



**STATE OF CERAMICS**  
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*Ceramics in Relationship to*  
*the Bodily Record*

*a discussion guide by Magdolene Dykstra*

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## Topic

Every time we touch clay, our bodies are immediately and inevitably recorded. From walking across the ground, pressing a mud-covered hand against an ancient cave wall, or molding a brick, to wedging, pinching, punching, and even biting, the trace of our bodily presence has been set in clay across millennia. In contemporary times the records of our bodies have multiplied exponentially in scale and material, including now commonplace things such as video surveillance, bank records and social media. Considering the plethora of these records, many of which are inadvertent and long-term, why do we continue to intentionally record our bodily presence in material, and how can such an approach be useful and critical in a contemporary practice?

This conversation will examine materiality, scale, political and personal contexts while considering the potential power and significance of accumulating and witnessing the residue of our embodied consciousness.

## Quotes from Suggested Resources

***Out of the Sun: On Race and Storytelling.* By Esi Edugyan (House of Anansi Press, 2022) – available as audio book read by the author**

"To look at a portrait is to be forced to build a human life out of our own imaginations. That is what makes it a fundamentally hopeful act. Every portrait is a plea, at its heart, for empathy."

"Art too is a defense against erasure. The best of it will always outlive us."

"In fact one could argue that the longest running battle in the history of world conflicts, is the one waged over the supremacy of stories. The dominant narrative tilts the axis of memory. Its triumph is the triumph of being seen."

Esi Edugyan's CBC Massey Lecture Series (podcasts available on CBC Listen App, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify and several other podcast apps)

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/out-of-the-sun-on-race-and-storytelling-esi-edugyan-s-cbc-massey-lectures-1.6319381>

***Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* by bell hooks (New Press, 1998)**

"...the creation and public sharing of art is essential to any practice of freedom." p.4

"Art constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact.", P.8

"The self, in other words, becomes evident through a visible demonstration of its connectedness." P.20

"Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye." P.64

"Living in white-supremacist culture, we mostly see images of black folks that reinforce and perpetuate the accepted, desired subjugation and subordination of black bodies by white bodies. Resisting these images, some black folks learn early in life to divert our gaze, much in the same way that we might shield a blow to the body. We shield our minds and imaginations by changing positions, by blocking the path, by simply turning away, by closing our eyes." P.96

"Beyond the realm of socially imposed identity, the limitations of race and gender, one encounters the metaphysical. Transcendent experiences, like death and dying, put into perspective the finite nature of human activity, the limits of human will and power." P.100

"It is only through recognition of the commonness of human experience – in contrast to the elitism and separatism imposed by systems of domination that reinforce the powers of church and state – that individuals can live in harmony, without engendering violence against ourselves or others." P. 217

***Women's Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment* by Bonnie Mann (Oxford University Press, 2006)**

"Who gets to be human? Who gets included or excluded from places, opportunities, or legal protections? P.84-5

"We return the body to its flesh and blood, and bring it 'back to earth', where the earth is understood to be in a productive and sustaining relation to the body. ...It is the earth

that sustains us, and this very sustenance is the condition for the possibility of lived bodily experience, there of subjective experience in general, including the experience of freedom." P. 128-9

"... I would like to begin to extend the notion of vulnerability that I am tracing in the work of Freeman, Butler, and Kittay to our dependence on place, including our dependence on the earth itself – in which all such relationships are ultimately nested. ... We are moment to moment dependent in this more primary relation, cannot survive for more than a few minutes without the air and warmth the earth provides, for more than a few days without its water, for more than a few weeks without its food." P.136

"Our dependence on the Earth is "the dependency relation in which all others are nested is at the very heart of our intersubjective moral relations." ... "That we have [and continue to choose] the path of 'tyranny' over and against the earth in this relationship, have 'failed to recognize the integrity' of the earth as separate from ourselves, have chosen to do battle with the earth to the point of suicidal destruction of the environment bespeaks an unfathomable moral and epistemological failure. Yet it is possible to know how to behave in the face of our vulnerability in relation to both other persons and to the earth; this very vulnerability is the vantage point from which we are called to right action." P. 137-8

"Our inability to care for one another in our intersubjective relations (and here my 'we' extends, with Butler, between nations and cultures) constitutes a second moral failure – but here we do not simply fail one another, we fail one another in relation to our dependency on the planet. We dishonor that relation as much as we dishonor one another." P.138

"Our own actions, in fact, bind us more and more tightly into relation, both with other persons and with the place we (and they) live. Given that these relations are irrevocable, how we live them is the only political question." P. 176

***For this Artist the Medium is the Body, by Josie Thaddeus-Johns, The New York Times, 21 Oct. 2021***

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/21/arts/dance/cassils-human-measure.html>

"Cassils has consistently understood that that visibility is not just a cause for celebration, but it also brings with it the danger of violence. Visibility becomes an opportunity for surveillance and scrutiny."

