

STATE OF CERAMICS | October 16, 2020

Sigrid Espelien

Clay Stories

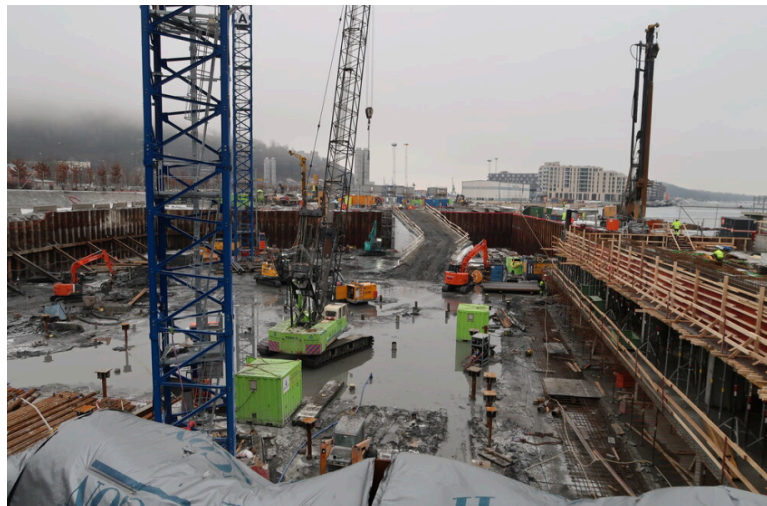
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IN ATTENDANCE:

Sigrid Espelien, Nicole Seisler, Kenna Dworsky, Arely Amaut, Aimee Odum, Ako Castuera, Ana Henton, Anca Nicolaescu, Andrea Nhuch, Andrea Pullicino, Andres Payan Estrada, Anela Oh, Ariel Gout, Ariel Zimman, Ashton Phillips, Ashwini Bhat, Cathy Lu, Chanda Zea, Elena Gileva, Ella, Emily Stapleton-Jefferis, Emily Sudd, Emily Blythe Jones, Evgenia R O, Fawn Penn, Haley Summerfield, Hannah Newman, Hee Jun Ahn, Iliana, Jackie Laurita Cortese, Jenn Kaplan, Jennifer Forsberg, Joerg Franzbecker, Josh Cloud, Joshua Green, Julia Haft-Candell, Julia Schuster, Karen Tong, Kat Stiller, Kate Chiddix, Kate Roberts, Kim Norton, Kitty Ross, Kristin Schimik, Liz McCarthy, Maria Moyer, Marina Weiner, Michael Kline, Nia, Qwist Joseph, Rosie Brand, Samantha Albert, Sarah Christie, Sarah Fraser, Sarah Kelly, Silje Kjørholt, Stacy Jo Scott, Stephanie, Sue Whitmore, Taylor Kibby, Teal Stannard, Tessa Grundon, Tim Berg, Zack, Zoe M

QUESTIONS FROM SIGRID ESPELIEN:

- 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 might 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? In my opinion, the situation in Norway, with no industrial processing of clay or brick production, creates a gap between people and clay. How do we repair 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? When is it trendy, politically correct fetishism? Why are we seeing a surge in artists working with local clay bodies?
- Is New Materialism actually a new thing, or is it repackaged indigenous methodology? (please refer to definitions of Duodji and New Materialism below)
- What do New Materialism and Duodji have in common?
- Indigenous methodology centers on thinking and living in a holistic way with nature and each other, an approach which also includes the making of art and craft, or duodji, which is the term in Sami language (see below). Indigenous methodology posits that an object is charged through the maker and the maker's consciousness about the material and process, and thus life and art are inseparable—this, in my opinion, is an interesting lens consider the art and craft movement with. 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? Finally, why is Indigenous art so often placed in the ethnographic section of the museum and not in the art section?

INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT FROM SIGRID ESPELIEN:

A lump of clay doesn't start its existence when it meets a person's hand; it already has a long history on its own. It was: transported in a truck, packed in a plastic bag, fed through a pugmill, dug from the ground, and transported via wind, water and glaciers over thousands of years; but first, stone is crush into sand, sand is crushed 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 to a sneeze in a human's lifetime. In Norway, everything available for purchase is imported. There is no processing of clay, no brick factories, and 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 for our artistic visions, but also as soil, land, and territory.



