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Material Performance: Presentation/panel discussion

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An edited transcript of a conversation between Phoebe Cummings and Clare Twomey who both presented at The Seminar Beyond the Object, Vasasalen Uppsala konstmuseum, 3 June 2018.

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CLARE & PHOEBE

Beyond the object?

A conversation between Clare Twomey and Phoebe Cummings

Clare Twomey is a British artist who works with clay, constructing large-scale installations, sculpture and site-specific works. Over the past 10 years she has exhibited at the Tate- UK, Victoria and Albert Museum- UK, Crafts Council- UK, Museum of Modern Art Kyoto -Japan. A major exhibition at the Crafts Council in 2003, 'Approaching Content' curated by Jonathan Parsons, saw Clare Twomey's work take a prominent role contributing to contemporary discussions on clay. In 2004 Twomey's work was exhibited at the TATE Liverpool exhibition 'A Secret History of Clay from Gauguin to Gormley'. She has developed affiliations with industry including, Royal Crown Derby, Emerys minerals and Wedgwood and is the Lead Artist for 2017/18 at Tate Exchange exploring the theme of 'Production'. Twomey is Professor at the University of Westminster where she leads the Ceramics Research Centre - UK. She contributed to the major AHRC-funded research project 'Ceramics in the Expanded Field', completed in 2014.

Phoebe Cummings is an artist based in the UK and joined the Ceramics Research Centre - UK as a Research Associate in 2017. Cummings creates highly detailed, temporary sculptures and environments from raw clay, often re-cycling the same material within new projects. Exhibitions have included the Victoria & Albert Museum-UK, Museum of Arts & Design-New York and the University of Hawaii Art Gallery-Honolulu as well as undertaking a number of residencies in the UK, USA and Greenland. She was the winner of the British Ceramics Biennial Award 2011 and the Woman's Hour Craft Prize 2017 and was shortlisted for the Arts Foundation Awards 2018.

The following text is an edited transcript from a conversation between Phoebe Cummings and Clare Twomey after the seminar for Beyond the Object held at Uppsala Konstmuseum. Both artists presented talks about their individual practice and research during the seminar.

PC: Curator Annika Enqvist spoke about 'clay as a method' in her opening introduction to the exhibition. I think this is important in our individual practices and within our interests as a Ceramics Research Centre at the University of Westminster. We are often thinking around the question 'what can clay do?', not only in a physical way, but what questions can it pose or potentially answer, how can we use it to think through or connect through. 'Beyond the Object' is a useful anchor thinking about this area of what we might perhaps describe as 'non-traditional' clay practice, yet in the exhibition there are of course many objects. I think what the work does is operate beyond the idea of the object as a goal, a kind of commodified endpoint. The object might be an outcome, but what else is enabled or accessed in the process? This seems so important in your work too, for example in FACTORY¹ at Tate Exchange. Objects were produced, but the work considered everything that surrounds that process of production; the human side of production; the care, skills, attention, dedication, collaboration that goes on.

CT: That's interesting, the term non-traditional practice, it seems very important, because everything we were exposed to in those two days still had a huge

engagement with the object. I don't know whether that was a shifting of the object, maybe at times the objects were the performer, but certainly the object was still very much present. I don't see a rejection of the object as part of your practice either, I see a challenge to the object. That's quite different isn't it?

PC: Yes, and I think that's probably true for most of the artists in *Beyond the Object*, there is still an interest in the object, but maybe in different phases of the object, of their becoming, or another means of operating or existing, beyond function and consumption. It's a shifting, not an absence.

CT: We have to think about clay practice too, that is central to all of this. What we understand as clay practice across the board, is that there is still a materialisation of a *thing*, whatever that thing is, it is a materialisation through clay, there is an object presence. In your work, the object can be challenged by its very being, it challenges the viewers perception. There's a continual circular dialogue. If we think about your fountain, 'Triumph of the Immaterial'² made for the Woman's Hour Craft Prize, then it's all those potentials, all those questions that are made tangible, they exist because the object exists. The changing material of clay challenges the fixed sense of the object, the temporality of the object questions our value and investment of labour, the object is undone by its own function and materials. But still the object needs to be made, in order to challenge it, a doing to un-do if you like, that is the cycle.

PC: Without the object we wouldn't be able to ask those questions, pose those challenges. There is not a redundancy, it's more about other functions. Function isn't necessarily practical or physical. In *Beyond the Object* a lot of the work is about articulating or investigating something; a sensibility, a stirring of thought, of play and perceptions. The objects are vessels for thinking and exchange.

