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Beyond the Studio

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Beyond the Studio: Fugitive Objects

The model of studio ceramics dominated contemporary ceramics in the 20th-century. For the most part, the terms might be considered inter-changeable. By its definition studio ceramics maintains two key positions; firstly, that the site of production is a studio – usually that of the individual artist/ potter, and secondly that the outcome of this is a fired ceramic vessel or object, that may then leave the studio as a commodity.

Through this paper I will consider from a personal perspective the shifts in education, making and outcomes as part of a ceramic practice, and examine specifically the role of the studio and it's relevance within the expanded field of ceramics today.

Back in 1999 when beginning a BA in three-dimensional crafts at the University of Brighton, my vision of how someone might operate as a ceramicist looked something like this: a modest, private space equipped with tools and materials where you produced objects. It was a model taught by Universities, though perhaps with a bit more sharing of equipment and less personal space than the ideal.

When graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2005, I still saw a studio as a goal, as though subtly through the structures of medium specific education I had almost been indoctrinated to believe such a space was a vital requirement. As Virginia Woolf famously stated in 'A Room of Ones Own' from 1929 “ a woman must have money and a room of one's own in order to write fiction.” As a 24 year old graduate, bankrupted by the cost of education, I certainly had no money, and a studio practice started to seem something of an elitist and unattainable ideal. What I take from Woolf's statement is that the real requirement to create something, be it fiction or work in clay, is a form of freedom – which is of course a complex and personal structure, in which

financial freedom is only a part. There is also a need for space, though I would argue not necessarily a physical or private one.

Fixing material into a permanent fired form seemed at this point a mismanagement of resources I had available and disregarded clay's potential for renewal and longevity in its raw state. And so I turned instead to a process of working directly in different locations with clay as temporary sculptures, which required only a bucket, board, clay and time in order to continue making.

In 'Thinking Through Craft' Glenn Adamson writes about how "the pastoral idea of a protected space of retreat returns us to the fact that studio crafts dilemma may be better captured not in the word 'craft' at all but rather studio."

The studio is still largely regarded as where work with clay is likely to happen outside of industrial production, despite the much-expanded nature of the discipline. Today a proliferation of shared access studios have emerged across the country as sites where people may learn, engage and experiment with clay amidst the widespread closure of ceramics departments in higher education within the UK. These shared spaces also move us from the idea of ownership of a space and the protected space of retreat. The structure of craft courses in higher education also appear to have shifted to include more of what we might consider live projects, and setting work in a specific context outside of the institution, engaging with real audiences.

There are of course no shortage of examples where the model of what might be considered studio ceramics continues to produce some of the most exciting and refreshing work with clay. Nao Matsunaga and Alison Britton are two such examples that can be seen in the collections here at York. After all, a studio is a practical place to make things from what generally is a messy material, but is by no means the only way to go about things.

In 2016 I was invited to write a Statement of Practice for the Journal of Modern Craft. It was an opportunity to reflect on my own approach to making which has happened in drastically different environments over the past 13 years, from the Arctic to Hawaii, factory to museum. As I wrote in that statement, “Places inform and direct the work and often provide vastly different environments to work in, but there is continuity in the approach to moving and thinking with the material. No one body of work is entirely separate from another, things dart back and forth between locations and times. I am not very interested in holding onto what is made, but things may resurface in different locations, in different ways, and there is an ongoing curiosity which is constant. Plasticity is a significant property of clay and I try to extend it into the way in which I work”

In beginning to describe this itinerant, peripatetic way of working I became clearer about what I carry with me, which is essentially a way of thinking through clay which provides a personal space and freedom regardless of physical location.

In 2011 I spent three days at the bottom of a public stairwell in Siobhan Davies Dance Studios building onto a 6 m length of rope which was gradually hoisted with a pulley. Here the choreography of making was as exposed as the resulting object, bordering on performance, and one of several projects where I have been publicly visible during the making of the work. As Martina Margetts writes in her essay 'The Matter in Hand' "both the natural world and the human body constitute what I would call 'thinking matter'. Earth, fire water and air are the first elements of material making and benchmark the flux of order and disorder prevalent in humans and in everyday life." In this way, our acts of making are also a form of matter, our choices of where and how we carry out these tasks also hold implicit meaning.

