



STATE OF CERAMICS | October 16, 2020

Andres Payan Estrada

Body Language: Human Trace and Digital Touch

1206 Maple Ave., #540 – Los Angeles | www.a-bprojects.com | [@a_bprojects](https://twitter.com/a_bprojects) | nicoleseisler@gmail.com

IN ATTENDANCE:

Andres Payan Estrada, Nicole Seisler, Kenna Dworsky, Teal Stannard, Sherry Virbila, Kristen Morgin, Julie Schustack, Katherine Ross, Stacy Jo Scott, Sigrid Espelien, Sarah Christie, Lucy Cran, Amy Santoferraro, Ariel Gout, Molly Shea, Rosie Brand, Qwist Joseph, Thomas Muller, Cathy Lu, Abraham Schroeder, Patricia Yossen, Julia Haft-Candell, Ella Scudder-Davis, Phoebe Cummings, Marina Weiner, Katy Keuter, Neha Kudchadkar, Xia Zhang, Alison Ragogue, Tim Berg, Ayumi Horie, Nikki Anderson, Kory Salajka, Maria Moyer, Taylor Kibby, Sue Whitmore, Yao Liu, Emily Blythe Jones, Collin Stafford, K. Tong, Josh Cloud, Maureen, Melika, Melanie, ELla Neiwert, Nancy Fleishman, Ariel Brice

QUESTIONS FROM ANDRES PAYAN ESTRADA:

- What was our initial impulse to form clay? To create something out of a material that we eventually understood as something outside of ourselves and something malleable that we could transform through a physical exchange between body and material. How does this nascent impulse influence the way we use touch to communicate today?
- How does touch and body language relate to our current reality where touch can be a series of taps on a glass screen that are translated into digital communication, or when touch is associated with the propagation of illness?
- How does our evolution into the digital realm affect, impact, or relate to contemporary material and object politics? Have our contemporary conditions changed the way we create, make, and associate with our physical realities?
- Where is clay in this reality— the timeless material that extends far beyond our corporal existence that has engrained itself into all moments of human life and evolution? Its malleability has extended beyond its material capabilities into a much more abstract and complex relation to us and our bodies. How has clay archived our histories, individualities, social structures, and how are we using it to propel ourselves and our communities into the future?

INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT FROM ANDRES PAYAN ESTRADA:

As humans we have a deeply engrained impulse to touch, to connect, to leave an imprint or trace either intentional or by consequence. We often attempt to use touch as way to discern our realities, the relation of another or other—outside of our own bodies and ourselves.

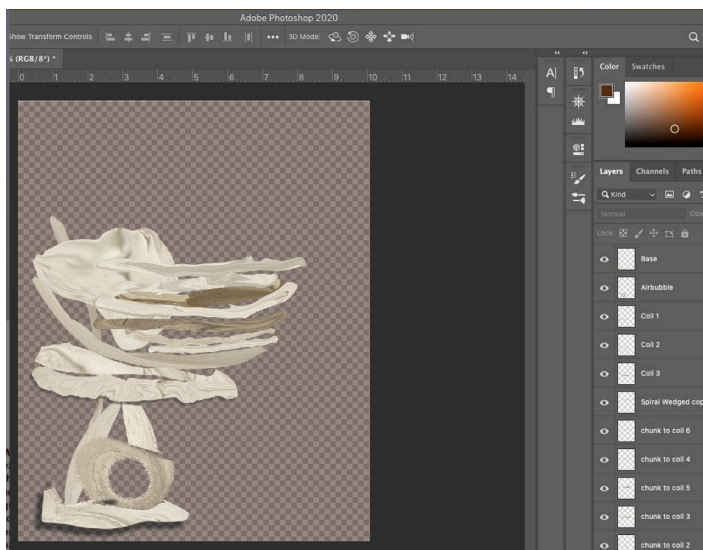
We often try to use touch as a way to understand the incomprehensible; how many times have we stretched out our hand towards the night sky, have run our hand through the ocean water, or held our arm up towards nothingness, towards a sublime that is bigger than ourselves—all in an attempt to connect and understand. We reach out to touch or hold materials and objects around us as a way of

understanding them, as a way to ground our association to them through physical relation. We use touch as a way to communicate affection to others and use physical exchanges to make ourselves present and form connections between our bodies. Yet, touch can also be subjective, individual to each body and to the histories, limitations, and impulses.

Andres began his talk by walking us through a variety of open tabs on his computer, which he referred to as a “galaxy of thoughts.” The busyness of his screen seemed to mimic the impact and dominance of technology he proceeded to discuss. Andres showed work from various artists (ranging from the digital ceramic work of Nick Lenker to more conceptual work around touch, like that of A-B Projects founder Nicole Seisler). Beyond discussing ceramic practices that touch on these ideas, Andres also shared information about ceramics found inside our phones or inside space shuttles to call attention to the hidden ways clay and ceramics seeps into our daily life, whether we’re aware of it or not.

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

Ceramic objects are imbedded in the material culture of our lives, regardless of our awareness of their presence — it is not surprising that when most people think of clay, the first thing that comes to mind



Nicole Seisler, instagram

are the fired, ceramic pieces found within a home: tile, tableware, toilet and sink, and even, perhaps, the bricks of which a house is constructed. Further investigation reveals clay and ceramic permeate much of our world, from the medical to the technological.

Our world is enmeshed in the technological realm, and clay is by no means exempt. The physicality of clay is compressed into images or videos, and lived experiences are translated into a medium that operates according to a different set of rules. How has our relationship with clay and ceramics changed based upon our use of technology? How does a screen mediate

our relationship with clay and ceramic objects? Touch is integral to both clay and digital technology — the same fingerprint pressed into clay opens our ubiquitous phones. These two manifestations of human touch are equally valid, but possess different qualities, possibilities and limitations.

