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Within this essay, I will discuss the keywords **Clay (touch)**, **Reaction**, and **Dialogue** in relation to both contemporary and historical artists who have worked with clay and look to understand the connection between reaction of clay and dialogues they have created, as well as ground this approach from the Phenomenological studies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard, and will look to analyse the work of Antony Gormley, Isamu Noguchi, for Clay, Kazuo Yagi and Theaster Gates for Reaction, and Edmund De Waal and Ana Mendieta for Dialogue; and from this come to construct question as the basis for my Dissertation.

CLAY (touch) –

Clay as a material is present in nearly all facets of human existence both historically and contemporary, from being used to create bricks which form the foundations for our homes, to our crockery with which we eat and drink from. When viewed outside of a human timescale, clay is formed by immense degradation of rocks as defined by artist and sculptor Antony Gormley, as being “this sedimentary layer composed of the oldest igneous rocks, which have been broken down to this very, very fine particulate and have sat there, amalgamating over millions of years” (Gormley, 2021). Gormley, who has worked with clay within his practice for its tactility, capable of being formed through direct touch, this can be seen directly within his ‘field’ series, as evidenced in Figure 1., small terracotta figures formed in the hand, and made on mass by volunteers and families. The multitude of figures take on a fluidity, filling the entirety of space, the audience member confronts this mass of figures looking back at you, their rudimental forms reflective of the masses of people needed to form each figure. Whilst also being considered as reflection of an identity or a living being, or as Gormley describes the direct contact with clay as being the “shortest possible bridge between life and the record of life” (Waal, 2004). Whilst the action of leaving traces and the handling of clay is considered by Gormley as translating and imposing a form on clay which draws a kinship with prehistorical objects as “when you make a ceramic object there is a feeling you are repeating some primal transformation of the unformed to the formed” (Gormley, 2021)

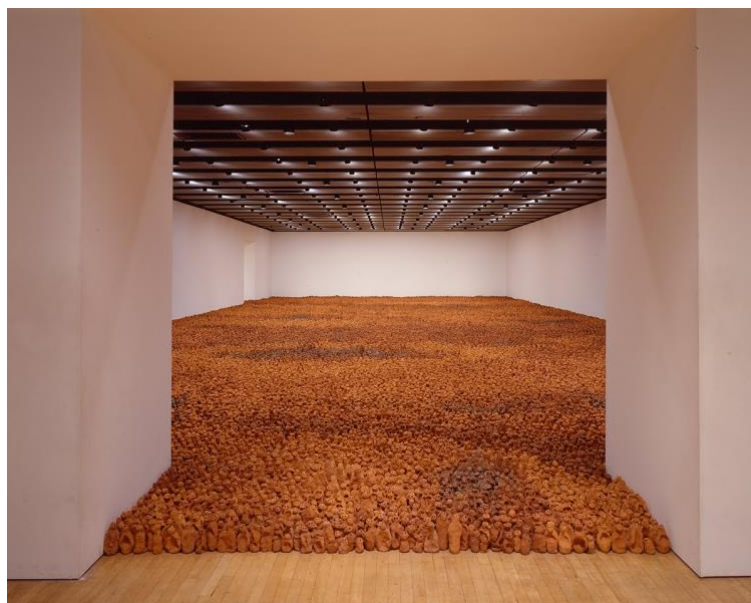


Figure 1. *Field for the British Isles*, Antony Gormley, (1993)

(Gormley, 2019)

This idea of touch as being something that both as something that enables us to communicate a record of our time whilst also drawing a link between primordial forms of communicating and interacting with materials such as clay. When considering touch as a way of translating of one's experience through perception to clay as defined by French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty "Every perception is a communion and a coition of our body with things". Hall (2000, quoted in Groom et al., 2004, p.43) This communion of body with clay in its raw state, is both dialogue with clay as much as listening to the material, what one perceives can take on a multitude of dialogues as explored within this essay. Considering this idea of interaction and touching clay and its malleability, being capable of taking the shape of those who touch, this touch is the key in understanding the experience of using natural materials I find draw a comparison to the work of American Japanese Sculptor Isamu Noguchi; whose usage of clay as conduit for idea of human and for its duality as denoted by Noguchi "The attraction of ceramics lie partly in its contradictions. It is both difficult and easy, with an element beyond our control." (Noguchi et al., 2022).

