

# C-Forum

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Critically evaluating  
the cross-disciplinary  
nature and application  
of clay in contemporary  
visual practices





# C-Forum

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Fig 17 Clare Twomey *Manifest: 10 000 hours* 2015

# C-Forum

EDITORIAL 2015

## THE FIELD OF DISCUSSION

Welcome to the inaugural issue of C-Forum, a new publication critically evaluating the cross-disciplinary nature and application of clay, in contemporary visual practices.

Why do we need another avenue to explore and discuss this material? Garth Clark's website, *Cfile*, has been instrumental in broadening the insight into contemporary ceramic practice, as has *Interpreting Ceramics*, an online periodical set up in the late 1990s and supported by the Universities of Wales, Bath, Bristol, and Aberystwyth.<sup>1</sup> These are just two of the many online blogs, magazines, journals and websites that deal with the rich diversity of 'clay', from varying perspectives.

*C-Forum* was titled as a conscious nod to the prestigious publications that have come before it, *Cfile* and *Art Forum*. The 'C' of the title becomes 'clay', 'ceramics' or 'craft', but also, and more importantly, 'context', 'criticality', 'contemporary', 'concept' and 'cross-disciplinary'. There has been a tendency to limit the field of discussion of ceramics to the dialogue of studio pottery and craft, which, whilst relevant to many manifestations of ceramic work, are not adequate when looking at developments in technology, education, globalization or the most recent offerings from fine art.

The blurring of contemporary practices, where fine artists engage with ceramic materials and ceramic artists take a conceptual approach towards making, makes the absence of a critical approach to ceramic work more apparent, and there is a desire for the development of a way in which to critically contextualize the field.<sup>2</sup>

This publication aims to contribute to the live debate and increased professional interest in the perception of contemporary ceramics as a cross-disciplinary, critically examined medium. There is a contemporary moment occurring that this medium is at the heart of, and creating a publicized platform with which to debate this is at the heart of *C-Forum's* intentions.

To open the discussion, this first edition will focus on the phenomenon that is giving ceramics its current moment in the spotlight: the resurgence of clay and material led practices within fine art. The movement towards conceptualized ceramic making and fine art explorations into ceramic processes, breaks the boundaries of traditional ceramic perspectives, and *C-Forum* hopes to open the discourse for what this means for the future of ceramics and how we can find a new relevancy and framework from which to view it. ■

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01 *Interpreting Ceramics: Research Collaboration*, (ICRC), 'Editorial', *Interpreting Ceramics*, <http://www.interpretingceramics.com/issue001/about.htm> (accessed 16.09.15)

02 Wendy Patricia Tuxill, *A Re-Conceptualisation of Contemporary Sculptural Ceramics Practice From A Post-Minimalist Perspective* (University of Hertfordshire : PhD, July 2010), pp. 9

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01-

# 'A Lagoon in an Ocean'

## An introduction into the position of ceramics in the contemporary visual arts landscape

IN HIS TALK AT THE European Ceramic Work Centre, Den Bosch, in 1992, sculptor Tony Cragg stated that *'...the problem is that in a finite world there are only so many possibilities and at the moment it seems to me somewhat irrelevant to discover a new material to make art with.'*<sup>1</sup>

In a world where an idea can be expressed and communicated just as eloquently and intelligently by a light going on and off or by a room filled with discarded wooden crates (Fig. 01) any material, technique or medium can become the conduit for an idea. Artists have been given carte blanche to appropriate the whole world and everything in it, whilst the world of design and function, a realm that one would assume is fairly safe ground for ceramics, has found faster, cheaper and more technologically advanced ways of producing. Clay appeared to be forever relegated to the sidelines. I mean, who makes a statement with bricks anymore?<sup>2</sup>

The Warholian notion that anything can be art, that it was no longer about a particular material quality, but more to do with an idea,<sup>3</sup> is something that the art world has taken to

heart and spent nearly a century proving and exploring with vigor. The advent of the readymade, first with Duchamp's *Fountain* in 1917, was made synonymous with 'art' in the 1950s and 60s through Pop. Warhol's soup cans and Jeff Koons' vacuum cleaners cemented the 'found' object in the Western notion of contemporary art: the subsequent

**'...the problem is that in a finite world there are only so many possibilities and at the moment it seems to me somewhat irrelevant to discover a new material to make art with.'**<sup>1</sup>

prioritisation of conceptualised making within art schools, along with the fame of the YBA's in the 1980s, contributed to a general turning away from material and process led practices over the last few decades.

Cragg's statement seemed to increasingly refer to a marginalized group that stood dancing around the larger world of the visual arts. As Grayson Perry so succinctly puts it: *'ceramics is a lagoon in the ocean of the art*





Fig 01 Phyllida Barlow *untitled: dock: hungcowledtubes* 2014

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- 01 Tony Cragg, *The Raw and the Cooked : New Work in Clay in Britain* (Oxford : Museum of Modern Art, 1993.), pp. 24
  - 02 This is said with some irony as the recent *Imagine...* BBC program followed the conception and construction of Frank Gehry's newest build, the DR Chau Chak Wing for University of Technology in Sydney Australia, a large part of which is made totally from bricks.
  - 03 Clare Twomey, *Possibilities & Losses : Transitions in Clay* (London ; Middlesborough : Crafts Council in partnership with MIMA, 2009), pp. 22
  - 04 Grayson Perry discusses his impressions of Richard Slee <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/g/video-grayson-perry-discusses-his-impressions-of-richard-slee/> (accessed 08.09.15)
  - 05 Alison Britton, Use, Beauty, Ugliness and Irony, *The Raw and the Cooked : New Work in Clay in Britain* (Oxford : Museum of Modern Art, 1993.), pp. 9
  - 06 Grayson Perry discusses his impressions of Richard Slee <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/g/video-grayson-perry-discusses-his-impressions-of-richard-slee/> (accessed 08.09.15)
  - 07 Asia has always revered ceramics as the highest art form, where the artist craftsman produces work that strives for a synthesis of the hand, heart and mind in the search for perfection of form.
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*world*.<sup>4</sup> It traditionally holds the position of quaint cousin to the more serious fine art, the more profitable design, or the more grandiose architecture.

Despite its marginalization, it has quietly developed into a universal language<sup>5</sup> that continues to enthrall generations of practitioners. The only place where it perhaps struggled to find a home seemed to be the otherwise infinitely accepting world of fine art.<sup>6</sup> Historically in Western cultures<sup>7</sup>, the hierarchy of craft versus art has meant that ceramic work has never reached the commercial successes of painting or other forms of sculpture, and has rarely been exhibited as primary work. Where we can take the six hundred year old market of painting as the gold standard in visual arts, ceramics in comparison has barely got started.



Fig 02 Anthony Gormley *Field for the British Isles* 1996

### **Skill and Deskillling**

That is not to say that ceramics has been completely ignored within the art world. There is a long history of it – the ceramics of Picasso, Miro and the like (*Fig. 03*) are well known – and more recent artists like Anthony Gormley, Richard Deacon or Tom Gidley (*Fig. 02 & 05*) have often used it as an extension of their main practice. However, it has previously been just that, an extension, often used simply as a way to produce commercial editions, with the occasional one-off sculptural

gesture. With exceptions of exhibitions such as The Tate Liverpool show *Secret History of Clay* 2004, the ceramic forays of artists have been largely overlooked.

The impression, therefore, of a sudden shift in attitude towards the material is an interesting one. The rising number of practitioners embracing the material, and more to the point, institutions showing it and audiences accepting it, has activated more publicized discussion around the material than there has been in decades. Despite this,



Fig 03 Pablo Picasso *Gros Oiseau Visage Noir* 1951

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08 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: skill and deskillling in art after the readymade* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 3

09 *ibid*

10 Peter Dormer, 'Introduction' in *The Culture of Craft*, ed. Peter Dormer (Manchester: Manchester university press, 1997), pp. 18–47

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there is little understanding of the adjacent, and increasingly blurred, position of ceramics to the general art world.

There has been much examination of the 'dematerialization of the object' and the advent of the readymade<sup>8</sup> in fine art, and it is here that we see the most obvious divide in 'ceramic' thinking and 'art' thinking. The 1920s saw sculpture move off the plinth, out of the studio and start its journey into the immaterial. What resulted was a redefining of artistic 'skill' as

...the dematerialization of the object...resulted in a redefining of artistic 'skill' as 'immaterial production.'<sup>9</sup>

'immaterial production' – the production of ideas – becoming more about authorship, and to include the hands of others.<sup>9</sup> John Roberts in *The Intangibilities of Form* cites the readymade as the founding event of the critique of value in the visual arts, where skill was redefined away from handcraft and towards conceptualization and the modern dialectic of skill and deskillling. Art was no longer just about the way in which something was made; the skill became the ability to communicate across all genres of making, artistic and productive labour. If art is therefore simply a concept that can be applied to any manufactured object, craft has no automatic value and the status of contemporary craftspeople becomes unstable.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, ceramics and the teaching of ceramics, has *always* been about how something is made, the mastery and development of material knowledge and skill.



