



# STATE OF CERAMICS

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Brick Piles and Waste Pits: a future of caretaking  
Rosanna Martin

Portland, OR

[www.a-bprojects.com](http://www.a-bprojects.com)

[@a\\_bprojects](https://twitter.com/a_bprojects)

[admin@a-bprojects.com](mailto:admin@a-bprojects.com)

## Topic

Cornwall, United Kingdom:

1600s: Clay is mined, fired as bricks on site, and used to build local estates.

1700s: The expansion of the china clay extraction industry results in huge quantities of waste clay. This waste clay washes downstream, creating large new-formed deposits that become a resource for small brickworks which mine this clay, mix it with sand and other local materials, and form bricks that are fired in huge beehive kilns.

1971: Technological developments make bricks obsolete as a tool for drying china clay and the Cornwall brickmaking industry folds.

2018: Rosanna Martin leases rights to a former china clay extraction pit and co-founds a site-specific, community brickworks called *Brickfield*.

This history is the starting point for a conversation about *Brick Piles and Waste Pits: the future of caretaking*. In this State of Ceramics, the latest in the Architectural Ceramics series, we venture into these questions:

- How might the use of industrial waste be integrated into artist practices?
- Can we reframe what our ideas of waste are, towards more responsible and environmentally friendly ways of working? As Jane Bennett states in her book *Vibrant Matter*, "How, for example, would patterns of consumption change if we faced not litter, rubbish, trash or "the recycling", but an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter?"
- Can caretaking, of materials and what we use (but also of ourselves, each other and our children) be elevated in importance, or become an act of resistance?

## Questions



Waste china clay found on the Fal Estuary, used for making bricks at a former Cornish brickworks  
Image credit: Rosanna Martin

### If bricks can kiss...

"The clay, the clay, the clay was coming. The pit was coming through there."  
John Osborne, Cornish brickmaker, 2020

"Kiss. A colour change on the face of a brick caused by the bricks being stacked on top of one another in the kiln, allowing the direct heat to alter the surface on exposed areas. Where the bricks are touching, the colour of the clay is preserved. Where the flames have licked the surface of the brick, a denser, shinier, more metallic surface is created."

Rosanna Martin, *The Brickfield Guide to Cornish Brickmaking*, 2020

"Just flattened, just flattened. All of that was full up with pallets of bricks."  
John Osborne, Cornish brickmaker, 2020

The scale of brickmaking in Cornwall is comparatively small to other sites in the UK and internationally. Brickworks mostly used waste clay from the china clay industry as their resource. When the last formal brickworks closed in 1971, the unsold bricks that were still in the yard were left abandoned. Over time, pioneer species grew up and around them; the bricks disappeared from view under greenery and trees.

“A word carries meaning. A metaphor means carrying across - one thing allied with another. We shape your world, say the bricks, and the words. And you shape us.”

“...perhaps bricks, rather than representing walling off or protectionism, can be reminders of uniqueness, solidarity and collaboration.”

Fiona Hamilton, Clay Bricks, in *Cornerstones, Subterranean Writings*, 2018.

In their seeming simplicity, bricks carry and are imbued with many meanings, and can hold big, conflicting ideas. If bricks can kiss, can they be used as an object to think through ideas of caregiving, and be symbolic of togetherness?



Handmade and reclaimed bricks at Brickfield, in a disused china clay extraction pit  
Image credit: Rosanna Martin

## The future of caretaking

If we care-take for waste, what can it become?

“Care is its neighbour, love, made solid. It’s in the touch and the weft, the holding...Against the odds, inventive forms of love insist on abundance, creating sites of connection forming, possibility making, consciousness-raising care and struggle.”

“world-making against the world, surviving within and against the material conditions of scarcity.”

Marianne Brookes, *Intervals*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2024.