With this, the translation of organisms and the interaction of human with living organisms and the narratives through the medium of sculpture and clay. As evidenced with Figure 2., this totem like figure of the centipede, an unglazed terracotta cup-like fragmentary objects suspended across a wooden beam spaced evenly; Noguchi's approach to the clays surface unaltered state with no usage of glazes or oxides leaves surfaces bear, his emphasis on clays language of unaltered creates a rawness and earth texture to the sculpture. And with the unglazed work reveals the touch of the artist and such as denoted by Merleau-Ponty "Each contact of an object with a part of our objective body is thus in fact a contact with the totality of the actual or possible phenomenal body." (Merleau-Ponty, 2012)

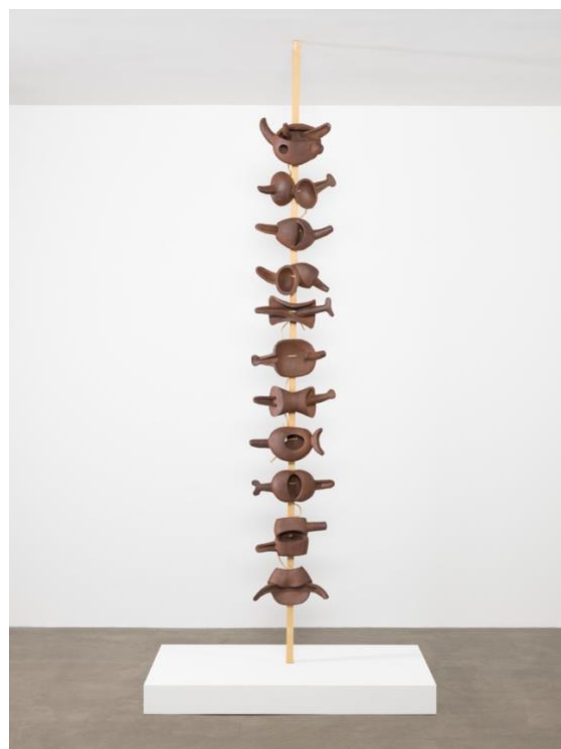


Figure.2 Isamu Noguchi, *Even the Centipede*, Kamakura, (1952)

(Noguchi, 2011)

REACTION–

The effect of Noguchi's work on others approaches and understanding of the possibly of clay in communicating messages and taking on a freer usage of clay as denoted by Yagi "They possessed what Noguchi called an essence of sculpture, tacility: 'we may bump into it, bleed from its rough surface, or delineate its countours with our fingers'." (Waal, 2003) Whilst also being against the cultural and historical views of ceramics as in the production of tea vessels and utilitarian work in comparison to ceramics for the construction of sculpture non-usable works of art. This approach had a significant effect on artists in Japan during the late 1950s such as Kazuo Yagi who went on to create the collective "Sodeisha, the "Crawling through Mud Association"" (Cort, 2003). This connotation of crawling through mud can draw comparisons to the worms wriggling in the earth which inspired the choice of name. As highlighted by Adamson, Yagi described the "essence of clay" as being "that feeling you get when you take soft clay and squish it between your fingers" (Adamson, 2018), considering this idea of the reaction of working with something that is malleable, with this, the reaction of perceiving something that has been handled and shaped creates a dialogue with the audience translating the "phenomenal body" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) of the artists and their experiences of perceiving the world around them. One example of this can be seen within Figure 3., considering the title "Memory of a cloud" can draw a symbolic connection with dropping of atom bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 during the tail of World War 2. This cohesion of idea and abstracted form then considered by Yagi "he also sought ways to allow the authentic irregularity of material to express itself in his work" (Adamson, 2018).

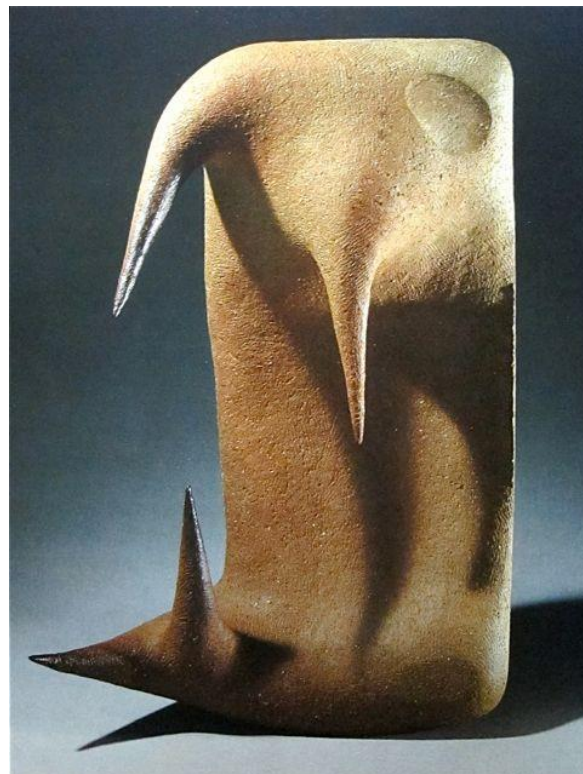


Figure 3. Memory of a Cloud, Kazuo Yagi (1959)