Sigrid began the discussion with a brief introduction of her background and education, before showing a series of images of where clay was mined in Norway, ranging from industrial sites to graveyards. The entire city of Oslo is set on clay from the last ice age. As such, the material provides a portal into the past. Sigrid is interested in questions of developing and processing clay for various uses; much of the clay she uses in her practice comes from the “unwanted mass” of available clay

mined for non-ceramic purposes, such as infrastructure expansion. This relates her practice to archaeology — within these unwanted clay masses, Sigrid has also found relics and artifacts from shipwrecks, among other human activities. Much of Sigrid's work speaks to clay's ability to

harken back to a previous time, which is also embodied by her interest in bricks and brick production. Though Norway itself doesn't produce bricks anymore, Sigrid has begun making them as an end product for the production and refinement of clay that speaks to the material's universality. In addition to her interest in clay as a window into times past, Sigrid is invested in technology and its relationship to contemporary clay and ceramics. She views clay as "open source," for everyone, just like technology.

Before opening up the discussion to the group, Sigrid shared the work of artists who she feels share similar interests in the history and spirituality of clay, including Dineo Seshee Bopape, the Jatiwangi Art factory and collective, Maret Sara Anna, Ana Mendieta, and Katrine Kjøster Holst.

SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSION (WRITTEN BY A-B PROJECTS ASSISTANT KENNA DWORSKY):

Our relationship with ceramics begins with the acquisition of clay — buying materials from a store is a very different experience than mining them yourself, which facilitates very different experiences and understandings of the material. Each landscape has its own natural resources, but this can mean that the available clay or glazes minerals are very limited. With store-bought clay, the entire earth is (theoretically) at our fingertips, though it lacks the same intimacy as sourcing these materials on one's own. Both methods of acquiring material facilitates a unique relationship with the clay in the hand.



<https://www.sigridespelien.com>

Mining clay with one's own hands makes it impossible to ignore the universal presence and importance of this material — we walk on it, eat out of it once it has been fired, and build homes out of it. Many participants shared their own experiences mining clay, and each individual seemed to have a different relationship with that process. Mining clay can become an artistic experience in and of itself; for some individuals, the process of sourcing is more important than what is made with the material. Though the clay is "free" when taken directly from the earth, it entails a different, non-monetary exchange that comes with a new set of responsibilities.

How does one navigate obligation and responsibility to their land? How do we ensure materials are acquired ethically? Our understanding of our relationship with and responsibility for the land are politically and culturally determined. American values orbit around capitalism — how do we assess, from a moral or spiritual standpoint, what earth is worth? How can an exchange be made when the mining process is removed from our personal practices?

In some cultures, an exchange is required for taking land--one must offer something in return, whether a prayer, a song, or something else. In Hawaii, it is commonplace to ask permission of the land before using or taking from it. Digging clay ourselves (and testing it, firing it, experimenting with it) can be an intimate learning experience that can combat 'click and ship' consumer culture, which distances us from our materials.

Many participants were eager to acknowledge that they do not have the answers to how to engage responsibly with a material that is mined. It is an ongoing discussion with a variety of possible approaches and solutions, and it seems impossible to find a finite, single answer. Some participants pointed to spiritual solutions, such as asking permission or offering prayer, while others began brainstorming about active land remediation to help prevent erosion.



Clay from all 50 states, Adam Silverman via instagram

Another facet of thinking through our responsibility as it relates to clay is how it can function within a community — clay has a unique capacity for universal human connection. Clay is a material that can be found anywhere, touched by anyone, and is within us all. The inherent spiritual potency of clay makes it an apt material for contemplating our connection to one another, as well as our communal connection to the earth. Clay deserves to be treated with the same respect as any body. Making work about clay itself and allowing this process to affect one's practice is another way we give back to the material and earth.

Some of the individuals taking part in the conversation have practices that both use local clay and address the impact of the earth on our work. Other participants discussed various projects centered around permaculture and indigenous practices with land. This begins with a deep consideration for how materials come into our possession, how we exhibit respect for this process, and how we learn ethics from the land itself.

There is strong potential for collaboration with the earth: One participant relayed a story about a class assignment that required burying work in the ground to reach a "complete" state, thereby facilitating an active conversation with a site (in one example, a cassette tape was buried and its sound was altered by minerals in the soil, functionally creating a collaborative soundtrack). The content of that work inherently relies on that specific land, and the land itself determines the final form. This territory necessitates further exploration: how does the process of digging land, as well as the body of land itself become the content of ceramic work?