Fig 04 Christie Brown *Sleepover* 2012

Whilst Duchamp was busy transcending (ceramic) urinals, Bernard Leach was beginning to fuse Asian ideas of beauty, form and utility to create the modern notion of studio pottery that would go on to inform the majority of subsequent ceramic discourse. Ceramics was rediscovering a voice as creator/maker, at the same time as Western notions of artist's 'skill' were shifting away from the artist as craftsman, and towards a redefinition as navigators/readers/manipulators of signs.

In modern ceramics, the technical ability of the maker has become a primary system of value. In contrast, that move away from 'maker' to 'navigator of signs' has become so internalized by subsequent generations of fine artists, that they now feel justified in their ownership of any task or material across a



Fig 05 Tom Gidley *Reclining Nude* 2014

limitless field of formal, cultural and spatial boundaries.<sup>11</sup> There are so many material and social languages at play in contemporary art that in comparison, a practice focused on solely ceramics seems simple and quaint. Sculpture and painting are no longer privileged sites of expression but used now more as a way of experimenting and communicating across forms, genres and non-artistic disciplines.<sup>12</sup> In the art world, how something is made has little bearing on its value, and the priority that ceramics puts on technical skill is seen as limiting and regressive.

### Expanding the Field

Although there has been an encouraging amount of discussion around the 'expansion' of the field of ceramics,<sup>13</sup> most notably in the 2014 Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded three year research project, *Ceramics in the Expanded Field*, it unfortunately seems

lead by Peter Voukos in the 1960s, there is a progression towards ceramic objects becoming an event rather than a solemn, perfectly achieved object.<sup>15</sup> They are no longer redefining themselves against a solely ceramic history, but are looking outwards to present their work against a wider visual culture. What one must be careful of is not to simply apply the terminology and methods of fine art without the proper academic critique of what it means to be using them. It is not enough to simply borrow a term: an installation may be described as any object or series of objects that are presented in a space, but to use it in the

‘...fine art isn’t really interested in installations anymore’<sup>14</sup>

to drag one step behind current interests in fine art. The Expanded Field conference was based around a discussion on ceramic installation and practices in relation to museum collections. It was only after they were already well invested in the project that one of the researchers, Christie Brown (*Fig. 04*), was informed that fine art ‘*wasn’t really interested*’ in installations anymore.<sup>14</sup> Taking its name from Rosalind Krauss’s pivotal essay of 1979 ‘*Sculpture in the Expanded Field*’, the move of the ceramic object off the plinth was a journey that fine artists had already taken, and seemingly moved on from.

This opening up of the work of ceramicists into the attempted assimilation of artistic means of expression, installations being a key example, shows development in ceramic practice. Like with the Abstract Expressionist ceramic movement at Otis Art Institute,

context of an art history means something else. It is up to the institutions, networks and most importantly the artists that inform ceramic education and discourse to ensure that this new breed of work is not just seen from within a ceramic history and context, but that it is also assessed within the broader spectrum of ‘installation’ and art that has gone before it.─

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11 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form : skill and deskillling in art after the readymade* (London : Verso, 2007), pp. 11

12 *ibid*, pp. 14

13 <http://www.ceramics-in-the-expanded-field.com/essays> (accessed 07.09.15)

14 Author interview with Christie Brown, *Ceramic Artist*, (Southbank Cafe, London : 13.07.15)

15 Rose Slivka, editor of *Crafts horizon*, 1961 Article, *The New Ceramic Presence, 20th Century Ceramics* (London : Thames & Hudson, 2003), pp. 159

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02-

# A Contemporary Moment

## Why is clay so popular?

**THERE IS A FINE ART** trend in ‘how-bad-can-it-be-and-therefore-get-a-lot-of-attention’ work that has the capacity to claim the spotlight for a season, boot the artists into a meteoric three to five year career and then subsequently fall into obscurity.<sup>1</sup> If we were being cynical, this could be applied quite succinctly to a lot of the ceramic work of fine artists that has caused such a splash in recent years. The invasion of football-playing, beanie-hat-wearing hipster boys making tactile organic ceramic forms<sup>2</sup> seems to be following this pattern. ‘Slacker aesthetics’, coined by Johanna Drucker in *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, was first used by her to discuss its value in relation to the then 1990s reassessments of the status of work and labour. Coming out of the 80s recession, artists work reflected the downtrodden feeling of an alienated and unemployed workforce, by creating a mass of work out of rubbish (Drucker cites artist Jason Rhoades’ installation series *Cherry Makita* as a prime example of this (*Fig. 06*)).<sup>3</sup> According to Drucker, the piles of detritus and lack of skilled labour in the artwork was intended,

or at least could be read as, a comment on the devaluation of skilled labour in the workplace.

This perspective has echoes of the situation we find ourselves in now. Although the naïve ceramic work that is populating contemporary art fairs does not seem to have the same political agenda, the crash and subsequent recession of 2008 means that we are in a similar, some would say worse, situation than we were after the 1980s, especially where art and education are concerned. It is not a big leap to assume that the current surge in clay application in fine art might bear relation to that. There is less space to make and show

**‘There has been an invasion of football-playing, beanie-hat-wearing hipster boys making tactile organic ceramic forms.’<sup>2</sup>**

art work, practically no government funding, art education is in turmoil, and, in the case of ceramics, there is an epidemic of BA course closures. Drucker proposes that aesthetics in art reflect dominant issues in the world at large, so the return to more personal, hand made ‘sloppy craft’,<sup>4</sup> especially in art ceramics, would be an apt reflection of the socio-economic disasters that regularly plague our news feeds.

This assumption would appear to be confirmed by the advocacy of clay as ‘cheap’ by many of those practitioners who have

recently begun using it. Having spoken to many of the artists synonymous with the rise in ceramics in contemporary fine art (Jesse Wine, Aaron Angell, Mark Essen (*cover image*) etc), their attraction to clay appears, in part, to be because they view it as an affordable and easy way to make sculpture, to blast through ideas in the studio quickly. Its immediacy has been related to drawing, a kind of 3D sketch that is easily rubbed out or made permanent depending on how successful it is deemed.

Some may debate the ‘cheapness’ of clay, but one cannot deny its accessibility. Once your studio is set up, the overheads are small, you don’t need a team of assistants, and you rely solely on yourself. It is just you and the clay, and that is an incredibly liberating situation to be in.

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- 01 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, Ill. : University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 97
  - 02 Author interview with Katie Cuddon, *Artist* (Skype : 26.08.15)
  - 03 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, Ill. : University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 97
  - 04 Anne Wilson, cited by *Martina Margetts RCA CHS lecture series, Contested Process: Space and Meaning* 24.10.14
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Fig 06 Jason Rhoades *Garage Renovation* New York (CHERRY Makita) 1993



Fig 07 Anish Kapoor Svayambh 2007

### A New Romanticism?

The accessibility of clay is picked up by artist and writer Jack Tan, in an interview with the author in July 2015. Disillusionment with the Big Gesture has been punctuated by the political and economical fall out of the banking crisis in 2008, and the 600 city protests in 2003 against the Iraq War. Such large, global events, which ultimately ended in failure – we’re still feeling the repercussions of both across the world – caused society to lose faith in that kind of grand action. The Occupy Movement in Britain did precious little to change our banking sector and the Iraq War still went ahead.

In response, artists, who tend to reflect and translate the events and feelings of the populace, also became disillusioned, and turned away from the escalating ‘professionalisation’ that has become synonymous with the famous names of contemporary art (Fig. 07).<sup>5</sup>

With the disappointment and distrust in the escalating expense and one-upmanship of the political, social and economic state of the world, artists began to turn back to what is close to them. A renewed interest in studio practices and a step towards more intimate ways of making, has produced a trend of work that is perhaps less theoretical and more to do with the subjectivity of the hand and the body.

*‘We’re coming to the end of Post Modernism. Someone said to me a few years ago: ‘The V&A has curated an exhibition on Post Modernism, therefore it must be over!’<sup>6</sup>*

We’ve had Modernism. We’ve had Post-Modernism. We’ve spent a long time cynically taking things apart, deconstructing everything, which has been reflected in the cynicism of found objects, assemblages and irony that has been rife in the art world. Perhaps there is now a need for a new romanticism; not a throwback to the socialist hypocrisy of William Morris, but more a making space for aesthetics and collaboration as a way

*‘The V&A has curated an exhibition on Post Modernism, therefore it must be over!’<sup>6</sup>*

to explore a more hopeful and personal way of critically producing and evaluating work. Ceramics is an obvious material with which to start making again, to start piecing our subjectivity back together and combat the alienating implications of globalization and media.

