

Imagined Space: 'The Evolution of Clay'

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Tutor's Name: Julia Lockheart

'The Evolution of Clay' **Exhibition**

As a curator, I have designed a local temporary exhibition entitled 'The Evolution of Clay', with a focus on Alexander Graham Cairns-Smith's theory, and how I have built my exhibition to provide an artistic insight into the justification of the theories remarks. The theory is similar to that of Reification from Marxism, where the transformation of human qualities – those of thoughts, ideas and values – are morphed into physical objects through the theorists ideology and artist's creations. Similarly, the theory is an example of abiogenesis – in which it is theorised that living things can generate from inanimate matter (Devoe, 2017, p. 3), that such as clay.

The idea of curating stems from the elements of modern life: proliferation and reproduction of ideas, data, information, pictures, knowledge and materials that we observe (Obrist, 2014, p. 23). Today, it is better used to signify the task of looking after an art collection. The curating role I have inherited coalesces around four functions: preservation, selection of new work, the contribution to art history, and presentation. In this essay, I explain how I have built bridges between artists, audiences, the venue, themes, and communities. The crux of this work is to build temporary connections between different communities – to gather a general audience and produce conditions for triggering relations between them; curating has a lot to do with bringing people together (Obrist, 2014, p. 11). To exemplify this, the audience is encouraged to partake in the creation of the pieces (Hoffmann, 2016, p. 57). Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster stated that "every space has the potential for many narratives depending on the users... the reader has also to add some of their own experience/knowledge to make it work." (2016, p. 57), subsequently meaning that my space is unmoved from the specifics of the concept, and is therefore allowed to communicate in correlation to the viewers own interpretation.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, a curatorial theorist once said that young curators can not only find value in working in a museum, gallery or biennial, but also in making artists dreams come true (2014, p. 11). As such, the creative limelight in this exhibition goes to Grayson Perry, an English contemporary artist known for his ceramic vases and observations of the contemporary art scene; Yun Hee Lee, a young Korean ceramic artist; Johnson Cheung-Shing 'TSANG', a Chinese artist who specialises in ceramic sculptures and public artwork; Auguste Rodin, a French sculptor who is considered the founder of modern sculpture, and Amalie Smith, a Danish visual artist who has directly engaged with the Clay Theory in her own exhibition, and has been rewarded the in-focus display in the cinema room. The art pieces selected link to my creative discipline and support the concepts behind Clay Theory through their figurative elements and justification of materials and form. I believe they change expectations, formulate as well as feed opposition present in the Clay Theory, are highly challenging, surprising and obscure, and visionary in their goal to surpass the limitations of their origin. However, describing my concept with the works of art alone may be seen as didactic, so to avoid partially making reflections on the artworks with my concept, I intend to showcase the broader history of the works through text panels on the walls. This way, I can better support a number of people that will spend an entire day within the exhibition opposed to having double the amount run through it (Obrist, 2014, p. 48). If we look at the average viewing times between works – being fifteen to thirty seconds (Hoffmann, 2016, p. 66) – I can expand this time by giving the audience the option to read into the artworks.



Fig 1. Barbaric Splendour by Grayson Perry, 2003.



Fig 2. Head Ballon by Yun Hee Lee, 2016.



Fig 3. Pathway by Johnson Tsang.



Fig 4. Sleep by Auguste Rodin, 1984.