CT: I'm thinking too about how the material might be tied up in the rationale for its use. Many works you have made are continually changing, the questions they pose are central to their material being. If we look at clay practice, we are not talking about the end-point, but what happens in the dialogue of that material process. That definitely happened in *FACTORY* at Tate, the objects were secondary to the process people went through to produce them. Actually, if we think about these two works, *Triumph of the Immaterial* and *FACTORY*, there is a duality. You on the one hand have the potential for stability in that object and you destabilise it, you dissolve it, and in the factory, we had something unstable- the material, and made it stable in form. There were 8 tonnes of clay, unknown potential, and we made it into something very apparent, a solid idea of a thing, like a cup. The material is also complicit in both of those things. In *FACTORY*, there was a complicity between the participants and the material, it became the experiential nature of what you are committing to in the process.

PC: I think also in *factory* the individuals had to surrender their objects, they didn't take ownership of their own object, and that too is destabilising. You shift from viewer to participant and move from maker to consumer of the same kinds of objects on that single journey in the work. I think this idea of clay as a method comes through again,

though it plays out in very different ways, it affords us both a language to ask questions, the clay is always a medium to allow other things to arise and surface.

CT: Maybe it can be the instability of the clay itself that helps open that dialogue too. If we return to that idea of traditional practice, then in both our cases, there is a sense that the expected process is not complete in some way. We destabilise things and require dialogue to make sense of that, because things are not performing in the traditional sense.

PC: Instability is so inherent to clay in its raw state. I think I am interested in the openness it offers, things are not necessarily concluded, certainly not fixed.

CT: If we think about the exhibition, there were many works which included ceramic objects which physically are fixed, but they somehow remain contingent, for example the cardboard boxes by Hanne Mago Wikland. They are highly refined, labour intensive, fired objects, yet they operate in a contingent way.

PC: You're right, because there is still an instability, they completely destabilise our perception, how we think we know those objects, what we expect of them, there is a fracture between their appearance and the contrast of their reality. We become displaced by them.

CT: An instability of knowledge.

PC: That was flipped in the work immediately next to it too, the laboratory like display of experiments by Ane Fabricius Christiansen. They were completely curious and unknown, sometimes the material was behaving in unexpected ways, but then the artist was tightening and loosening control over that, harnessing it or allowing it freedom. As a viewer, you have no expectations of the objects because you don't know them, they might be evocative or suggestive of something recognisable, but they remain elusive.

CT: Also, we can't ignore time. So much of the work has a relationship to time. Time and empathy. Some of the works are bound to a set physical duration, some dealt with geological time. In a way that immensity of time, that it is so hard to understand, a non-human time, is made tangible by the materiality of the work. I think in your work there is a different kind of empathy, there is access to a human sense of time, lived time. Labour.

PC: Time and materiality is significant. I'm thinking about Hedwig Winge's constructions, this graceful chaos, a sense of repositioning - repositioning material and meaning. That work moved clay from some of its associated heaviness and groundedness. There is a lightness and tension there, matched in the briefness of its form and how that is fixed in time and space. Maybe that goes back to this shared interest in instability, essentially it gives us a chance to reposition things, physically and conceptually.

CT: A pushing and pulling; a negotiation. As practitioners we are always asking things of the material, to behave a certain way, sometimes pushing it to the edge of its capabilities, sometimes it pushes back, it tells us what it will and won't do. There are all the associated histories and narratives we pull out in making objects too. Paulina Pollanen's work highlighted how sometimes those histories may be difficult and problematic, how can we negotiate those too? There are negotiations at every level, sometimes that requires confrontation, often it calls for listening.

¹ FACTORY: the seen and the unseen' was a large-scale project in 2017 in which Clare Twomey transformed the entire space of Tate Exchange at Tate Modern, London into a working factory for 2 weeks. The public could clock in, join the production line and exchange the object they made for one previously produced by someone else within FACTORY. The work was the beginning of a yearlong investigation into the theme of Production delivered by associates working across the UK. For more information see: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/tate-exchange/workshop/factory>

² Phoebe Cummings *Triumph of the Immaterial* (clay, water) 80cm x 60cm x 50cm, V&A, 2017
Triumph of the Immaterial was an ornate, floral fountain made from clay which won the inaugural Woman's Hour Craft Prize in 2017 at the V&A. Water was timed to flow for a few minutes each day over the 6-month exhibition, gradually eroding the piece.