Over many projects I have been more interested in the idea of the material enacting it's own performance rather than placing the emphasis on a fixed object, with pieces often changing subtly over the duration they are shown. As such, they can be problematic to define and certainly to collect. For me, the dissolved notion of studio has also been accompanied by an ongoing interest in objects as something fugitive; objects are something I seek to be shifting, brief, and quietly transformative. This was explored in the recent dissolving fountain I made as part of the Woman's Hour Craft Prize exhibition at the V&A which slowly eroded as water flowed for a few minutes each day over the 6 months it was shown.

It now exists through a group of fragments, photographs and film clips which are touring different venues over the coming year. In dealing with fleeting objects there remains ongoing questions of what constitutes the work and the best means to document it. For me this has always included photographs, sometimes film and more

recently fragments, though I still feel unresolved about keeping this physical material. I have begun to consider the possibility of documenting the work also through writing, that perhaps a non-visual language might offer a richer means to evoke a memory of the work, that perhaps through making I might eventually arrive instead at a text.

One of the pleasures and fascinations of working within a material specific practice is that through it, a much wider dialogue is enabled. As Petra Lange-Berndt describes in her introduction in *Materiality – Documents of Contemporary Art* “ Complicity with materials means not engaging predominantly with peers who operate in the same system, but rather, becoming involved with other disciplines according to the topic: botanists for example, if considering an art practice centred on plants... The path one takes when ‘following the materials’ is thus not linear, not clearly divisible into avant-garde, high modernist, post-modern and so on. Rather one encounters anachronistic layers, incorporating references that point beyond canonical art-historical boundaries.”

During a ceramics fellowship at Camden Arts Centre I spent time with specialists working in very different ways with clay, within the material science department at Imperial College learning about the use of clay and ceramics in Radioactive waste management, and at the Natural History Museum finding out about the analysis of clay on Mars. Work I made during that time also explored palaeobotany and information of past landscapes preserved through the London Clay. There was a studio space provided as part of the fellowship but it was as much a space from which to reach out or invite people in as it was for making, and where it fulfilled this practical function it

was more of a laboratory for experimenting with the materiality of clay and other reactive agents.

In working directly in the site where the work is shown, there are usually specific histories already in existence to draw on and add into, that operate like another material. After the Death of the Bear' made in 2013 reconstructed the scene depicted on a plate produced by Spode and other Staffordshire manufactures, constructed in a space within the closed Spode factory during the British Ceramics Biennial. The work was built on a scale for the viewer to enter, and beside which the original plate was displayed.

Whilst such fugitive objects challenge the traditional collection process, museums have however provided numerous opportunities to make within or in relation to their collections. The entire studio space provided by a residency at the V&A in 2010 became the outcome of the time spent there, allowing visitors to see an evolving environment informed by objects in the collection.

What is also afforded by a deep understanding of one material and it's historical use is the opportunity to manipulate traditional techniques to explore new possibilities. For example, during the residency at the V&A I began looking closely at the small extrusions often seen on figurines and began using the same texture over large areas.

This same hand produced texture covered a 9m sculpture in the University of Hawaii Art gallery in 2013, made in collaboration with large groups of students from

departments across the university, some in ceramics, others beyond the art department entirely. During this time the gallery space was an active site of production and accessible to all on campus, questioning any ideas of the studio as a private place of making, the artist as a lone author and the gallery as a space only to view the so called 'finished' work.

Most recently a temporary commission for the University of Liverpool's Victoria Gallery and Museum has considered the meaning of making something in common. Situated in a gallery that was the former women's common room built in 1892, the room was the first dedicated space for women in higher education in the UK. The room contains a fireplace designed and carved by the first group of female students; which I consider a quietly radical object. For the exhibition the gallery room is re-imagined as a common space and decorative architectural features that occur throughout the building have been added to the room that continue to evolve through a series of public workshops taking place over the coming months. During the opening night visitors made a tea set, recalling the kettle kept in the original common room, highlighting simple acts that bring people together and encourage communication. The work asks us to consider who belongs within institutions. The commission is part of a series at Victoria Gallery and Museum, that temporarily locate practices that challenge collecting in museums and provoke us to consider what museums of the future might look like as well as the idea of post-medium collecting.