### DIY Revolution

Craft has always been an antidote to the dehumanizing aspects of modern life. Glenn Adamson devotes an entire chapter of his book *Thinking Through Craft* to the idea of the ‘pastoral’ heritage and applications of country-style making. If artists are looking for a way to explore an alternative to mass production,



technology and the disposability of inorganic consumerism, what better material to turn to than the earth itself?

With the omnipresence of technology mediating our everyday experiences, the return to a more do-it-yourself domestic creativity is something that is being reflected on our televisions and on our high streets, not just in our galleries and studios. London is overrun with 'independent' barista coffee shops and organic cafes, the *Great British Bake Off* (TGBBO) is outstripping *X Factor* in television ratings, and Kirstie Allsop's craft shows and George Clarke's *Amazing Shed of the Year* celebrate what can be accomplished by the Great British Public, with just a hammer, some glitter and a bit of imagination. The fact that industry has effectively removed the need for hand-made functional-ware means

that studio-based pottery and design becomes a luxury item.<sup>7</sup> There is even an upcoming television series popularizing pottery, *The Great British Pottery Thrown Down*. It is easy to accept the commonly held notion that the return to clay is a reaction against the alienating affect of technology, a sweet talent show (from the makers of TGBBO) about its hobbyist nature is surely indicative of the permeation of this idea into our culture.<sup>8</sup>

Artist Katie Cuddon holds a slightly alternative perspective, but still one recognizing the connection to media. She expresses an interesting suggestion that perhaps there is a link to the tactility of clay with technology that has been otherwise overlooked. With all our phones, iPads, computers and even televisions becoming increasingly touch screen, technology is actually moving closer

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05 Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York: Off White New York, 2014), pp. 3

High production values and the growing industry of art fabricators, is perhaps best illustrated by the Anish Kapoor retrospective at the RA. Firing canons, next to what amounted to a huge train carriage of wax being pushed through the arches of the central hall, and 6ft 3D printed cement vessels are about as Big a Gesture as you can get.

06 Author interview with Jack Tan, *Artist* (Skype: 26.07.15)

07 Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York: Off White New York, 2014), pp. 5

08 It will be interesting to see what this does for the status of ceramics in the general public. TGBBO saw a rise in interest in baking in the public, and it seems likely that a T.V. show by the same people about pottery will do the same. A call from the British public for more access to ceramic training in the face of all the closures of BA courses is possibly exactly what will help continue the craft. On the other hand, I can't help thinking that, although all publicity is good publicity, advocating amateurism and the vessel, regardless of how skilled the participants are, may not be the best way to raise the bar of critical thinking in the medium. I feel we're on the edge of a new movement within ceramics, where it is seen not just in terms of skill and tradition, but more as a medium that has the potential to make a real contribution to almost every part of our critically evaluated lives and culture. Populist television shows will just serve to cement the image of ceramics as a hobbyist craft forever in the mind of the public, and reinforce the closed notion of it as a tight community of highly skilled potters. Jesse Wine's sculptures may be badly made, something the artist himself readily acknowledges, but the conversations arising from them are at least sparking a discourse that radically challenges traditional views on the material, as well as bringing it to audiences that would otherwise ignore and dismiss it.

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to the body to incorporate a sense of touch.<sup>9</sup> We spend our days stroking, tapping, and moving things around on a screen using our hands, in a similar manner to how you might manipulate clay. It is an intriguing thought that perhaps the new generation of technology-infused makers might be returning to clay because of its similarities with contemporary machines, rather than as a statement against it.

### **Post-Disciplinary Attitude**

Being an artist used to be a marginal career choice, but with the expansion of art schools for profit, everyone is or could be an artist. With the Tate Modern being one of the most visited tourist attractions in Britain, the audience we are presenting work to is becoming much more varied and won't necessarily have any previous experience of 'art' at all. In order to keep their attention, work that involves a high level of intellectual engagement and prior knowledge from the outset is perhaps going to be less popular.

Whereas it is important that this doesn't drive artistic production into specifically organizing a particular experience or 'dumbing down' the message, it may suggest that it is not enough to simply have a lazy engagement with material and process any more. When so many people are making, when there's so much out there, artists are being forced to engage with every aspect of production and material and to not alienate the viewer from the outset.<sup>10</sup> The familiarity of clay means that there is a

predetermined point of reference to anyone who may come across a piece of 'ceramic sculpture'.<sup>11</sup> There is something reassuring about an object whose materiality you have a frame of reference for. If nothing else, you will be able to look at a Stirling Ruby ceramic (*Fig. 08*) and say 'I understand what that's made from.'

The use of clay in fine art practices is indicative to the post-disciplinary attitude of so many contemporary practitioners; an impulse driven choice of materials that challenge and disregard traditional uses. Fine art ceramics is ignoring the 'traditional' constructs of ceramics in a big way.

Artists by nature are parasitical,<sup>12</sup> when they bleed one area of interest and exploration dry, they move onto the next. Reclaiming 'forgotten' ceramic sculptors<sup>13</sup> certainly would appear to be new territory for artists who are always looking for the 'new', the next movement or unique selling point that will move the market on. To those practitioners coming to it for the first time, there is an inclination to see it purely as a material, one of many, that is perfect in its ability to record the transformation of state, touch, the boundaries of the body and the physicality of material itself. The

### **'Artists by nature are parasitical.'<sup>12</sup>**

unpredictability of clay is what seems to almost universally excite the imagination; its visceral qualities and immediacy is the point of entry for anyone coming to clay without formal training.<sup>14</sup>

Ceramics has a whole global history in its own right that has not been foregrounded by art historians and that is practically unknown to the general art world: it is exciting to see that history being given a new perspective, and this new 'trend' in ceramic making will hopefully progress into a more permanent 'development', that will continue to push the medium forward for some time to come.<sup>15</sup> ■



Fig 08 Stirling Ruby *Basin Theology*/Tatwin+Ritalin 2013

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- 09 Author interview with Katie Cuddon, *Artist* (Skype : 26.08.15)
- 10 Ceramic Seminar, Chaired by Eva Masterman (RCA Ceramics Dept, Kensington Gore London : 20.05.15)
- 11 Here we take 'ceramic sculpture' to indicate any non-functional ceramic object, whether made by an untrained artist, or highly skilled ceramicist.
- 12 Author interview with Alex Hoda, *artist and co-curator of Broken Music at Cass Sculpture Foundation* (Skype : 27.08.15)
- 13 Author interview with Aaron Angell, *Artist* (Troy Town Pottery, London : 10.09.15)
- 14 Ceramic Seminar, Chaired by Eva Masterman (RCA Ceramics Dept, Kensington Gore London : 20.05.15)
- 15 Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York : Off White New York, 2014), pp. 2
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'If nothing else, you will be able to look at a Stirling Ruby ceramic and say "I understand what that's made from".'

## 03-

# An Acceptable Standard

## Hostilities and differing positions of ceramics and fine art regarding the value of skill

**WHILST IT IS ACCEPTED THERE** has been an opening up of the ceramic market, this did not result in the 'eureka moment' where all ceramics was then considered 'art'. Being an artist or creating 'art' is so much about the language you use, the intent. These are the defining values that art is based upon, and ones that craftspeople very often don't take into account.<sup>1</sup> When ceramicists went after the fine art world, they perhaps expected the world that seemed to accept anything, to readily apply that acceptance to the broad range of ceramic output, without discrimination. The nuances of positioning that render a cup not a cup but an art piece<sup>2</sup> have resulted only an extreme few being accepted into the art fold, leaving a vast majority marginalised and embittered.<sup>3</sup>

Commenting on Richard Slee at the V&A (*Fig. 09*), Grayson Perry points out that there

has to be an acknowledgement that being seen as a craftsperson is a handicap when it comes to fine art. Whilst ceramicists are constantly re-defining themselves against their own history,<sup>4</sup> those who look outward to compare themselves to other histories and contexts often find it difficult to accept the different agendas. Perry continues to point out that this isn't how it works, a relationship goes two ways, and if a practitioner of any kind, including ceramicists, wants to move towards contemporary art, they must embrace the language and values of that discipline and direct their work towards the correct audience.

### **A Pure Domain**

The concept of a once-pure domain beyond the colonising reach of mass culture is long gone. The contemporary artist draws from lived experience, which is interpreted through cultural systems that are necessarily hybrid and heterogeneous.<sup>5</sup> The tendency of the craft world, and in particular ceramics, to wrap itself in a bubble of tacit and secret knowledge, available only to the initiated, is possibly why ceramic artists have found it difficult to break

through the fine art barrier in the first place. It is old-fashioned and damaging to any practice to try and separate itself off from the influences and currents of the wider cultural debates and applications, and yet that separation still permeates ceramic disciplines and teaching.

