

## #ceramics

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For over a decade, my mobile device has been the first object I come in contact with every morning. The small touch screen softly brightens my face as my fingertips caress the glass and maneuver a digital landscape. Slowly, bells, alarms and buzzes fill the silent bedroom as my eyes dilate from the flashes of multiple applications that seamlessly connect me to an entire global network. As I write this, Instagram has 9,288,403 images tagged #ceramics. There are currently thousands of profiles from around the world dedicated to the ceramic community with images, content and information constantly being generated and shared. With hundreds of individuals continuously creating content, this stream of information moves through fingertips, devices, satellites, computers and servers in a matter of seconds. Just as this information is produced, it is uploaded to “The Cloud” of digital information stored in one of the thousands of Facebook data centers spread throughout the world and made instantly available for global engagement.

Often unacknowledged is that the servers that store all of this information are tangible objects that exist and take up physical space, made of a combination of materials that range from plastics, resins, glass, fiber optics, rare earths and ceramic materials. The mobile devices used to send and receive information from these super computers and any electronic device we own would not function without hundreds of ceramic components and hardware including capacitors, insulators, inductors and resistors. Indeed, our primordial relation to clay has come a long way from our first gestural and tactile experimentations with earth, early representations of the human form, and ventures into handmade functional objects. These early experimentations with raw clay materials, intended purpose in form and a controlled chemical change through firing, continue to be considered some of humankind’s earliest forms of advanced technologies. Today, ceramics has expanded into the fields of cosmetics, medicine, sanitation, military, science and engineering. Included in these fields are building supplies, electronics and functional wares which are the three largest ceramic global production industries that make up the bulk of our ceramic consumption. This multitude of contemporary applications are true to the complex and long histories that we have developed with clay and the importance that it has served in human development.

Ceramic advancement and material experimentation have helped usher us into our digitally advanced contemporary world. Our relation to the material in our everyday life is much more complex and prevalent than is often acknowledged. We have developed a reality that is enmeshed with the digital where time, processes and the physical realities of objects and materials are often blurred into the intangible digital. These disconnections to the physical can be dangerous as they can lead us to disregard the histories, politics or labor behind what we consume and surround ourselves with. The reality is that, around the world, there are thousands of worker hands making, forming and firing ceramic objects, hundreds of others in poor working conditions dismantling the outdated and broken electronics of the world, and dozens more packaging and preparing objects to be sent out to thousands of consumers. Fueled by the capitalist enterprise, the digital has made it easier to swipe and click to consume and has also obscured the human hand and the labor behind the making of consumer goods and the larger implications of consumption in a physical world. The impacts are seen in the depletion of resources from exploited countries, as well as the complete transformations of landscapes and ecosystems including gold mines in Australia, lithium fields in Bolivia, copper mining in Chile and other rare-earths and clay mining around the globe. Every object that we possess has the trace of a human hand — we must acknowledge the impacts of these traces, the bodies that have built the worlds around us and the permanency of our actions.

Ceramics possess an immutable nature — the material has undergone a permanent change that grants it both an enduring quality and a fragility. This allows the objects to withstand time and deterioration, which has been valuable

when gathering historic information about late and ancient civilizations. Through the information carried by ceramic artifacts, we can trace the history of our developments in clay and its integral place in building communities and daily living, including the passage of knowledge in making, and information about past geologies through its material makeup. What will be the enduring remnants or material history that we will leave behind to reflect our contemporary existence and how will ceramics be a part of it? Our consumption and the digital realm continue to expand at an uncontrolled rate, generating the electronic, digital and material waste footprint of our civilization. Undeniably, ceramics has its material implications in this narrative as it is able to outlast most of the materials we create. Our current ceramic usage reflects our contemporary realities: it traces our creative evolution and technological advancements but is also the part of our wasteful consumption. From massive piles of broken porcelain outside Chinese factories, advanced ceramic tiles strengthening rockets in space exploration, to ceramic capsules containing radioactive material waste being buried into billion-year-old rock in deep geologic repositories, our ceramics will carry the histories and materialize the impacts of our civilization.

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.