While the site remains a point where a large part of making still takes place within my work, there has been a distinct shift since having children over the past 6 years. I can

no longer spend extended periods of time away from home so increasingly work on components in preparation. Moulds and parts of this piece were made at home over the period of a month before building the work together and adding to it on site over a period of 4 days.

This preparatory work is done from either the kitchen table or a small table in the laundry. There is of course a long history of women working within the domestic space, particularly for industry. My great grand-mother would sew leather as piece work for a factory from her home, and other family members were involved in chain making, another industry employing many women workers via domestic workshops in the West Midlands. In 2017 I made this piece, Nocturne, produced entirely at home, at night, while my children slept. The flowers, originating from different geographic locations and climates all bloom at night, a moment extended by the replicas wrought here in clay. It was shown as part of a show titled Women's Work at Airspace gallery in Stoke-on-Trent, which considered the role of women in the in the potteries, working from home as well as in the factories.

There is a similarly long tradition of hobbyists undertaking craft activities within the domestic space and I know I am far from alone amongst professional artists and designers. Yet I still encounter a perceived validation attached to having a studio space as a marker of professionalism. Last week, I spent five days making work in a public exhibition space and one of the most commonly asked questions by visitors to the space was where my studio is. Perhaps the most honest answer to that question is wherever I am.

The studio must adapt to my life and circumstances and in turn I must adapt to what is available at any given time. I don't view this shift in working partly from home as an oppressive return to gendered roles but rather a choice that enables me to keep working in a way that is possible, and that is amenable to my life at this time, and is just one of many locations in which I work.

Jenni Sorkin devotes a chapter in 'Live Form- Women Ceramics and Community' to the idea of women kitchen potters, a term first used by Janet Leach. Sorkin specifically examines the practice of Susan Peterson and describes her "ability to utilize the ceramic process as a locus for experiencing and building community beyond the confines of master-student lineages, as a structuring device for nonhierarchical and participatory experiences."

Sorkin references Caroline Jones, 'Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist' from 1996, writing how she (quote) "weds a history of "post-studio production" to the masculine bravado of the 1960s and, specifically, the continuing influence of Judd, Smithson, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol. These artists transformed the artist's site of production from the studio, an historical oasis of isolated object-based creation, into a theoretical and critical sphere both nomadic and unfixed, a situation of "de-architecturing," to borrow Smithson's own term—altering the private, symbolic space of the studio and envisioning it as a series of procedures orchestrated by the artist and executed by others."

However, in my experience this de-architecturing of practice has enabled me as a woman working with clay, and simultaneously may encompass the kitchen as a valid space of production as part of a broader mode of working, unfixed to any one location.

Through considering examples within my own practice I have reflected on some of the ways in which the studio no longer provides a solid definition, either of itself or of contemporary ceramics. The AHRC funded research 'Ceramics in the Expanded Field' in 2014 by the Ceramics Research Centre UK at the University of Westminster helped to define the breadth of practice within the UK, particularly in the context of museums and collections. Similarly, Alun Graves recent Peter Dormer lecture highlighted work over the past 20 years that has not conformed to traditional modes of studio production and acquisition within the V&A ceramics collection. The theme of this conference, re-stating clay encourages us to re-think ceramics, to interrogate how we define what we do. Specifically, this pathway asks us to consider the future of contemporary studio ceramics. We cannot do this without also re-thinking our relationship to the studio, is it a relevant way to frame how we work with ceramics? and if so, perhaps our definition of the studio needs to expand beyond the sense of a fixed room to embrace how these activities sit within wider society and the varied approaches to production and making that exist.

As Karen Barad identifies matter can be "understood as a dynamic and shifting entanglement of relations rather than a property of things." At the centre of all the varied work discussed over these two days is CLAY; clay is our shared point of entanglement, regardless of where and how we interact with it.