The need to protect decades of tradition and practical learning is easily understood, especially when many ceramicists' careers are

**'We're not trying to keep ourselves in a box but we do have certain concerns.'**<sup>7</sup>

hinged on the identity of a particular method of building or glazing. It is also important to acknowledge that of course not all ceramicists are interested in being part of the fine art world. Many are content with the craft world they inhabit, and my intention here is not to de-value that in anyway. All one has to do is wander through the wealth of decorative and functional objects in the Victoria and

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- 01 Grayson Perry <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/g/video-grayson-perry-discusses-his-impressions-of-richard-slee/> (accessed 09.09.15)
  - 02 *Grantchester Pottery* is a key example of utilitarian forms and objects hovering between the line of 'functional' or 'art' in contemporary practice. Even though their tableware is often used, it is intended to be a comment on value and the activation of objects through social interaction, but to all intent and purpose is simply functional tableware.
  - 03 Garth Clark, 'Homer, Ceramics and Marketplace Anxieties' in *Ceramic Millennium: critical writings on ceramic history, theory and art*, ed. Garth Clark (Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006), pp. 334
  - 04 The mid 1950s West Coast Americans and the Japanese Shiseido movement transformed the ceramic agenda; around 1980, the death of Leach, burgeoning of Jacqueline Poncelet, Alison Britton and Carol McNicoll etc did it again.
  - 05 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 92
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Fig 09 Artist Grayson Perry receiving CBE 2013



Fig 10 Richard Slee *Camp Futility*, Studio Voltaire 2012

Albert Museum to realize how important this category, and the continuation of practices involved in it, is to our culture. The craft sector is worth £3.4billion p.a.<sup>6</sup> in the U.K., so obviously it is a thriving and valuable asset. The other important thing to note is that ceramics, no matter how it talks to fine art, still has specific agendas of its own.

*'We're not trying to keep ourselves in a box but we do have certain concerns.'*<sup>7</sup>

Someone with twenty years of ceramic training and material knowledge will be looking at an object made from clay with a totally different context and knowledge than someone looking at it from the point of view of a painter or sculptor.

### **Legitimising Labour**

There is an implied egotism of the fine art world that makes them feel able to present their clay work to the wider world, whilst, in relation to the work of trained ceramicists, it is still in its infancy. The absence of technical expertise is professed as a conceptual underpinning rather than simply as a lack of engagement and knowledge of the material. For the retiring world of ceramics that has based decades of its progression and dialogue around a commitment to material knowledge, this arrogance is galling and has warranted much disdain for the majority of fine art offerings.

It is very easy to make 'something' out of clay, but difficult to push that initial gesture into 'art'.<sup>8</sup> A painter will spend years experimenting

‘...(to) understand the ‘tolerance’ of a material, how something breaks, can be expanded beyond just a physical application and applied to a philosophical reading.’<sup>15</sup>

and mastering their use of stroke, colour, composition; they would not expect the first thing they paint to be a masterpiece, and yet there seems to be an acceptance of the crudeness of ceramic newcomers that perhaps would not be tolerated in other art-forms.

This dismissal of technique is even seen as a radicalization of the process, bringing a fresh and deinstitutionalized aesthetic to an otherwise tame and narrow field. In the work of non-specialist ceramic artists, such as Jesse Wine, there is often a reference to the ‘purposeful purposefulness’<sup>9</sup> that presided over the work the Abstract Impressionist ceramic movement of the 1960s (*Fig. 11*). The freedom of expression away from the ‘tyranny of traditional tools and materials’ that was seen as an affront to the sacred traditions of craft<sup>10</sup> could be an exciting re-visiting for ceramics.

However, to value introspection over the utilitarian and skills based labour was an affront then, and I don’t feel as though it has been any better received fifty years on.

For fine artists, technical knowledge can become something that can be applied to other things, an idea that seems to have been lost on the vast majority of ceramic artists. To know and understand the ‘tolerance’ of a material, how something breaks, can be expanded beyond just a physical application and applied to a philosophical reading; it has multiple understandings in terms of people, a material, life, and death. Ceramicists, who arguably are best placed to conduct this investigation as they spend their lives

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<sup>06</sup> Crafts Council’s Celebrating Makers Lecture Event, (Simmons and Simmons, London : 09.09.15)

<sup>07</sup> Author interview with Christie Brown, *Ceramic Artist*, (Southbank Cafe, London : 13.07.15)

<sup>08</sup> Garth Clark [https://cfonline.org/commentary-joanne-greenbaum-outs-garth-clark-on-criticism-in-absentia/?mc\\_cid=320e7f0301&mc\\_eid=b16cd24410](https://cfonline.org/commentary-joanne-greenbaum-outs-garth-clark-on-criticism-in-absentia/?mc_cid=320e7f0301&mc_eid=b16cd24410) (accessed 09.09.15)

<sup>09</sup> Edmund de Waal, *20th Century Ceramics* (London : Thames & Hudson, 2003), pp. 158

<sup>10</sup> Rose Slivka, ‘The New Ceramic Presence’, 1961, quoted in Edmund De Waal *20th Century Ceramics* (London : Thames & Hudson, 2003), pp.159

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‘You no longer have to be Picasso...in order to deconstruct an image into cubism.’<sup>11</sup>

acquiring that knowledge, rarely implement it using a language that would be accepted or understood by fine art.

In contrast, fine art labour becomes an investigation into the unknown, starting from a point of ignorance. The idea that in order to start deconstructing a method of creative production you must first be an expert doesn’t necessarily fit with the current landscape of contemporary art. You no longer have to be Picasso and be able to execute the minutiae of painting technique in order to deconstruct an image into cubism.<sup>11</sup> Artists are not wrapped up in the acquisition of knowledge about a particular material per se; personal production and material knowledge become important because it discovers something that can only be revealed through the process. With ceramicists, more often than not, the learning must happen before embarking on the journey at all; it becomes a means to an end, rather than a method of philosophical exploration.

There is an undeniable hostility of the ceramic world against the art world for appropriating ‘their’ material. Ceramics, traditionally based in function, arguably doesn’t have the intellectual foundation that other disciplines have. Its history is very much

about techniques and skills, which deserves respect but is of little interest to those outside it.

What’s more, labour and value are connected in contemporary culture through fine art, and for labour to be devalued inside the framework of art production is, by extension, to legitimize its devaluation elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> An understandably scary thought for a discipline that uses high skilled labour as its benchmark of quality: when the fine art world has set about legitimizing ‘deskilled’ making in clay and being lorded for it, it stands to reason that the flip side of that would be a devaluation of ‘good’ making in ceramics in the wider cultural world. The defensiveness and dismissal of the wave of these naïve makers could very well stem from the fear that through their success, the skill and knowledge of ceramic practice and history will be rendered defunct.<sup>13</sup>

### **An Acceptable Standard**

As the only material-based practice that has managed to separate itself and elevate itself out of a ‘workshop’ and into a ‘department’, it is understandable that the ceramic community would feel defensive. In an art education that is based on intellectualization, conceptualism and profit, rather than technical ability, the importance of making skills has been





Fig 11 Peter Voulkos *Tiento* 1959

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- 11 Author interview with Alex Hoda, *artist and co-curator of Broken Music at Cass Sculpture Foundation* (Skype : 27.08.15)
- 12 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, Ill. : University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 97
- 13 This fear of the expansion outside the protective walls of craft might be assuaged by a comparison to photography. Also a medium of duality, both with functional and vocational art applications, the skills there haven't been lost. Although there are sure to be tensions between those who revere skill, and those who feel you should be spending your time talking about philosophy all day, rather than shutter speeds, the craft of photography still endures.
- 14 Claire Bishop on *Danh Vo at the 2015 Venice Biennale* <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/claire-bishop-on-danh-vo-at-the-2015-venice-biennale/2372> (accessed 08.09.15)
- 15 Author interview with Frances Richardson, *Artist* (Studio Voltaire, London : 04.09.15)
- 16 Garth Clark [https://cfileonline.org/commentary-joanne-greenbaum-outs-garth-clark-on-criticism-in-absentia/?mc\\_cid=320e7f0301&mc\\_eid=b16cd24410](https://cfileonline.org/commentary-joanne-greenbaum-outs-garth-clark-on-criticism-in-absentia/?mc_cid=320e7f0301&mc_eid=b16cd24410) (accessed 09.09.15)
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gradually devalued and dismissed, in favour of the art and skill of 'decorative placement'.<sup>14</sup> For those who have the attributes that naturally allow one to acquire skills, and who have spent years acquiring them, to see the value others place in the deskilled forays of fine art making-in-ceramics, must be very frustrating.<sup>15</sup>

While fine artists hold up their new experiments as if they have found a totally new material, ceramicists scoff at the simplicity and lack of material knowledge. This dismissal of the time-honoured value system of skill that has kept ceramics a vibrant industry in its own right, could easily be interpreted as final and definitive two fingers up to a medium and discipline that art has repeatedly sneered at.