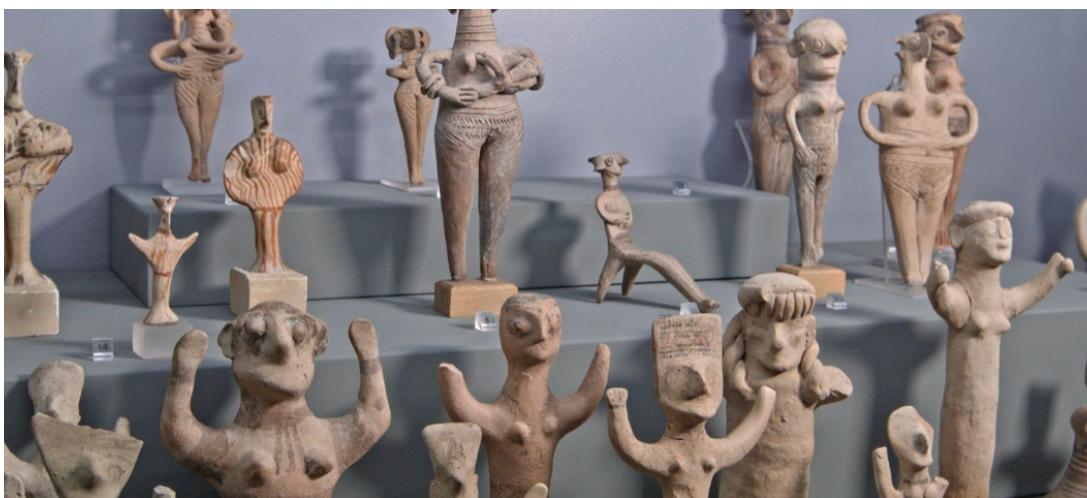


Fig 5. 3D movie of Still, from the Clay Theory Exhibit by Amalie Smith.

As seen below, my chosen artworks have been displayed appropriately within the gallery space: stands have been implemented for sculptures, one has been wall mounted and the video has been set up for on-screen viewing. I specifically chose my pieces in correlation to their materiality, and human-like qualities. This links back to my theory in which human bodies have been created through clay processes. While Perry's ceramic vase challenges more sociological and psychological discussions of human behaviours - a link back to reification, where Perry has translated these discussions onto his work – other pieces such as the selection of clay ornaments in Smith's 3D movie link back to the main theory, in which human figures were made from clay at a very early stage of human existence. As clay is constantly being produced by the Earth (Cairns-Smith, 1985, p. 116), I found Tsang's piece fit the criteria interestingly through his use of a newborn's portrait with a sort of 'pathway' directly from the Earth – as shown in the minuscule module on the sculptures head. 'Sleep' by Auguste Rodin has a special place in the exhibition for its use of terracotta and modelling clay, amongst other natural materials. It shows a raw form of sculpture that highlights the natural aspects of the Clay Theory. The sleeping state of the figure reveals a sort of dormancy stage in the creating process. The last piece, however a bit more contemporary, still holds a similarity to the figurines in the 3D movie, which is why I have included it in the exhibition. Lee has extracted creative human qualities and utilised these to create something more eye-catching and questionable. The band across the eyes can be seen as the hidden link within the Clay Theory; in that we can't see the facts of how we came to be, but we can still close our eyes and imagine the possibilities. The purpose of these pieces were to instil these types of thoughts and ideas into the viewers minds.



Fig 6. 'Sleep' in display case.



Fig 7. 'Head Ballon' in display case.

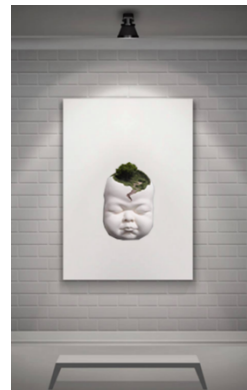


Fig 8. 'Pathway' mounted on wall.



Fig 9. 'Barbaric Splendour' on display stand.

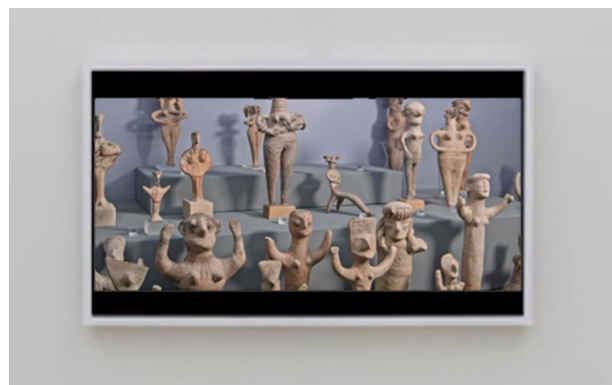


Fig 10. 3D Movie on exhibit screen.

