



STATE OF CERAMICS

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Ceramics in Relationship to *SoftWare*:
how soft bodies engage with digital bodies

a discussion guide by Stacy Jo Scott

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Topic

*“Clay’s methods are situated in our bodies and mirror our own evolution through time. Clay has always been an evocative scribe of its moment. Its technologies have followed humanity’s every shift. This shifting path is not a record from primary to advanced, but a continually recurring event. The potential of our present moment is that we can reach back and forward through time, through the clay in our hands, and the machines that have evolved with us. In this present, we can find traces of the cyborg in the earliest pinch pots, and folk practices in 3-D prints. Our future isn’t foreign but is already embedded within us.”**

This conversation will explore how our soft bodies engage with the digital softwares that currently surround us. This is not just a one-to-one relationship where one works upon the other; rather, each are malleable mediums through which meaning, making, and communication are channeled and transmitted. The intermediary and active space between digital media and technology and the ancient haptic knowledge of working with clay is an intermingled and tangled pathway to more expansive thinking about our creative process, the field of ceramics, and the agency we have to mark our places in the universe.

In this conversation, we will consider software (ie. Soft Ware) as:

- Meaning making engines
- Languages to bridge the gap between body and machine
- Revealer of our expanded body
- Systems for understanding our relation to the universe
- Games that catalyze our process
- Languages to communicate across space and time
- Magical scripts

**Ephemeral Material* by Stacy Jo Scott, Studio Potter, Winter 2019

Questions

Embodiment

- How do our soft bodies interact with the digital softwares that surround us?
- How are software's codes and norms embedded in the action of our bodies?
- How do we allow the idiosyncrasies of clay and the body to come through or subvert the logic of the software?
- How is software malleable and changeable? How does it change? Who changes it?

Agency

- How does software work upon us? How are we changed by it?
- How can we have creative freedom and remain active agents while using software written by others, whose aims may not conform to our own?
- Using digital fabrication technologies like 3D printing we confront the constraints of any machines we might use. What does the voice of the machine offer our making? What are we unwilling to give up to the machine?

Pathfinding

- What are the codes we follow in our lives?
- What are the hidden instructions and internal mechanisms we follow in our own practices?
- As we attempt to plot a practice or career path, what norms do we conform to that are written by others?
- How can we write our own codes to find authentic paths forward in our practices?

Magic and Conjuring

- Magic disrupts linear descriptions of the way the universe works. In what ways do we enact nonlinearity in our practices? How is linearity disrupted as clay and software intersect?
- As we make, how are we in turn made? What ~~new~~ deeper roles do we conjure and inhabit in the studio?
- How does our creative work bring us into relationship with the seen and unseen, the tangible and intangible?

Readings and Selected Quotes

Ephemeral Material, Stacy Jo Scott, 2019

"Clay offers a break from the underlying order of the machine, that is sometimes reflected through material nuance, chance, or glitch. The idiosyncrasies of clay interrupt the logic of the machine. The code relies on the material to bring it to life. Clay's specific histories, cultural, personal, and geological, bring sensory memory to its forms."

"The artifacts of digital fabrication reveal a paradox. The abstract language of code that runs the machine appears foreign to the materiality of clay and our bodies and yet is revealed through this materiality. Donna Haraway describes this condition of paradox as '...about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes... about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.' Such thinking can deliver us outside of the body/machine dichotomy to a new model that doesn't rely on such binary arrangements to

flourish. The power of this imagery lies in its ability, as she puts it, to 'suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.'"

"This release from the binary separation of human and machine opens up other avenues of examining the multiplicity of human experience. Such multiplicity reflects a queerness that rests, sometimes hidden, within much of contemporary experience. Queerness, ever shifting and evasive of definition, offers a name to experiences that waver on the liminal bounds of what were assumed to be hard and fast delineations, between categories and identities. As clay and bodies invite machines into their soft space of lived experience, they perform what the queer and the cyborg knows, that separation is only temporary, and potential experience is far more vast than traditional allotments would assume.

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Digital Fabrication as Magic, Stacy Jo Scott, Rough Draft, 2014

"Bringing materiality to code is magic, bridging the gap between the seen and the unseen. Magic disrupts linear descriptions of the way the universe works. Likewise, the materiality of 3D printing presents a foil to distinct binary poles of cool digital logic and linearity. It is a disruption to the way objects are traditionally made. Is it also a disruption to how objects make us? What are the new roles we inhabit, and what possibilities do they offer?"