Whether you like the work or not, the 'non-specialist' artists are raising the profile of ceramics and challenging the traditional views of what is acceptable and valued in terms of material knowledge and skill; these artists that stand for the rise of ceramics within contemporary art are new to the medium, as is the market that supports them. If the ceramic community is unsatisfied with the lack of critical standards and ignorance of the medium that allows for '*poor work to become an acceptable standard*',<sup>16</sup> it's up to them to take hold of that standard and give the market an alternative. ■

## 04-

# Case studies

‘...(clay) is being recognized as an art material that is important to the development of art and culture and, most importantly, being realised as something that has value that is akin to the rest of art.’<sup>1</sup>

The work of non-specialist artists has been changing the way we view and discuss contemporary ceramics, freeing the material from the preoccupation and weight of the craft. Approaching any mode of making without formal training will inevitably allow for an opening up and cross-pollination of ways of working that can only serve to invigorate the medium. However, this initial encounter with clay seems to be producing a homogenized aesthetic with a shaky conceptual foundation.

Deconstructing ceramics away from the vessel is a well-trodden path, for both artists and ceramicists (Simon Carrol and Lucio Fontana to name but a few) and is the obvious entry point for anyone who first starts using the material. Especially when we look at ceramics as a discipline of two halves, as the bridge between painting and sculpture, form and surface combined, it is no wonder that it very often collapses into an undefined mess.<sup>2</sup>

The following are intended to give a brief insight into the thinking and origins of some of the leading names and initiatives in fine art ceramics.

## Aaron Angell and Troy Town Pottery

Aaron Angell (*Fig 12*) suggests that the problem ceramicists have with his work is that he is approaching the material without any knowledge of it. Ceramics is very difficult to produce, especially re-produce, and therefore you have the formation of a 'secret knowledge of the ceramicists' that also becomes stigmatized knowledge. Ceramics is a kind of art world-seeming community that is bitter about the lack of representation of artists within their community in the wider art world.<sup>3</sup> His initiative *Troy Town Pottery*, is part of *Open School East* in London, and has brought notoriety to the young artist. As well as being Angell's studio, it holds two week subsidized residencies for artists who want to learn about and use clay – but only if they do not and have not ever made anything functional. Ceramic access in London is difficult to find if you don't want to work alongside 'potters' who have an inherently different attitude towards making, and Angell preaches a dogma of clay as a purely sculptural material that '*resists the influence of the vessel*'.<sup>4</sup> *Troy Town* is a reaction against the lack of openness within the ceramic community, and is about letting people in, initially to give artists the knowledge to mix their own glazes instead of repeatedly using and limiting their pallet to shop bought ones. The studio has a vast stock of glaze recipes that were mainly developed by Angell and are 'open access'. However, whilst this is an impressive and innovative model for a ceramics studio, and one that I think the



Fig 12 Aaron Angell *Dei Marmory Show 2014*

ceramics world could learn a lot from, Angell has admitted that he increasingly has to keep glazes back for his own work. He is coming up against issues of labour and ownership that are the very reason ceramicists tend to be so secretive. He has begun assimilating 'pottery' methods whilst at the same time preaching their limitations.

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01 Author interview with Jesse Wine, *Artist*  
(Plaza Plaza, London : 28.05.15)

02 Author interview with Alex Hoda, *artist and co-curator of Broken Music at Cass Sculpture Foundation*  
(Skype : 27.08.15)

03 Aaron Angell, *Glazed Expressions: Contemporary Art and Ceramics* (The Hepworth Wakefield : 06.06.15)

04 <http://openschooleast.org/#troy-town-art-pottery>  
(accessed 31.05.15)

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## Jesse Wine

Jesse Wine (Fig. 13) could perhaps be accused having his *'finger on the pulse'*<sup>5</sup> at responding to the cues from society, and the 'trendiness' of ceramics, but there seems to be a real excitement at discovering a *'superior sculptural material – the best I've ever used'*.<sup>6</sup> There is a complete childlike naivety to his earlier work that is created and validated by his perverse and dogged commitment to *not* knowing the process. What would become contrived mark-making in the hands of someone who understands the process, becomes a conceptual decision inherent to his artistic identity. By his own admission, he is *'just not that interested'*<sup>7</sup> in the depth of process ceramics offers. Wine states he never looked for a sound process to give consistent results. Absolutely, categorically no recording or documenting of recipes, firing programs, clay bodies or glaze combinations; it's enough to make any trained ceramicist squirm at the mess and waste of it all.

Although now totally devoted to the process of ceramics, his interest in the process comes from the intelligent curation of his production, the editing and conceptual attitude towards making, rather than the making itself. His sculptures are a direct response to the materiality of the medium, the embodiment of an attitude to making that has permeated the fine art world for decades; that it is not the end result that matters, but the intent in which it was made. For Wine, making becomes an existential experience where the forms you model often mirror your appearance. He is fond of relaying an occasion where his shorter, broader brother came to the studio and produced short, broad objects, whilst Wine's work often becomes thin and tall like him. The act of self-portraiture becomes an unconscious act.<sup>8</sup>

Although it is his prerogative to say, or not say, whatever he wants about his work, I wonder how much longer he can keep the relevancy of this discourse in his practice. The promotion of an idea of experimentation and the immediate reaction to the clay as the conceptual basis for his work, surely hinges on his lack of training in it. Having worked with the material for over five years, it is impossible to prevent himself from learning (his recent exhibition at *Limoncello Gallery*, London, was a series of wall tiled friezes, referencing historical Eastern ceramics, Morandi's paintings and Wine's bedroom floor. They are a marked difference to his earlier over-glazed forms, and show much more consideration of the process). If he now has 'skill' but continues to profess the work as unskilled, surely this causes a fundamental issue in the conceptual grounding for of his work?



Fig 13 Jesse Wine *Duravit 1* 2014

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05 Author interview with Rebecca May Marsden, *Gallery Director Limoncello* (Skype : 30.07.15)

06 Author interview with Jesse Wine, *Artist* (Plaza Plaza, London : 28.05.15)

07 *ibid*

08 *ibid & Glazed Expressions: Contemporary Art and Ceramics* (The Hepworth Wakefield : 06.06.15)

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## Grantchester Pottery and Wysing

For Phil Root of *Grantchester Pottery* (Fig. 14), clay is an allure that hangs over the work he does with collaborator Giles Round, something to misdirect the viewer into a false sense of security. Based loosely around the Omega Workshops of the Bloomsbury Group of the early 1900s, Grantchester Pottery is an exploration of value. With installations set up as interior show rooms, it is difficult to know whether you should be taking them seriously when they say they hoped someone would commission them to design their sitting room, or that Swatch would ask them to design a watch.<sup>9</sup> There are hints at Franz West's functional art objects, creating an overarching concept that validates sitting in their studio and making teapots. One could suggest that this is a comment on the art market at large. What is any art practice other than the validation to make what you want? What is Frieze other than a big show room from which to furnish the houses of the rich and famous?

Originating at Wysing Art Centre, the pair re-established the ceramics studio there and it will be interesting to see if this will be looked back upon as a defining moment in the rise of clay in contemporary fine art in Britain: it was where Jesse Wine, Mark Essen, Aaron Angell, Emma Hart, and many others that are leading the ceramic charge, all first experienced clay for the first time.

It is difficult to think of Wysing as separate to the pastoral: it is in the middle of the British countryside, an ideal place to get back to ones roots, be closer to nature and make pots. But the work that is being produced there is far from that – there aren't many pastoral call centres (a topic regularly explored by Emma Hart) or trainer manufacturers (trainers are a reoccurring theme in Jesse Wine's work), which means there is a definite rub between the subject matter and the idea of craft being located in a rural setting.<sup>10</sup> Wysing sits in an interesting position within that, starting as a



Fig 14 Grantchester Pottery, admin 2014

traditional, pastoral place for potters, but re-appropriated by artists.

Whilst this appears to be only a positive, I think it is indicative of the fundamentally confusing way these artists position themselves. Although there is obviously an interest and involvement in ceramic history,<sup>11</sup> there is also a strident disinterest in the conversation of 'skill' or association with a ceramic context. Between them, these artists appear to have sparked a debate that they simply aren't interested in and refuse to participate in. The names – *Troy Town Pottery*, *Grantchester Pottery* – are a misnomer, instantly activating a series of influences and references to a craft way of working, that apparently most of these artists find 'boring.'<sup>12</sup> They have deliberately drawn people into a conversation that they don't want to have.<sup>13</sup> –

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09 Author interview with Phil Root, *Artist of Grantchester Pottery* (telephone : 27.08.15)

10 *Glazed Expressions: Contemporary Art and Ceramics* (The Hepworth Wakefield : 06.06.15)

11 Angell's presentation at the *Glazed Expressions* talk at the Hepworth Wakefield was a who's who of ceramic history and he is co-curating a historical ceramics exhibition at Tate St Ives in 2016

12 Author interview with Jesse Wine, *Artist* (Plaza Plaza, London : 28.05.15)

13 Author interview with Phil Root, *Artist of Grantchester Pottery* (telephone : 27.08.15)

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## 05-

# A New Dialogue

### **Discussion on how to progress ceramic practice through a new interdisciplinary understanding of how it could be taught and assessed**

THE ASSIMILATION OF CLAY INTO fine art has raised the profile of 'ceramics', but the boundaries between what is art, design or architecture are merging; art collaborations such as *Grantchester Pottery* are creating installations of functional-ware and example interiors, whilst architects are being nominated for the Turner Prize (*Fig 15*). With artists and designers increasingly encroaching on ceramic 'territory', what is the best way in which to ensure the survival and value of medium specific working?