Quartz sand waste pile, “clay country”, Cornwall

Image credit: Rosanna Martin

- As artists, ceramicists, researchers; how can we renegotiate our practices to fold in more caretaking and caregiving?
- Is the act of making something, of crafting, an act of making love solid?
- Can abundance be found in material limitations and scarcity?

- What do inventive forms of love/care look like?
- How can our practices enable us to form connections; with each other, the land and other species towards more sustainable ways of working?
- Can small acts of making and agency within our practices make a positive difference on a large scale?

“Worms, or electricity, or various gadgets, or fats, or metals, or stem cells are actants, or what Darwin calls “small agencies,” that, when in the right confederation with other physical and physiological bodies, can make big things happen ... in some times and places, the “small agency” of the lowly worm makes more of a difference than the grand agency of humans.”

Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, 2010.



Handmade Brickfield brick using waste materials from the china clay industry  
Image credit: James Darling

## Extraction and romanticising the digging of 'wild' clay

- Is digging our own clay a more sustainable approach to buying bags from wholesalers?
- The process is surrounded with a romantic lexicon, such as using the prefix 'wild' before clay, and 'foraging'.
- It is certainly meaning-making, and can lead to valuing the resource more highly, developing connection to place, etc but what are the implications if everyone went to the same spot and dug the same clay? In Cornwall specifically that could lead to coastal erosion in places where that is already an issue, and disruption of natural habitats for wildlife. We are then small scale extractors.
- At what scale do the positives of this activity outweigh any negatives?
- If we are taking from the land, how do we acknowledge this appropriately?



A side bevel brick with a kiss  
Image credit: Oliver Udy

## Care-taking Industrial Waste - a solution?

- As brick making in Cornwall did in the 1900's, can we look to processing and using waste from industry as a solution?
- How can we all make better use of waste materials? How can we access these materials, when often industry can be intimidating and closed off to working with individual artists?
- Is there a model to be found for this way of working?
- Could there be or are there already organisations that advocate for artists interested in working in this way to network, approach industries and share resources?
- Can we create open source information about where materials are coming from within the ceramic industry?



Brickfield mini-beehive kiln made using reclaimed bricks  
Image credit: Georgia Haseldine

## Readings and Selected Quotes

Article: Fiona Hamilton, *Clay Bricks in Cornerstones*, *Subterranean Writings*, ed Mark Smalley, Little Toller Books, 2018.

“Brickmaking could be combined with sheep-rearing and crop-growing, for the cycles of these different seasonal activities complemented each other. Clay was dug in the autumn, weathered over winter. Moulding began when danger of frost was over, after sowing and lambing. The kiln was kept ablaze from April to November. In a symbiotic arrangement, the tile and brick industry expanded in concert with the building of transport links, and the acceleration of house building.”

“The average lifespan of a brick is 500 years. The word ‘brick’ itself has continuity, remaining relatively unchanged through Germanic, Dutch and French versions since medieval times, with only a few letter’ and slight pronunciation differences. The no-nonsense, unadorned single syllable seems at one with the object, as if word and thing were fused together in an inalterable bond that, like brick itself, won’t come undone except in temperatures of over 2000oC.”

Book: Marianne Brooker, *Intervals*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2024

*Chapter 2: Mother of Invention*

“Before you can understand how my mum died, you have to understand how she lived. Sick and poor, she made a workshop of herself. When her hair fell out, she learned about wig making and tracked down cheaper versions of her favourite styles from foreign wholesalers. When her teeth fell out, she learned how to mould dentures from a bright white and pink polymer. She duct-taped her feet to a tricycle so that she could feel the wind in her hair. She made an eyepatch from an old bra. Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. But there’s something else in this mix - a defiant kind of self-love: each act a refusal, each invention a gift. These contrivances were a means of survival, in material terms and in more personal, psychological; even spiritual terms, they gave her a sense of vocation, pleasure, creation and repair. More than symptom management, my mum created a pattern for a whole other way of life: world-making against the world; surviving within and against the material conditions of scarcity.