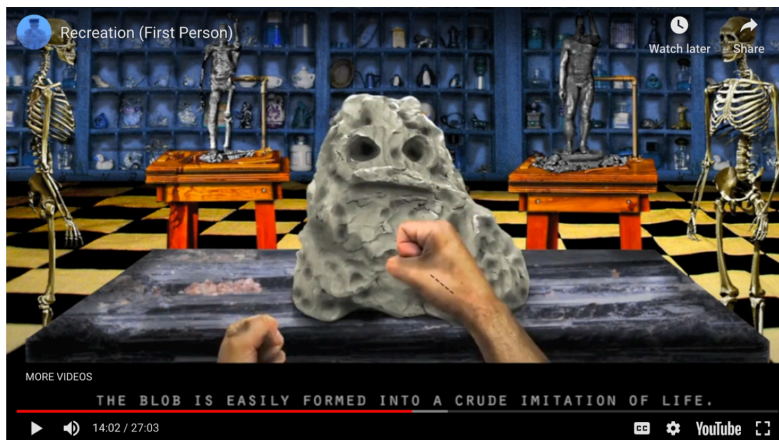
Ceramic objects and technological objects both speak to the temporality of human life, juxtaposed against the longevity of the inanimate objects we use and experience. The permanence of ceramic material leads to an inevitable and daunting process of amassing with no terminus. Our digitization of ceramic objects and clay via the internet and photography creates a similar expanding mass of information and further complicates the relationship between clay/ceramic and technology. What does it mean for a clay/ceramic object to exist in a non-physical realm? Is manipulating an image of clay with digital “touch” still considered working with ‘ceramics’? Is our digital fingerprint as unique as

our physical mark? Can we “feel” the physical presence of a maker in digital work in the same way that we can perceive an individual’s touch in a clay object? By sharing and using the same digital tools, it is possible to compile an array of perspectives of the same experience, and thus a more universal idea of an experience.

We believe there is a valuable, tangible connection between the digital and physical realms. Although the pottery apps found on an iPhone seem intrinsically removed from the physicality of clay, the digital space offers an immediacy that allows for the rapid development of ideas that IRL require significant quantities of time and material to manifest. Perhaps, then, the most significant connection between the digital and the analog is that the same language can be and is used for physical and digital work in clay.



Sigrid Espelien’s digital wedging via instagram



Nick Lenker / Youtube screenshot / Recreation (First Person), 2017

Perhaps, then, language is also the limit of the connection: touch and pressure seem to operate differently in these spaces. The opportunity or capacity for something unexpected within the making process changes as things become digital — how much of the experience of making is predetermined and preprogrammed? The two experiences feel so different that perhaps they’re better thought of as entirely separate mediums.

As our access to the physical world of clay and ceramics is severely limited by the pandemic, is technology helping to fill this gap, or is it doing something different? YouTube videos have long been used to teach throwing, especially in community studios where materials and facilities are often more accessible than instruction. The wealth of information on YouTube has allowed makers to respond to a “shared” set of knowledge which otherwise would—and has in the past—exhibited an insular quality. Likewise, the pandemic has shifted our “shared space” to the realm of the digital — teaching and learning ceramics, as well as the tools available to us as makers, have changed entirely. Digital technology has increased the accessibility to knowledge that otherwise requires an academic institution, studio space, or formal instruction, but it has also decreased our physical interaction with one another. This has an unavoidable impact on our relationship with our work, our medium, and notions of intimacy in art making.

Ceramics studios, by design and necessity, are most often community centered — we work together, often share the same batches of clay as we inhale the same air, and fire our work together in the same kilns. Covid-19 has prevented this level of community and shared experience. Has this caused a shuffling or reordering of values as it relates to our practices? Digital tools are generally associated with productivity, speed and efficiency, yet none of those descriptors aptly describe ceramics’ relationship with the digital sphere. Clay requires heaps of patience and a general acceptance of failure — how have these values impacted our experience of the pandemic and the shift to the digital as individuals who work with clay?



There appears to be a measure of conceptual overlap in terms of what we are driven to create in both clay and computers. For instance, there is an impulse to recreate the self or the body in clay, which is mirrored by the desire to create AI. Why do we continuously strive to capture or recreate the physicality of human experience? Is this possible, or will there always be some kind of “failure” with this endeavor? What are the limitations to translating the weight of the human body into clay? There is always a disconnect between self and object, and anything recreated in the image of the human body will inherently embody that disconnect. Is there a different way to think about these “failed” attempts of recreating the human form which allows us to learn something new about the human experience?

Technology and clay have a complex relationship that has yet to be fully explored. It poses exciting opportunities as it relates to new kinds of touch and making, while simultaneously introducing a new set of challenges. During a time in which touch feels scarce and sacred, considering the impact of digital touch as it relates to clay and beyond seems integral to understanding our relationship with the physical and with ourselves.

Our discussion closed with Andres reading from his essay, *#ceramics*. He left us with this thought: “We live in a specter of time, in a conflation of digital and physical worlds that expand our relation to everything past and present and give us a glimpse to the future. The digital has given us the tools to connect, to build communities across different geographies and to share knowledge. We have the power to question our histories, to write or rewrite forgotten and erased narratives, and to challenge systems and patterns of consumption and value. We are presented with both terrifying and wondrous realities of our existence and have the opportunity to either disconnect from a crumbling world or challenge our contemporary conditions to build our communities towards a new future.”