## Questions for Discussion

- Why do we insistently and purposefully leave records of our bodily presence?
- Why do different groups/individuals experience this same drive throughout history?
- Who is choosing to do this now? Why now? In what contexts?
- How does a bodily presence translated into material connect to the interior self?
- How might the practice of bearing witness to another's embodied consciousness impact how we engage one another in the world?
- How does the repetition of a quiet gesture differ in impact from grand or more ostentatious movements? Does scale shift the conversation?
- At what point is the bodily record an act of resistance? When does the bodily record succumb to commodification? Should commodification be avoided? How can works of bodily records ensure that they are more than decorative?
- How can the use of clay, a responsive material found worldwide, contribute additional layers of meaning to the bodily record?
- How does an incidental mark differ in impact from an intended mark?
- What is changed when the recording of a mark becomes a collaborative effort?

## Reference Images:



1. Handprints in Cueva de las Manos, natural pigments on rock, located in Argentina, 7,300 BC to 700 AD



2. Magdolene Dykstra, Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between the two my life flows, site-specific installation at A-B Projects, 2022



3. Magdolene Dykstra, detail of Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between the two my life flows, site-specific installation at A-B Projects, 2022



4. David Hammons, The Door (Admissions Office), wood, acrylic sheet, and pigment, 1969



5. David Hammons, Untitled, pigment on board, 1969



6. Joyce Wieland, O Canada, lithograph in red on wove paper, 1979



7. Yves Klein, Suaire de Mondo Cane (from the Anthropometries series), pigment and synthetic resin on gauze, 1961



8. Cassils, detail of Human Measure, cyanotype of participants bodies, 2021



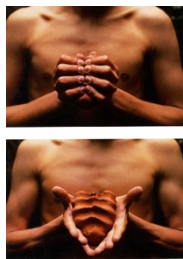
9. Magdolene Dykstra, detail of Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between the two my life flows, site-specific installation at A-B Projects, 2022



10. Judith Braun, Fingering #35, charcoal fingerprints on wall, 2020



11. Judith Braun, Fingering #35 – scale shot, charcoal fingerprints on wall, 2020



12. Gabriel Orozco, My Hands are My Heart, two silver dye bleach prints, 1991



13. Fumi Amano, Look at me, performance with frosted glass, 2016



14. Raheleh Filsoofi, BITE, ceramic object and performance, 2021



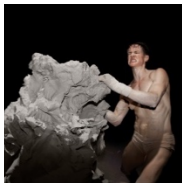
15. Brie Ruais, *Scraped away from center*, 130lbs (Night), Glazed and pigmented stoneware, hardware, 2018



16. Raheleh Filsoofi, *BITE*, ceramic object, 2021



17. Magdolene Dykstra, detail of *Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between the two my life flows*, site-specific installation at A-B Projects, 2022



18. Cassils, *Becoming an Image*, performance with a 2000lb clay block in a dark room with a photographer, 2012 – present



19. Cassils, *Monument Push*, four-hour performance of pushing the 1,900 pound bronze *Resilience of the 20%* sculpture pushed through the streets of Omaha, NE in tribute to its LGBTQ History, 2017



20. Bull & bison in Le Tuc D'Audoubert, unfired clay sculpture protected in a prehistoric cave, (c.13,500 BCE)



21. Sharon Norwood, *Serving up those Savannah Greys*, found bricks with glaze, 2022



22. Ashwini Bhat, *The Earth Under Our Feet*, still image from performance, 2022



23. Wedging by foot in India, still image from footage taken from wildfilmsindia.com, uploaded to YouTube in 2013



24. Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, detail of *Being Human Being*, 7 days of participatory performances with unfired clay, linen, and candles, 2014



25. Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, participant in *Being Human Being*, 7 days of participatory performances with unfired clay, linen, and candles, 2014



26. Surabhi Saraf, Laura Hyunjee Kim, and Ashwini Bhat, *Beyond All Polarities, We Are \_\_\_\_*, participatory performance installation with clay and video, 2022



27. Surabhi Saraf, Laura Hyunjee Kim, and Ashwini Bhat, detail of *Beyond All Polarities, We Are \_\_\_\_*, participatory performance installation with clay and video, 2022



28. Magdolene Dykstra with Madison Grineau, Ashley Guenette, Taylor Morency, Abisola Oni, Manreet Pabla, Manya Shahi, and Heejun Shin, *Rupture*, site-specific painting at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, 2022