Arseli Dokumaci describes tendencies like this as 'activist affordances': 'the unspectacular choreographies of the everyday ... through which disabled people *enact* and *bring into being* the worlds that are not already available to them'. Through this dance, crouching, crawling, arching, grasping - homes are made not just habitable but reciprocal: 'the fixed, rigid and obdurate materiality of the environment becomes something else, as if it were alive, sensing, reciprocating and caring for your sick, impaired body in pain'. So much is possible in that glancing *as if*: a life made otherwise, a wish. These habits of mind and movement have the power to reshape a densely material world; they're resolute and impatient, unwilling to wait for ramps, rails and concrete forms of assistance installed or distributed at the discretion of others."

"This plant is endless: 'some species can live on, and on, and on, for as long as there's someone around to water them - to bear them in mind, not altogether forget about them,' Kate Briggs describes. We have a lot to learn from these 'tending gestures'."

Book: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, 2010

"...the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert. This habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings) is a "partition of the sensible," to use Jacques Rancière's phrase. The quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality *of* matter and the lively powers *of* material formations, such as the way omega-3 fatty acids can alter human moods or the way our trash is not "away" in landfills but generating lively streams of chemicals and volatile winds of methane as we speak. I will turn the figures of "life" and "matter" around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound. In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape."

Article: Sarah Christie, *Taking, (What About Clay?)*  
<https://waczine.com/2023/12/04/taking/>

"The United States Geological Survey reports that clay is indeed plentiful. If we already have more clay than we can ever use I can just dig it up wherever I find

it, can't I? Perhaps. But only if I think it is inert, history-less, and believe it to be mine for the taking."

"Perhaps it is an ingrained hang-over from the colonial narrative of "discovery" that we seem to frequently view clay simply as a material waiting for us to come and do something with it, rather than as having a history, and even a purpose. What would happen if instead we looked for meanings that it already holds? Would clay tell us more stories than we could ever know, if we were more open to hearing them?"

"I might eventually throw this "waste" clay into a bucket of water, break it down, sieve it, wedge it up and use it for sculpture, even fire it. For now, though, I'm going to let it be what it already is, and consider what meanings it carries, and where I could allow those to lead me, if I were to truly listen."

Article: Alison Harper and Sarah Chave, *Deep Materialism and Care-taking: A study of material relationships for the twenty-first century* in *Art and Creativity in an Era of Ecocide: Embodiment, Performance and Practice* by Anna Pigott, Owain Jones and Ben Parry, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2023.

"The restoring of dignity to so-called waste - be that a discarded sheet of paper or a crisp packet - is not intended to celebrate that all this discarded matter exists in the world. Rather, getting to know the materials better opens ways to be saddened and angered that they have to be in the world at all in this form. It also provides time and space to reflect on the environmental devastation which the extractive and industrial processes used to bring the materials into their current form has generated. Engaging with these artefacts invites an imagining of what it could mean if all in the world were to be treated with dignity rather than as fodder for a capitalist machine endlessly spewing out surplus. It is also an invitation to seek active ways to help this 'imaginary' come into being."

"Central to our conception of deep materialism is an acceptance of the responsibility and micro-political agency of each individual to seek out the provenance, destination and ecological impact of the material goods they often take for granted, whether these be paper cups, clothing, food, phones, computers or furniture. Implicit in this thinking is a concern for 'post-use' materials, commonly called 'waste', opening questioning of what 'waste' is. ... the phenomenon of 'waste' can also be understood in a different way... it is matter which has been extracted, exploited and needlessly discarded."

“For us, the way [William] Morris discusses issues of wealth and waste is inspirational. His thinking encourages questions such as: What is wealth? What is waste? Is waste ‘unwanted’ wealth?”

“We have questioned what ‘waste’ is and how a repositioning of ‘waste’ as a lively, agential material can contribute to less destructive ways of being in the world.”