"The initiate to a magical order attempts to learn or interpret the discernible order of the universe. Their belief is that among the seeming chaos there are certain systems at work. Perhaps in learning these systems, one can learn to tilt them to one's will. To hack reality, so to speak. To create a script for oneself, rather than running the script written by another."

"Digital fabrication closes the circle between software and the space of magic. The action of digital fabrication creates a bridge between the unseen formlessness of the mathematical construction of code and the formness of material objects constructed from this information. Through digital fabrication words (code) are transformed into things. The magician makes a similar assumption, that words can be imbued with transformative power. Not just that language is powerful, but that language can be transformed into a tool, an instruction."

Glitch Feminism, Legacy Russell, 2020

"To exist within a binary system one must assume that our selves are unchangeable, that how we are read in the world must be chosen for us, rather than for us to define-and choose-for ourselves. To be at the intersection of female-identifying, queer, and Black is to find oneself at an integral apex. Each of these components is a key technology in and of itself. Alone and

together, "female," "queer," "Black" as a survival strategy demand the creation of their individual machinery, that innovates, builds, resists."

"We use 'body' to give material form to an idea that has no form, an assemblage that is abstract."

"When the body is determined as a male or female individual, the body performs gender as its score, guided by a set of rules and requirements that validate and verify the humanity of that individual. A body that pushes back at the application of pronouns, or remains indecipherable within binary assignment, is a body that refuses to perform the score. This nonperformance is a glitch. This glitch is a form of refusal."

"Who defines the material of the body?"

"As glitch feminists, this is our politic: we refuse to be hewn to the hegemonic line of a binary body. This calculated failure prompts the violent socio-cultural machine to hiccup, sigh, shudder, buffer. We want a new framework and for this framework, we want new skin. The digital world provides a potential space where this can play out. Through the digital, we make new worlds and dare to modify our own. Through the digital, the body 'in glitch' finds its genesis. Embracing the glitch is therefore a participatory action that challenges the status quo."

"The glitch posits: One is not born, but rather becomes, a body."

Manifesto for Cyborgs, Donna Haraway, 1985

"Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert."

"Why should our bodies end at the skin?"

"The machine is us... an aspect of our embodiment."

To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision, Tom Gunning, 2013

"What is it that mediates between the seen and the seer- what pathways do vision and the other senses take?- rather than being the mere vehicles of transmitting messages and meaning?"

"Spiritualists embraced recent scientific devices, such as telegraphy and photography, both as tools for conveying or demonstrating their ideas and as central metaphors for their communication with the spirit world. In an ideology in which "mediumship" played the central role, a fascination with "new" media abounded, allowing a convergence of modern media of communication with occult systems."

"Vision, Lucretius claimed, was carried by images (simulacra), which he described quite materially as films, 'a sort of outer skin perpetually peeled off the surface of objects and flying about this way and through the air.' He explained their effect on human vision as one of direct contact: 'while the individual films that strike upon the eye are invisible, the objects from which they emanate are perceived.' As David Lindberg summarizes this tradition, 'films or simulacra... communicate the shape and colour of the object to the soul of the observer; encountering the simulacrum of an object is, as far as the soul is concerned, equivalent to encountering the object itself.'"

Medieval Robots, E.R. Truitt, 2015

"Automata stood at the intersection of natural knowledge (including magic) and technology."

"However different from the robots and cyborgs of modernity, medieval robots also sponsor inquiry into the definitions of life, the natural, and the artificial. In any age, automata are potent symbols of human understandings of nature."

"[M]edieval philosophers... in later periods were characterized as sorcerers for having created automata."

"Automata are important liminal objects. They identify and patrol boundaries of many different kinds: between courtly and churlish behavior, between good and evil, living and dead. In many cases automata also comment on categories, often calling them into question by their very existence. In all cases, they reveal their own in-betweenness: surpassingly lifelike copies of natural objects, or eternal bodies that hover between life and death. [M]edieval automata complicate the natural/artificial binary."

On Sourcery and Source Code, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 2013

"Code is executable because it embodies the power of the executive, the power of enforcement that has traditionally- even within classic neoliberal logic- been the provenance of government."

"David Golumbia-looking more generally at widespread beliefs about computers-has insightfully claimed: 'The computer encourages a Hobbesian conception of this political relation: one is either the person who makes and gives orders (the sovereign), or one follows orders.'"

"This conflation of instruction with result stems in part from software's and computing's gendered, military history: in the military there is supposed to be no difference between a command given and a command completed-especially to a computer that is a "girl." For computers, during World War II, were in fact young women with some background in mathematics."