



STATE OF CERAMICS .edu edition

Clay Stories

a discussion guide by Sigrid Espelien

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A lump of clay doesn't start its existence in the meeting with a person's hand, it has a long history on its own: transported in a truck, being packed in a plastic bag, going through a pugmill, dug out from the ground, and transported with wind, water and glaciers over thousands of years; but first, stones crush into sand, sand crushes into silt, and silt rubs against itself until it becomes tiny clay particles under 0,002 millimeters. The moment of a person touching the clay is equivalent merely to a sneeze in a human's lifetime.

In Norway there's no processing of clay (everything available for purchase is imported), there are no brick factories, and there is almost no ceramic industry left. And yet, there is an abundance of local clay. How does this impact our connection to clay? How important is it that we know our clay, know our clay's history, know our clay's locality? This discussion will address how we understand clay as a material not only perfected for our artistic visions, but also as soil, land, and territory.

Questions:

- **If you did the exercise (or if you have previously collected local clay), what are your thoughts about the clay you found? Did your relationship to or understanding of the clay shift during the exercise? And what does the clay think about you, if you could guess?**
- **How are we connected to clay as more than a material for ceramic art purposes, but also as land, territory and soil?**
The situation in Norway, with no industrial processing of clay or brick production, makes in my opinion a gap between people and clay. How do we relearn or fill this gap? What is the situation in the United States or elsewhere with the connection to material(s) and is this important for contemporary art?
- Based upon the text *The Glaze Waste* from *The Clay and Other Essays, 2020* (available for download at <https://a-bprojects.com/state-of-ceramics/>) by Katrine Køster Holst, from her PhD reflection in artistic research at the Art and Craft department at the Oslo National Academy of Art, 2014-19:
Are all materials political? How is this text linked to the exercise about clay?
- **When is working with local material necessary or relevant, and when is it a trendy, politically correct fetishism? Why are we seeing such a surge in artists working with local clay bodies?**

Examples of artists who use the history of clay as content in their work:

Dineo Seshee Bopape, South Africa

<https://hyperallergic.com/347885/an-artists-plots-of-earth-decay-to-dust/>



Jatiwangi Art factory (residency and art collective in West Java, Indonesia)

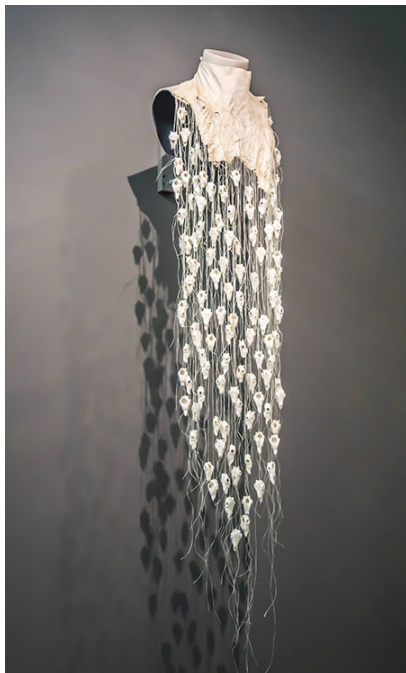
<https://algorie.home.blog/2017/03/08/asian-art-biennial-2017/>



Part of the Jatiwangi collective: LAIR (band with instruments made out of rooftiles)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwbC0UWpcH8>



Maret Sara Anna, Sami artist and activist, bone porcelain from reindeer bones
<https://maretannesara.com/#/>



Katrine Køster Holst, Denmark
(Exhibition as reflection for PhD in artistic research: *Minerals and natural phenomenon- artistic expression through rule-based research*, Oslo National Academy of Art, 2014-2019)
<http://www.koesterholst.com/installations.html>

Other Questions

- **Is New Materialism actually a new thing, or is it indigenous methodology in a new packaging?** (please refer to definitions of Duodji and New Materialism below)
- **What do New Materialism and Duodji have in common?**

Indigenous methodology is about thinking and living in a holistic way with nature and each other, which also includes the making of art and craft, or duodji, which is the term in Sami language (see below). This methodology—the way that an object is charged through the maker, the maker's consciousness about the material and process, and the inseparability of life and art— is, in my opinion, an interesting lens for looking at the art and craft movement. Perhaps clay and ceramic art could benefit from being seen through this context. Is new materialism actually a new thing, or is it indigenous methodology in a new packaging? Why is indigenous art so often placed in the ethnographic section of the museum and not in the art section?

«Duodji is today understood firstly as the handicraft of the Sámi people. (According to Wikipedia: the Sámi people are an indigenous Finno-Ugric people inhabiting Sápmi, which today encompasses large northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula within the Murmansk Oblast of Russia. The Sámi have historically been known in English as Lapps or Laplanders). The Sámi people have through the ages lived of the natural resources and crafting of utility articles, and duodji/handicraft has been important for the survival in nature. Duodji, the craft, and duoddjon, crafting, is a process of the hands, which provides the people their everyday necessities, like clothes, tools, things for the home and so on. Today duodji does still to some extent have the same purpose in the natural resources-based livelihoods as in the past, but the content of the duodji term has changed together with the change of the Sámi lifestyle. Today the duodji term can even contain modern acts of crafting, to which every craftsman ascribes their own meaning. Duodji is a part in the building of the Sámi identity, meaning that the Sámi people use duodji as their cultural property and their mean of expression, in which they include their own experiences.»

<https://arkisto.fi/aida/en/students-of-duodji/what-is-duodji>

«New materialism is a term ascribed to a range of contemporary perspectives in the arts, humanities and social sciences that have in common a theoretical and practical 'turn to matter'. This turn emphasizes the materiality of the world and everything – social and natural – within it, and differentiates new materialisms from a post-structuralist focus upon texts, 'systems of thought' and 'discourses', focusing upon social production rather than social construction (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 4). The materialities considered in new materialist approaches include human bodies; other animate organisms; material things; spaces, places and the natural and built environment that these contain; and material forces including gravity and time. Also included may be abstract concepts, human constructs and human epiphenomena such as imagination, memory and thoughts; though not themselves 'material', such elements have the capacity to produce material effects. »

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320016117_New_Materialism