Article: Clare Loder, *Did the Sky used to be Full of Birds?*, in *Art and Creativity in an Era of Ecocide: Embodiment, Performance and Practice* by Anna Pigott, Owain Jones and Ben Parry, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2023.

“Thinking through the formation of clay from biological matter, mineral components, water-filled pockets and air-cushioned gaps, its muddy lineage from vegetal being to shale and slate kin, all of this embodied agency and notions of deep materialism ... has helped me to pay closer attention to my material and to see it as the life-world that it is.”

Article: Grace Ndiritu, *Ways of Seeing: A New Museum Story for Planet Earth*, 2017  
<https://www.gracendiritu.com/Writings/ESSAY-WAYS-OF-SEEING-A-NEW-MUSEUM-STORY-FOR-PLANET-EARTH-2017>

“For a long time, I have been disturbed by the limited and polarising way that Western philosophy has separated the human mind and spirit from the body. This dichotomous way of thinking affects everything: from the way governmental policy is created, global markets are managed, and peace and security issues are tackled to the food we eat and the way we interact with art. The urgency of our current ecological crisis means that it should no longer be a question of if objects have a soul, but what we can do to heal this split in our thinking – preferably, before it destroys our environment and our shared cultural future.

The Western tendency to see the world as a “dead” place – and to see the Indigenous peoples who use traditional ecological knowledge to communicate with Nature and her objects (natural or crafted) as playing “make-believe” – causes us to consume endlessly and pollute carelessly. Because if we think Earth is a dead planet, why care for her (it)? Even today, most non-Western cultures still believe that objects have a soul. This belief is called animism.

“As we have been born countless times, it follows that we have had countless mothers. Thus, there is not a single being we meet who, over the incalculable expanse of beginnings time [sic], has failed to be our mother.”

“But why this emphasis on interconnection or “inter-being”?

“If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So, we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. ‘Interbeing’ is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix ‘inter-’ with the verb ‘to be’, we have a new verb, inter-be.”

“The observation that we ‘inter-are’, while true and poetic, is not really the most important element of ‘interbeing’. The important part is the realisation that there is no independent self that the perception of self, of ‘me’, of ‘mine’ is an illusion. Awareness that ‘I’ am made of ‘non-I’ elements leads to the understanding of non-self and it is the realisation of non-self that brings an end to suffering.”

Website: Feral Atlas <https://feralatlas.supdigital.org/>

Book: Caitlin Desilvey et al, Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices, University College London, 2020.

“The rhododendron and the buddleia are unlikely to merit protection any time soon, but the clay country is also home to several rare species designated and protected for their natural heritage value. In one case, the act of ‘protection’ is far from straightforward, however. One ruderal bryophyte (moss) species, the Western rustwort (*Marsupella profunda*) needs disturbed and exposed substrates to survive; it is a pioneer that colonises unshaded or lightly shaded clay and granitic rocks. In the 1990s, the moss was identified in several sites in and around both dormant and active pits, and some of these sites were subsequently protected with Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designations. Because the necessary disturbance was absent, however, the moss became shaded by encroaching gorse and bramble. The plants are now largely extinct in the designated areas and the species has been categorized as ‘Vulnerable’ on the International Union for

Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List (Hodgetts 2011). Natural England has identified 'refuge' sites for species translocation and entered into a collaboration with Imerys to help replicate the heavy industrial activity that will maintain the unique ecological conditions required to maintain viable populations (Callaghan 2014). In this paradoxical instance of ruderal heritage in action, the conservation of natural heritage is only possible through the 'periodic large-scale disturbance' brought about by extractive intervention (Callaghan 2014, 7)."