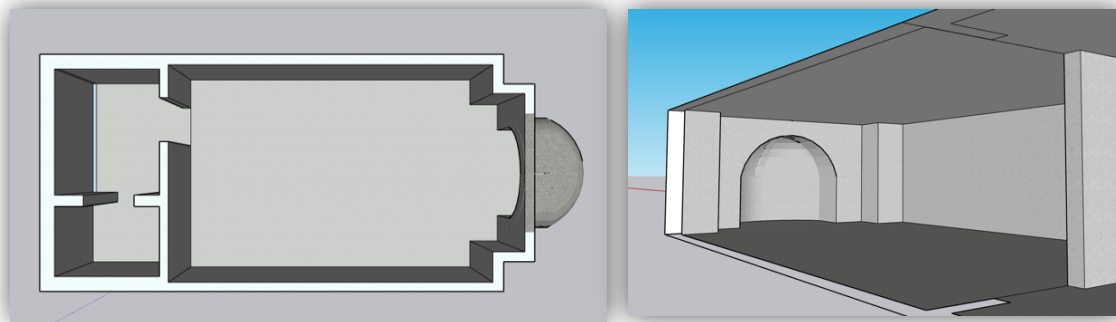


Fig 11. My exhibition space inspired by the Mission Gallery, a SketchUp model.

Exhibitions are deeply rooted in the free circulation of people through a public space (Obrist, 2014, p. 26). My imagined space is an inspired structure from the Mission Gallery in Swansea, and consists of three rooms – each of a separate purpose. It is effectively set up for a limited group of people who would need to book a place to see my exhibition a week prior to opening – this would allow for the diversion of crowds. As with all museums, galleries or otherwise, they have to consider an entry point – both physical and intellectual – into an exhibition (Serota, 2015, p. 32). The partitioned rooms provide more privacy and sound-proofing for the cinema room. There is a lit banner above the open-arch wall leading into the main exhibit room that emits the exhibit title. Ladder lights hang from the ceiling to adjust the light levels in the screening room so there are less reflections on the monitors. However, natural lights are a key feature of the exhibit room for the more sensitive sculptural displays. An ample amount of windows alleviate fluorescent lighting (Hoffmann, 2016, p. 88). To atone for the changes in lighting according to the time of day, there are additional LED strip lights across the bottom edges of the walls in the exhibit room that have adjustable light levels, and the adhesive backings allow for mobility when necessary. The architecture of my exhibit room contains a polyphony of positions that create fascinating associations across various historic periods; there is no sequence or rivalry between the art pieces, but a general dynamic of mixing cultures and time periods.

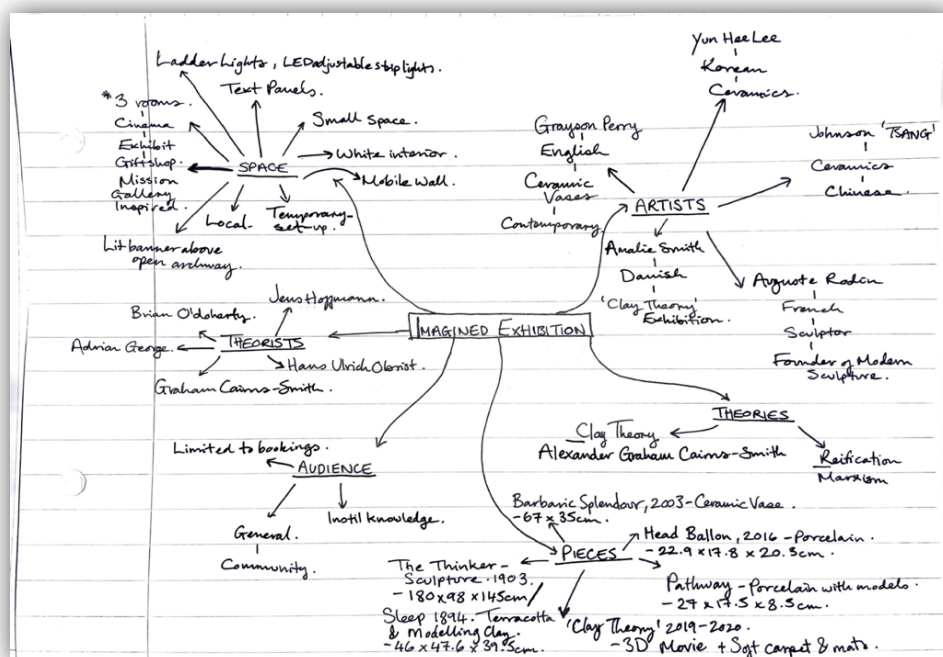


Fig 12. A structured map of my ideas.