(Yagi, 2011)

This intention of highlighting the ‘authentic irregularity of material’ can then consider clay inseparable from what is created as signifier and must be considered together and as described by Yagi “Even the slightest tea bowl gives rise to the contemplative insight that it has indeed been formed of a handful of earth from the great earth which joins the vast stretch of the horizon to the soil beneath your own feet”. (Winther-Tamaki, 2022)

The dialogue with material and thus reaction of the material under an exerted pressure by artist and process of firing, the process of changing, the process of being changed and what remains, the solidification of a form; ‘Reaction’ then can be considered then to be both from the perspective of reaction to the material, but equally the reaction of the material which can draw the aim to understand and communicate an idea that is not looking at replicating pre-existing ideas from established genres and styles of the time and place. But instead reflected within the work of American artist Theaster Gates, within his ‘Brick Reliquaries’ , Figure 4., which explores the unpredictability at play within the glaze process, if applied to the form, the outcome of the ceramic objects surface is affected by the choice of each material within the glaze recipe, and with this any Impurities, unexpected contaminants that may occur in the wood fired kilns, the glaze then never truly can turn out as one may expect in an uncontrolled environment or one where different. Within the heat of the kiln, all which is burned and all that is left is the end form, this petrification of the clay can be seen as a sealant of intention. With this, to expose the work to temperatures beyond and or exceed the limits of a material and thus push through a somewhat destructive act a new a material structure and surface which exposes the kinship between the act of firing and accepting alteration which can be unpredictable to further the connection between the nature and human actions and perception; and thus, form is given to the formless.



Figure 4. *Brick Reliquary – Square with Marks*, Theaster Gates, (2020)

(Gates, 2021)

DIALOGUE –

Dialogue can be both with the catalyst of creating with clay and equally a response to the outcome. Responding to the clay creates a raw perspective, seeing through the stages from raw material to the final product. Dialogue can create a thread throughout the process of interacting and responding to clay. The usage of clay for its tactility, its ability to record motion, action and thus from this artist and ceramicist Edmund De Waal's usage of ceramic vessels in dialogue with poetry and language expanding on the connection of translating experience through clay. There is a duplicity to the actions and placement of each vessel, they take different forms and interpretation and as described by De Waal, "The potter's art ... is Intricately interwoven with the ancient human sense of originating in earth and returning to the first state." (Waal, 2014) The clay goes through a journey of states, with the human interaction and this material that once belonged to the earth is now synthesised through human touch and chemical reaction to create something. As defined by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who explored ideas of cohesion of poetry and space drawings dialogue between human and earth, between how we perceive the world around us on a Phenomenological basis and how we translate this; "To give an object poetic space is to give it more space than it has objectivity: or, better still, it is following the expansion of its intimate space." (Bachelard, 2014)

The refined form of each vessel and the actions of throwing multitude of pieces working on mass, then when considering as De Waal denotes "There are rhythms, repeated sequences of pots, and there are attempted rhythms, pauses and caesuras. There are congestions and releases. There is more white spaces than words." (Waal, 2015) His use of the literary term 'caesuras' to define the placement of the pots give a literary connection as the word is the consideration of the space with sentences when considered then within De Waal's ceramic sculptural installations each space is considered, with gaps creating pauses within the composition, and as evidenced within Figure 5. the white spaces between each vessel creates a thread that is carried through the lines of the shelves that leads the audiences to perceive and derive a multitude of readings which as defined by Bachelard "the phenomenology of the poetic imagination is to be able to experience a fresh nuance in the presence of a spectacle that calls for uniformity, and can be summarised in a single idea" (Bachelard, 2014).