The increased output in ceramics from a wide variety of disciplines (especially fine art) makes the disparity in ceramics as a discipline in itself all the more apparent: while the developments and work in the medium has continued to rise and expand, both within a ceramic context and without, there has been precious little critical evaluation or writing on the subject.<sup>1</sup> With the increased blurring of the definition of 'ceramics' and how the material manifests in different contexts, the need for an inclusive dialogue recognizing

its distended applications is paramount. To lift a quote and observation directly from Christopher Schreck's recent publication, *NEW BALANCE: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art*:

*"There is still a realm of the unknown, in terms of judging the quality of ceramics," ceramicist Margie Hughto remarked in 1979. "The number of ceramicists working continues to expand, and yet the criticism evaluating the work does not." Fast-forward 35 years, and we seem to find ourselves facing the very same problem.*<sup>2</sup>

Ceramics has largely been considered to epitomise the gap between high and low art, art versus function, and this hierarchy reinforces the idea that anything created through craft methods must be intrinsically antithetical to progressive artistic aspirations.<sup>3</sup>

Although there are strengthening outputs in the field of sculptural fine art ceramics from both the fine art and ceramic worlds, there is precious little dialogue between the two camps. A possible reason for this is that few ceramicists in recent years have been accepted across the boarder of craft to art, and therefore there has been no-one to challenge the widespread dismissal of the values of medium specific working within contemporary art practices. Those that have been accepted show an awareness of being able to contextualize their work outside of the realm of ceramic tradition, drawing from archetypal ceramic forms and histories, at the same time as distancing themselves from the technical foundations of their practice.

Rachel Kneebone, for example, shows a very direct relationship and connection to a wealth of both ceramic but also sculptural history, whilst Edmund De Waal's marrying of the languages of architecture and ceramics is articulated with a first class honours from Cambridge in English literature that allows

his work to expand out of the closed craft field it originated from. Grayson Perry is perhaps the most obvious example of a ‘potter’ turned artist, and openly deals with social class structures, creating politicized vessels that are validated to the art world and the public through his teaching, speaking and television shows.

In the younger generation, yet to truly break through, but certainly hovering enticingly around the edges of the art world, Neil Brownsword (*Fig. 16*) also has an engagement with social and political history, commenting on the industrial collapse of the Stoke potteries, whilst Phoebe Cummings’ installations in raw clay draws direct inspiration from a wider historical context of objects, images and a reinterpretation of studio practice.

There is another conversation to be had that looks at the similarities and disparities between the work of these artists and those of their fine art cousins, but here I will simply point out that all of them appear to be exploring the same notion: clay as a medium for conceptually grounded sculpture.

I wholeheartedly agree with Schreck in that to assess the manifold proffering of what constitutes contemporary ceramics, a context must be given in order to truly understand its value within the wider dialogue surrounding art and craft. As has happened in other areas when disciplines crossover,<sup>4</sup> the most interesting conversations happen when those boundaries meet.<sup>5</sup> For something to be truly innovative, you need to understand the limits of where others have been.

## Territory

All great movements should arise from art schools, as they are the most focused platform for critical discourse, and were created to innovate and propel disciplines forward. In doing so, they form the general opinion and prejudices of the rest of the cultural world, but despite people seemingly becoming more interested in material and process led practices, departments and workshops where



Fig 15 Assemble Group Photo 2014

‘The most interesting conversations happen when boundaries meet.’<sup>5</sup>

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- 01 Wendy Patricia Tuxill, *A Re-Conceptualisation of Contemporary Sculptural Ceramics Practice From A Post-Minimalist Perspective* (University of Hertfordshire : PhD, July 2010), pp. 9
  - 02 Margie Hughto, quoted in Clement Greenberg, “*Status of Clay*” (1979), reprinted in *Ceramic Millennium: Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory, and Art*, ed. Garth Clark. (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design) 2006 In Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York : Off White New York, 2014), pp. 1
  - 03 Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York : Off White New York, 2014), pp. 1
  - 04 A good example of this would be the collaborations between sculptor-designer Isamu Noguchi and dancer-choreographer Martha Graham
  - 05 Author interview with Rebecca May Marsden, *Gallery Director Limoncello* (Skype : 30.07.15)
-

skills are taught are deemed unprofitable and are closing. The neo-liberal expansion of the British universities means that they are now being run as businesses, and profit is arguably more consequential than the proliferation of knowledge

Despite everything, ceramics still seems to be receiving funding. The multi-million investments in a new building for the Royal College of Art Ceramics Department seems almost reckless considering there are now practically no BA courses with which to take a pool of ready-made students. The relevance of these courses, who will make up the future student body, and how much influence they have on practices afterwards, are issues that should be putting increased pressure on the traditional teaching methods and course structures, of both fine art and ceramic institutions.

In regards to fine art, initiatives such as Aaron Angell's *Troy Town Pottery* seem to be a very present statement about the deficient facilities and skills-based access in art education and the separatism and narrow-mindedness of ceramics. The lack of resources in art schools means that people are approaching clay from a non-academic or non-typical point of view. It is being rediscovered in art schools as a general workshop, more like an open access print room, where students can access the facilities without the rules of a ceramic heritage and training. Whilst this may have the affect of limiting people's experience and knowledge of what is possible in the material, it may also be extremely liberating.<sup>6</sup> Although the destruction of the ceramic courses is heartbreaking, it is possible that it will be the very agency that actually reinvigorates the medium.

### **Limited Discourse**

Ceramics can no longer claim ownership for its material;<sup>7</sup> clay is just another territory for artists to inhabit, and what is being produced

can't be viewed within the same parameters as the traditional practice. Although its common perception is as a pastoral outlet for hobbyists, or as a craft discipline with stringent adherence to tradition and rules, clay is in fact an incredibly fluid material.<sup>8</sup> By addressing ceramics as a medium and craft discipline in relation to contemporary art, that investigation readily opens up the conversation to the many inherent qualities of the material that makes it relevant and useful when considering advancements in industrial design, environmental activism, identity politics and lifestyle aesthetics and many other broader implications.<sup>9</sup>

It is an acknowledged problem in ceramics that the teaching and practicing of this most technically driven of processes is preoccupied with its own practical creation, much more than with the evaluation and discussion of how it connects to wider cultural debates.<sup>10</sup> The majority of critical writing about the material has been from the perspective of craft theory, and is inherently preoccupied with issues of skill, labour and tacit knowledge, or falls under the bracket of 'art' and therefore tends to denounce its material heritage altogether. Neither encompasses the variety of objects and applications that fall under the term 'ceramics', or attempt to delve into its role in the larger socio-political discussions that are commonplace when talking about art education or industry in general.

Whilst the discourse of studio pottery still remains valid for numerous exciting practitioners in its own right,<sup>11</sup> it obviously cannot be applied to the whole of contemporary ceramic practice. Ceramics is in danger of being left behind or engulfed by the more critically grounded practices of other disciplines if it does not acknowledge this. Putting up a fence is not the way to preserve skill.

There will always be people interested in making vessels, where their focus of



‘People are approaching clay from a non-academic...point of view, which is in some ways liberating but also has the affect of limiting people’s experience of it.’<sup>6</sup>

investigation is zooming in on colour and tone, surface and texture, rather than thinking conceptually about that object.<sup>12</sup> Ceramics will not cease to inspire makers on a purely craft level, dealing with the tradition of hard-earned, high-levels of technical skill. There is no real need for purists to be threatened by the influx of ‘visitors’ to the material,<sup>13</sup> but this statement will probably do little to assuage the conflict.

There is all the more reason, then, to be clear in what aspect of ceramic practice we are discussing. When dealing with the ceramic/fine art cross over, in particular, it is important to classify the distinction between ‘standard ceramics’, ‘art ceramics’ and ‘non-functional crafts.’<sup>14</sup> The distinction should not imply a hierarchy, simply a way of working out what it is we are looking at, and subsequently, how we should read the intention of the object/s. To read a non-functional craft object as an art object is to do it as much disservice as it is to read art ceramics in terms of application of skill. Willful misinterpretation will undermine the intentions of the artist in either camp and will stymie intelligent discussion rather than encourage it. Not everything is studio pottery, just as not everything is art, but ceramics has the ability to be informed by the best of both. There is no getting away from the fact that the mug you drink your tea out of is made from the same stuff as Grayson Perry’s £50,000 pot, and it’s exactly that familiarity and diversity of application that makes clay a continually fascinating material, and worthy of its own investigation.