The map provided highlights the connections between the cultures, and junctions between elements. This form of map-making opens up a new route, but is only a temporary design exclusively for my exhibition. Alighiero Boetti explained that maps can not remain accurate over time (1986, p. 10). If I were to repeat my exhibition annually I would need to revise and redesign my map, as it contributes as a door to the future of curation and would need to follow on from the yet-to-be trends.

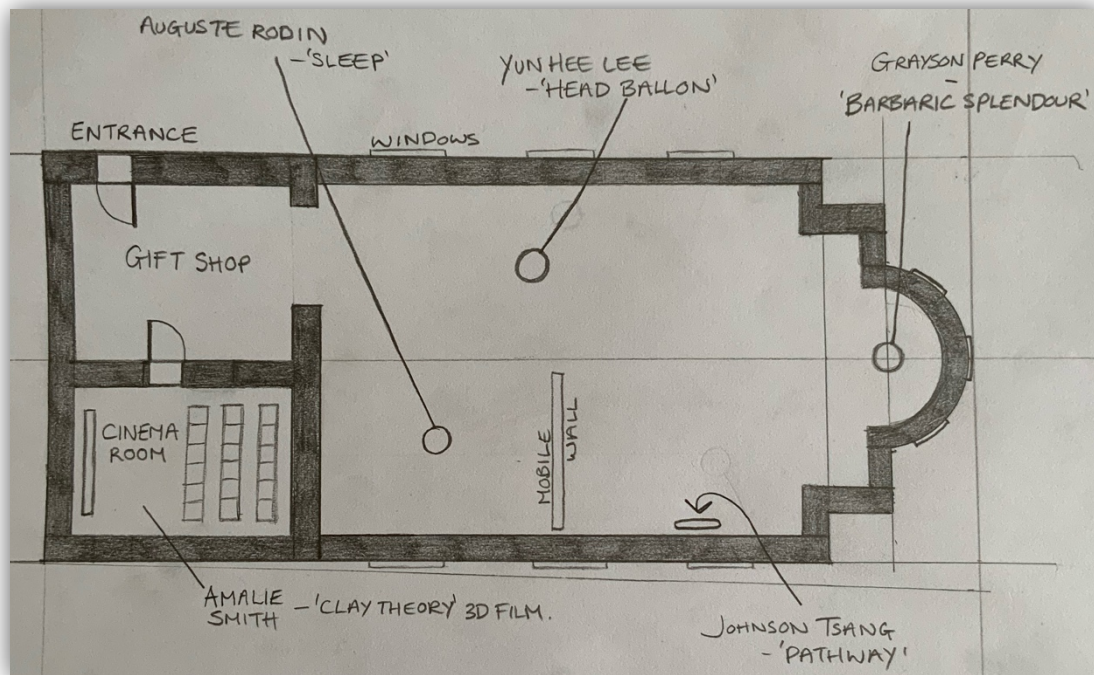


Fig 13. My exhibition floor plan.

You can see through my floor plan that my pieces, as opposed to the salon style – where paintings were hung floor to ceiling, gilded frames almost touching (Obrist, 2014, p. 28), that I have partitioned my selected pieces. For this reason, I enable the audience to freely observe the work without the distraction of others in close proximity, and adjustments in visual cues may be reduced, resulting in a cleaner gallery space that we commonly describe today as the 'White Cube'. Brian O'Doherty describes the space as "a unique chamber of esthetics." (1976, p. 14), almost a frame in itself for the visual arts. To break up this seemingly spacious area, I have included a form of spacial alteration within the exhibition room: a mobile wall, able to break up the room and alter the direction of a crowd. Oftentimes this is necessary for the overall circulation of the room and it makes the space almost exploratory – a curiosity emerges for the pieces of art beyond the wall.

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List of figures:

Figure 1.

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Figure 2.

Artsy.net. 2021. *Yun Hee Lee | Head Ballon*. [online] Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/yun-hee-lee-head-ballon> [Accessed 17 April 2021].

Figure 3.

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Figure 4.

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Figure 5.

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