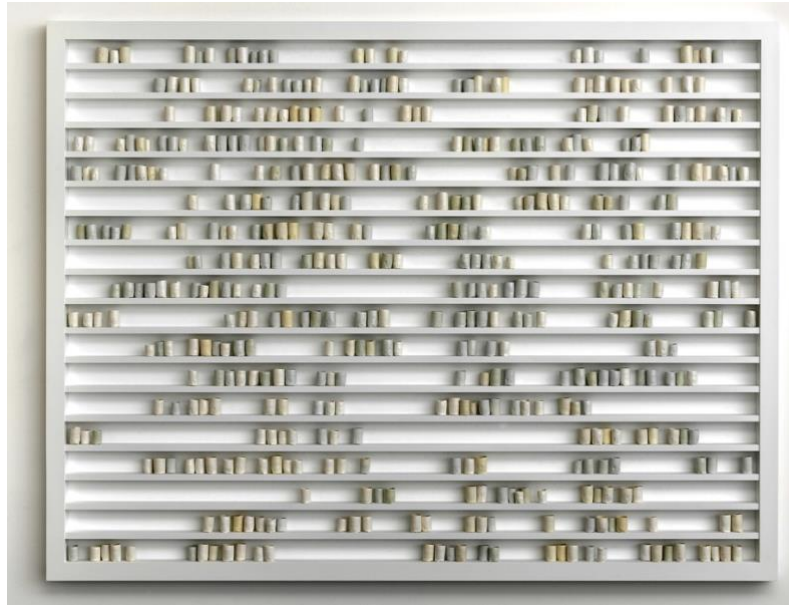


Figure 5. *"breathturn, I", Edmund De Waal, (2013).*

(Waal, 2013)

As seen within Figure 5., the installation takes on similarities to a musical notation sheet both to be read and understood for its composition. With each vessel, some packed closely together followed with large gaps then placed sporadically, spaces within the shelf construct internal descending lines of white disrupting the composition only to be manoeuvred by a cluster of grey and steel glazed vessels. But the reading of the work line by line, space by space perhaps can be seen to enact the motion of the eye scanning, applying our own knowledge to something new to us, to enact the action of experience itself. It may give a baseline within a given space and memory, with which something may tether the subject to a particular subject.

With this when considering multifaceted dialogues with which can be embedded within clay one key figure who highlights this whilst also reference the usage of records of temporary structures as way to recognising both the dialogue with earth, and thus clay, whilst not removing the material from the environment within which it is suited. Cuban-born American artist Ana Mendieta looked to highlight the many dialogues that she recognises and associated with the medium of earth and clay. The earth takes on the connotation of representing the female body and as conduit of cross referential forms creating a dialogue both from position of Mendieta heritage and displacement from homeland of Cuba at age 12 and being relocated to Ohio; but equally dialogue between the consciousness and the surface, as denoted by Mendieta "I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way of re-establish the bonds that tie me to the universe" (Tufnell, 2019). With this, as defined by De Waal, "How do you register and mark experiences, how do you register and mark loss" (Lamaro, 2021), this point can be considered best reflected within Mendieta approach to sculptural temporary interventions on the environment and the usage of recording something to enable to continue the dialogue further beyond the break down and return of the material to its original state as evidenced in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Ana Mendieta, Bacayu (Esculturas Rupestres), / Light of Day (Rupestrian Sculptures), 1981

(Mendieta , 2019)

The basis for my choice to focus on the clay and within this touch, Reaction and Dialogue As it reflects the principles of working with clay and what one expects when working with a material that is open to interpretation and intention to be straightforward process, but it is something where those who interact with it must develop alongside the very thing which you carry out, clay is something that through dialogue and reacting to clay and the reacting with the process then creates a dialogue between the inanimate material and the animate organism, this connection as defined by Theaster gates aa being;

“you can’t shortcut into the kind of expressive thing just by picking up a piece of clay and just throwing it around. That there is something else that needs to happen on the way to that communication with clay, through clay.”

(Gates, 2022)

It is a material that is present throughout the world, it has been used for centuries and can be a reflection both human existence in the many states and interpretation the clay is formed too, thus providing a reflection of the time with which each artist lived in as a record of the life but the life around them as evidenced within each artist who I have referenced within this essay. With this, comes the idea of accepting change both as something that fluctuates and that what is permanent; this can be reflected in the act of firing a work; the irreversible process of removing of moisture from clay and the resulting object being solidified in as a finale form. As defined previously, with working with clay and ceramics comes the acceptance of damage, mistake, change and chance, to exist in the ebb and flow. These multiple associations and meaning embedded in the material of clay itself. Clay then can be considered a reflective medium, something in flux and equally something that can solidified in time through firing in a kiln. To work with clay then is to work with something that has experienced and been formed by inextricable forces with which has created a medium that is malleable and formless it develops a dialogue with the artist and as much as

the artist is in dialogue with it. When considering this within my own practice exploration of working with clay both with the incorporation of organic materials such as the use of dried insects dipped in porcelain, or the creation of ceramic forms derived from animal architecture and alternative existences; which I consider both as creation of my own fossil but equally drawing a link between human interaction with the environment, both for its ability to sustain life but equally considering our own actions that can detrimental to our own health as humans and that of the earth that sustains us.

RESEARCH QUESTION -

Within current contemporary dialogue on the usage of clay within art, is there a lack of consideration of the haptic quality of clay and kinship between nature and the phenomenology of such?

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