### Hybrid Art Forms

The value different practitioners and disciplines put on skill and material knowledge is a barrier that continues to shut down conversations before they have really begun. Those who



Fig 16 Neil Brownsword *SY Series* 2001

- 06 Author interview with Katy West, *Artist and Curator* (Skype : 27.07.15)
- 07 Marek Cecula, (*American Craft* vol 68 : 2008), pp. 59
- 08 Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York : Off White New York, 2014), pp. 4
- 09 ibid
- 10 Wendy Patricia Tuxill, *A Re-Conceptualisation of Contemporary Sculptural Ceramics Practice From A Post-Minimalist Perspective*, (University of Hertfordshire : PhD, July 2010), pp. 2
- 11 Author interview with Rachel Conroy, *Curator of Applied Arts at National Museum of Wales* (Skype : 24.08.15) The recent ceramics exhibition at Cardiff National Museum, *Fragile?* dedicated a whole room in the exhibition showing films and work of contemporary ceramicists, Adam Buick, Claire Curneen, Lowri Davies, Walter Keeler who sit very comfortably within the studio pottery tradition. This work had been commissioned by the Derek Williams Trust and shows a strong and exciting studio pottery tradition is still relevant and interesting to the extended dialogue of ceramic practices.
- 12 Author interview with Katie Cuddon, *Artist* (Skype : 26.08.15)
- 13 Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York : Off White New York, 2014), pp.3
- 14 ibid



Fig 17 Clare Twomey *Manifest: 10 000 hours* 2015

are concerned with the critical evaluation of making objects must look outward to find a new boundary and context with which to discuss their practice.

If we are being pessimistic, ceramics has been forced to deny its own culture in order to integrate into the dominant art form.<sup>15</sup> The obsession with technique that came out of teachers/tutors needing something to quantify, became the hallmark for ceramic education, risk and emotion were/are all but eliminated because they threatened the final outcome. Overwhelmed by their own history, ceramic practitioners refuse to see their work outside of the narrow cultural context from which they come from and therefore cannot fully realise the potential of the material or the wide ranging implications of material specific practice.<sup>16</sup>

However, Clare Twomey (*Fig. 17*) suggests, that there is a new generation of

'clay practitioners' that are immersed in the practices and debates of the wider visual arts. Intelligent making in clay is part of a larger dialogue placing principles of craft into a relevant role in our visual arts.<sup>17</sup> It should be viewed, not as a genre in itself, but as a boundary and a way of critical thinking.<sup>18</sup> Twomey says that '*embracing terminology is vital*', addressing the importance of definitions and terminology as the only possible basis for communication.<sup>19</sup> Words and descriptions are integral as they give context to the work, a way for the viewer to know what they are looking at. In today's hybrid art world, this should include an important acknowledgment that recognition of the materials used is intrinsic to the content and conceptual understanding of the work.

Ceramics' universality is perhaps its downfall as well as its triumph. It allows the potential of the subversive, the supplemental<sup>20</sup>

and whilst 'expanding the field' in sculptural terms may be old hat, the re-examining of the rich social and craft history of medium specific clay practices, could discover a whole new perspective. In the same way, artists revisiting the 'forgotten' histories and practitioners of ceramics may well allow for an entirely different reading and discourse to be opened up. It makes sense that artists coming to a material like clay for the first time would initially try to capture the rawness of existence, the detritus of the everyday experience, as viscera, mud, *'physical stuff'*.<sup>21</sup> That is not all the medium has to offer and it is reassuring to think that we are, hopefully, just at the beginning of the relationship between fine art and clay.

### Yardstick of Quality

Interdisciplinarity has been defined as a *'democratic, dynamic and co-operative alternative to the old fashioned, inward looking and cliquish nature of disciplines'*.<sup>22</sup> The latter part of that statement is worryingly familiar when looking at the institutions of ceramics and how they are perceived by other disciplines. An interdisciplinary reading of clay would allow the work to be celebrated and analysed, regardless of institutional allegiance, and without diluting the traditions and craft that continue to inform and develop the material. Within that framework, all disciplines must be acknowledged and understood in order to create a meaningful dialogue overall.

However it happens and whoever leads it, be that ceramicists or fine artists, a strong critical discourse is integral to the progression of the medium. That can only hope to occur if we open the doors and pull down the boundaries of institutionalized prejudices and accept ceramics for the cross-inter-disciplinary material that it has become.

With that in mind, it is then not useful to ask the question: *Why is this (ceramic) art?*<sup>23</sup> Such a challenge is most probably to be dismissed and regarded with hostility by artists, and therefore runs the risk of quashing a critical

reinvention of ceramics as a valid discourse before it has begun. We should instead be asking, *what is (ceramic) art, since this is it?* This allows for an analytic and descriptive answer instead of a defensive one.<sup>24</sup> There is no point in dismissing work as 'bad' or 'badly made.' It deserves to be considered, if only as a way of distinguishing and critically evaluating our own position. Instead of allowing our perspectives to be shaped around a 'dogmatic

**'We're all working towards some imaginary last word. I don't know who will have that, but I'd like it to be soon.'**<sup>26</sup>

rigidity', we should expand our judgments to be qualitative rather than dismissive.<sup>25</sup> There is no 'last word'<sup>26</sup> to be had; we need to produce a yardstick of quality with which to assess this new wave of ceramic making, in order to enhance and further the discussion with a balanced perspective and sense of mutual discovery.─

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15 Clement Greenburg quoted in Rob Barnard, 'The Idea of the New' in *Breaking the Mould : new approaches to ceramics*, (London : Black Dog, 2007), pp. 22

16 *ibid*

17 Clare Twomey, 'Contemporary Clay' in *Breaking the Mould : new approaches to ceramics*, (London : Black Dog, 2007), pp. 26

18 Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford ; New York : Berg, 2007), pp. 167

19 David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (London : Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 21

20 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1997 cited in Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford ; New York : Berg, 2007) Throughout *Thinking Through Craft*, Adamson interprets Jacques Derrida's idea of 'supplement' as a quality that can be applied to craft as something that is inherently bound and essential to not only art, but art history. For Adamson, the history of art cannot be viewed without the supporting history of craft.

21 <http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=124> (accessed 28 Feb 2015)

22 Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinarity* (London : Routledge, 2010), pp. 3

23 Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago, Ill. : University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. xiv

I paraphrase and slightly appropriate this question from Drucker – she uses it in the sole relation to slacker aesthetics in general but I am putting it to use specifically in relation to the naive ceramic sculptures of Jesse Wine and others associated with the rise in ceramics in contemporary fine art.

24 *ibid*, pp. 95

25 Christopher Schreck, *New Balance: Approaching the Use of Ceramics in Contemporary Art* (New York : Off White New York, 2014), pp. 6

26 Aaron Angell, *Glazed Expressions: Contemporary Art and Ceramics* (The Hepworth Wakefield : 06.06.15)

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# Appendices-

## Research Questionnaire: What is the future of ceramics as a material in contemporary practices?



Fig 18 Phoebe Cummings, *Flora* 2010

### PHOEBE CUMMINGS

**CF** What is your perspective on how ceramics has been viewed over the last five years? Has it changed/ become more popular, and if so, what, in your opinion, is the cause of the upsurge?

**PC** There seems to me to be a more conscious effort to represent and support different kinds of ceramics practice within museums and through commissioning/other opportunities over recent years. For example, creating the ceramics residency space at the V&A and

establishing a Ceramics Fellowship at Camden Arts Centre. This year I had a temporary piece of work collected by three regional museums through the Contemporary Art Society's Craft Acquisition scheme. Though not uncommon within other areas of practice, this feels like part of a development for museums collecting craft which is often so tied to a permanent object.

The popularity of ceramics also seems to have had a significant upsurge within more of a fine art context, with many artists exploring the use of clay as part of a broader practice. There seems to have been a trend for ceramics shown at art fairs and in commercial galleries. I think partly interest in certain areas comes in waves, things rise and fall back again in cycles, but also in a broader sense there has been increased interest in materials and making, perhaps part of a reaction to living in a digital age.

**CF** Amongst contemporary practitioners, who is setting the agenda for the advancement of ceramics? Who is leading the way/ has the most innovative practices and why?