Article: Anna Tsing, *The Buck, The Bull and the Dream of the Stag: Some Unexpected Weeds of the Anthropocene*, *Suomen Anthropologi*, 2017

"Although phenomenological approaches to landscape have continued to thrive (Ingold 2011), the term's genealogical taint blocked the array of other approaches—materialist, ecological, historical, etc.—that otherwise might have blossomed around the term. I am grateful to geographer Kenneth Olwig (1996) for taking us beyond this impasse. Olwig argues that an earlier and more pertinent genealogy of landscape in Germanic Europe is that place in which political moots could be gathered to discuss things, that is, issues of importance. A landscape is a gathering in the making. This definition lends itself to analysis of many of the problems which landscape studies can address. Landscapes are both imaginative and material; they encompass physical geographies, phenomenologies, and cultural and political commitments. The definition can be extended, too, to encompass multispecies gatherings in the making (Tsing 2015). My landscapes are moots in which many living beings—and non-vital things as well, such as rocks and water—take part. They come together to negotiate collaborative survival, the 'who lives and who dies' and the 'who stays and who goes' enactments of the landscape. They may not acknowledge each other directly. They may ignore each other, as with the buck and the Bull. But each declines or flourishes in the effects of the world-making projects initiated and maintained by the others. Landscapes, then, are gatherings of ways of being in the making. As ecologists argue, they are units of heterogeneity: a landscape can exist at any scale as long as it encompasses heterogeneous patches. There are landscapes on a leaf and on a continent. The so-called 'landscape scale' of GIS is only one of many scales for landscapes worth exploring. And ways of being? Ways of being are historically shifting enactments. Species is relevant, but hardly fully determinate. A farmer and a financier have different human enactments; so too a racehorse and a plow horse have different horse enactments. Rocks and water also have historically shifting ways of being. In landscape moots, ways of being emerge—and shape what's possible for all the others. Landscapes are historical, and they allow us to think across a variety of scales, from deep time to current events. Such shifting scales of time are the focus of discussion about the Anthropocene, a term that continues to be contested—and thus still open. How might we bring landscape into discussions of the Anthropocene?"

## Projects Exploring Origins and Use of Waste Materials in Artistic and Design Practices

- Golden Earth Studio - <https://www.gedevelopments.com/studio>  
A collaboration between artists, makers, and the construction industry, promoting a conversation on sustainable development and the circular economy through the process of waste transformation. An initiative set up between Gabriel Lau and [Sara Howard Studio](#).
- Alternative Ceramic Supply - <https://glost-glaze.com/material-glaze-research/alternative-ceramic-supply-interview>  
Urban and Industrial landscape material processing artist collective of Amelia Black, Claire Ellis, Georgia Stevenson, Sarah Muir-Smith
- European Ceramic Context 2023 - <https://www.europeanceramiccontext.com/>  
Devoted to sustainable practices in contemporary ceramics and aims to discuss questions like: Can we rethink and recycle ceramic materials? Is it time to revise concepts and perceptions of aesthetic conventions? How do we grow and mature new typologies, materials and methods?  
Exhibition and artist residency opportunities available.
- Material Intelligence Magazine (online) - <https://www.materialintelligencemag.org/about/>
- Ceramic Materials Atlas - <https://ceramicmaterialsatlas.com/>
- Hannah Rose Whittle, Tech Fellow 2024 at Rijksakademie <https://www.rijksakademie.nl/en/residents-advisors-team/hannah-rose-whittle>
- Future Materials Bank <https://www.futurematerialsbank.com/material/asbestos-river-clay/>  
The Future Materials Bank is an archive of materials that supports and promotes the transition towards ecologically conscious art and design practices.
- Ignorance is Bliss <https://ignorance-bliss.com/products/ceramic-tiles>  
A research-based design project utilising industrial waste and secondary materials to create new products.
- AterlierNL <https://www.ateliernl.com/>  
Atelier NL showcases the value of local materials and the graceful subtleties of the natural world by reshaping raw earth elements into tangible, everyday objects.

- Lab AIR  
<https://www.lab-air.nl/>  
Design Collective for Aerial Issues
- Keramiek Museum Princessehof  
<https://princessehof.nl/en/about-the-museum/news/2023/sustainable-ceramics-1>  
A series of exhibitions on sustainable ceramics