**PC** Keith Harrison's practice breaks down the rules of what you might expect from ceramics, it also connects different audiences with clay/ ceramics with its cross over into music/sound. Neil Brownsword is innovative in how he explores the post-industrial landscape, he has committed to exploring one area in depth but does so in a way that seems to continually challenge, and not always through making objects. I think James Rigler and Aneta Regel are both making really exciting work, in both their practices there is an interesting use of materials combining ceramics with other things.

Ai Weiwei, Theaster Gates, Urs Fischer, are perhaps working most visibly with ceramics in an international/ fine art context.

**CF** What do you think about the increased interest in clay in fine art practices? Do you include it when you think about the landscape of contemporary ceramics?

**PC** It is good to see clay and ceramics having more prominence and opening up discussion. Fine art, design, science should all be

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seen as part of the landscape of contemporary ceramics I think. There has been a tendency, I think, for ceramics to stay within itself, to be shown in certain places, to only be talked and written about in ceramic specific publications, so it is positive to see things opening out more.

**CF** Do you think such distinctions between ‘applied’ artists and ‘fine’ artists are still relevant?

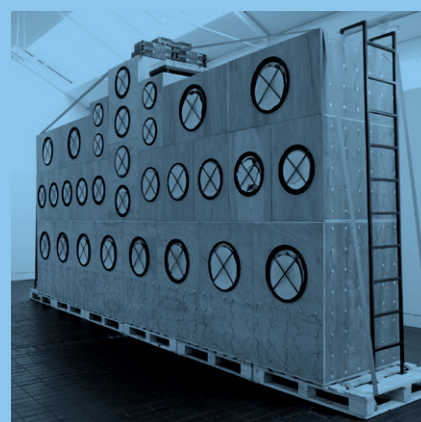
**PC** I think increasingly many artists have practices which cross disciplines so our understanding of these terms has to be broad and maybe they are becoming less relevant. Personally, if talking to a general audience I tend to just define myself as an artist as it includes everything, though if I was talking to a more specialised audience I would say I do ceramics as there is an understanding that this might not mean I make vessels.

**CF** What is the future for clay? In an environment where the boundaries of practices are constantly expanding, is there a place for medium specific teaching? Artists and makers from product design, jewellery, architecture, fine art and more, are all starting to

‘successfully’ use the material. What does that mean for the future of trained ceramicists, for those who commit their life to fully engaging in the process? Is this approach necessary any more and, if so, why?

**PC** I think in practical ways there are benefits to material specific departments within education, it provides the opportunity and facilities for in depth technical exploration and research and a more focused critical/historical programme, however, I think there needs to be greater discussion and collaboration between different areas. Material specific departments can run the risk of tunneling activity in a certain direction based on what has come previously. I think committing to a material still has a place, neither superior nor inferior, to other kinds of practice. Whilst I feel I benefitted from studying in a mixed material department at degree level, I think it’s important that we don’t lose all of the specialised facilities and spaces for working in ceramics. So much has been lost already, yet the interest in working with the material has not.

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**Fig 19** Keith Harrison, *Float* 2015

## **KEITH HARRISON**

**CF** What is your perspective on how ceramics has been viewed over the last five years? Has it changed/ become more popular, and if so, what, in your opinion, is the cause of the upsurge?

**KH** Clay as a material seems to be valued again across the board.

Perversely the material seems to have been re-found as it has become more scarce as a specialist material at art colleges and schools. Maybe this has taken the pressure off the material as there is less of a self-contained ceramics scene with its

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# Appendices-

## Research Questionnaire: What is the future of ceramics as a material in contemporary practices? (cont.)

accompanying historical weight and the material is used across disciplines rather than as a discipline in itself.

**CF** Amongst contemporary practitioners, who is setting the agenda for the advancement of ceramics? Who is leading the way/ has the most innovative practices and why?

**KH** I'm not so sure it necessarily has to be advancement as it suggests a technical development. Also I'm not convinced ceramics in itself needs to be advanced but instead could be thought about in the context of material. I think anyone who uses clay are making according to the time it is made; the processes available and what the work requires.

I think Camden Arts Centre has been pivotal in showcasing practice utilising Ceramics/Clay, particularly through it's residency programme.

**CF** What do you think about the increased interest in clay in fine art practices? Do you include it when you think about the landscape of contemporary ceramics?

**KH** I think it all counts, whether it is Fine Art or Design or Architecture

and all the shades in between. The *Fragile?* exhibition currently on show at National Museum Cardiff is a celebration of this breadth.

**CF** Do you think such distinctions between 'applied' artists and 'fine' artists are still relevant?

**KH** Not sure the term applied artist was ever particularly helpful as it implied hierarchy.

**CF** What is the future for clay? In an environment where the boundaries of practices are constantly expanding, is there a place for medium specific teaching? Artists and makers from product design, jewellery, architecture, fine art and more, are all starting to 'successfully' use the material. What does that mean for the future of trained ceramicists, for those who commit their life to fully engaging in the process? Is this approach necessary any more and, if so, why?

**KH** I think the material's versatility literally allows it to morph and reconfigure itself. Courses at undergraduate level are less medium specific now, which has probably thrown the specialist teaching into

the post-graduate arena. Ceramics equipment seems to be increasingly a whole art college facility to enable work across all courses whereby technical support becomes increasingly vital eg the model at EKWC. I think that leads to some brilliant finds and my wish, looking forward, is that the equipment and facilities are kept so students are able to find clay.

I'm not sure the term ceramicist is sufficient any more as it is so general. I think practitioners are more specific about where they are operating, their future practice is not necessarily dependent on this kind of label.

I think there will continually be those practitioners who wish to explore a process based medium specific approach and others who use it because at that moment it best carries the idea. I hope both approaches remain viable options.

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Fig 20 Nao Matsunaga F-315(L) and F-312(R) 2013

## NAO MATSUNAGA

**CF** What is your perspective on how ceramics has been viewed over the last five years? Has it changed/ become more popular, and if so, what, in your opinion, is the cause of the upsurge?

**NM** I do not quite understand the question, or rather I do not understand what you mean by ceramics. It is a very broad and flexible material as you know, so I do not know how it's been viewed in the last five years. Although I have noticed a lot of visual artists seems

to be using it, branching out from painting practice for example. I think it is quite fashionable to use clay.

**CF** Amongst contemporary practitioners, who is setting the agenda for the advancement of ceramics? Who is leading the way/ has the most innovative practices and why?

**NM** I am not sure whether it is for 'advancement of ceramics' but there are many people doing cool things using clay. James Rigler, Phoebe Cummings, Anders Ruhwald. They all use material other than clay as well as using clay to its strength. Their work does not seem to be about 'ceramics'.

**CF** What do you think about the increased interest in clay in fine art practices? Do you include it when you think about the landscape of contemporary ceramics?

**NM** Great I think. I try not to categorise things (very hard to do), I look at things in terms of whether I like it or not, whether I think it's good or not.

**CF** Do you think such distinctions between 'applied' artists and 'fine' artists are still relevant?

**NM** They are relevant to 'applied artists' and 'fine artist'.

**CF** What is the future for clay? In an environment where the boundaries of practices are constantly expanding, is there a place for medium specific teaching? Artists and makers from product design, jewellery, architecture, fine art and more, are all starting to 'successfully' use the material. What does that mean for the future of trained ceramicists, for those who commit their life to fully engaging in the process? Is this approach necessary any more and, if so, why?

**NM** I have no idea what is the future for clay, probably not much different from its past. I think all those you mentioned have always 'successfully' used clay, of course some were better than other but... I do not think it is a new thing for artist, designers and architects to be using clay. I think one has to focus on getting better and better, if what one does is good then people will recognise it.

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Author interview with Aaron Angell, *Artist*, (Troy Town Pottery, London : 10.09.15)

Author interview with Christie Brown, *Ceramic Artist*, (Southbank Cafe, London : 13.07.15)

Author interview with Rachel Conroy, *Senior Curator of Applied Arts, Curator of exhibition Fragile? Cardiff National Museum of Wales* (Skype : 24.08.15)

Author interview with Katie Cuddon, *Artist* (Skype : 26.08.15)

Author interview with Charlie Fellowes, *Director of Edel Assanti Gallery* (Edel Assanti : 08.08.15)

Author interview with Alex Hoda, *artist and co-curator of Broken Music at Cass Sculpture Foundation* (Skype : 27.08.15)

Author interview with Rebecca May Marsden, *Gallery Director Limoncello* (Skype : 30.07.15)

Author interview with Frances Richardson, *Artist* (Studio Voltaire, London : 04.09.15)

Author interview with Phil Root, *Artist of Grantchester Pottery* (Telephone : 27.08.15).

Author interview with Jack Tan, *Artist* (Skype : 26.07.15)

Author interview with Nicola Tassie *Artist* (Standpoint Studios, London : 29.07.15)

Author interview with Katy West, *Artist and Curator* (Skype : 27.07.15)

Author interview with Jesse Wine, *Artist* (Plaza Plaza, London 28.05.15)

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