

# **Material and Spiritual Entanglements with Ceramics.**

## **Looking at the case of contemporary Western practitioners in Japan.**

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### **Abstract.**

Drawn by images of Japan centered on ideas of craftsmanship and spirituality, disseminated from the mid-nineteenth century, artists and intellectuals in the West have often searched East for something beyond the normative patterns of their societies. This paper looks at the case of forty Westerners who have crossed national borders to practice ceramics in Japan between the 1960s and the 2010s. Drawing on philosophical aesthetics and recent social theories of making, I will explore the role of bodily and sensory relationships in the participant's accounts of their engagement with materials, processes, traditions, and histories generally categorized as Japanese ceramics. As a technical and artistic object with historical and ideological connections with the tea ceremony and Zen Buddhism, Japanese ceramics appears like a valuable tool to explore the connections between materiality and spirituality, and between ethics and aesthetics. I start by highlighting the contested connections between Japanese ceramics and spirituality, which have been shaped by Western Orientalist and Japanese cultural nationalist discourses, followed by an outline of the dissemination of these ideas in the West. I will stress their impact in post-war Euro-American avant-garde and countercultural movements and how they tie in with the Western ceramic practitioners' paths to Japan. Then, I explore the participants' selective negotiation of the meanings, norms, values, and sensibilities condensed in what I call the ›ethos of Japanese ceramics‹ within their transnational experiences of cultural displacement, based on an analysis of their narrative accounts and ethnographic observations. While the culture of the Other can function as a path for the reinvention of the Self through the rejection of Western modernist hierarchies of art and its aesthetic conventions, the participants' negotiations and reinterpretations of the values attached to culturally marked objects, materials, and processes reveals their ecological aspirations, lifestyle orientations, and cosmopolitan dispositions, which are shaped by an awareness of the human and non-human interdependencies involved in the process of

making and interacting with objects. Through the participants' resignifications and correspondences of the material and spiritual values attached to Japanese ceramics, new and hybrid forms of knowing and being that blur the binary oppositions between East and West, Self and Other, object and subject are created.

### **Zusammenfassung.**

Westliche Kunstschaffende sowie Intellektuelle haben in Ostasien häufig nach Inspiration und Ideen gesucht, die über die normativen Muster ihrer Gesellschaft hinausgehen. Dabei fühlten sich diese sozialen Gruppen vor allen Dingen von Vorstellungen über Japan angezogen, die auf handwerklichen sowie spirituellen Ideen basierten, die seit Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts Verbreitung fanden. In diesem Aufsatz wird der Fall von westlichen Keramikherstellenden untersucht, die zwischen den 1960er- und 2010er-Jahren nach Japan gekommen sind, um sich im Land nicht nur über die heimische Keramiktradition fortzubilden, sondern sie auch auszuüben. Auf der Grundlage der philosophischen Ästhetik und neuerer Theorien der Herstellung werde ich in den Erzählungen der Befragten die Rolle der körperlichen und sensorischen Beziehungen untersuchen. Dabei geht es um die Auseinandersetzung der Individuen mit Materialien, Prozessen, Traditionen und Geschichten, die im Allgemeinen zur japanischen Keramik gezählt werden. Durch den so gelegten Fokus kann die Verbindung zwischen Materialität und Spiritualität sowie zwischen Ethik und Ästhetik herausgearbeitet werden, da die japanische Keramik als technische und künstlerische Tradition historische und ideologische Verbindungen zur Teezeremonie und zum Zen-Buddhismus aufweist. Im ersten Abschnitt des Texts werde ich die umstrittene Verbindung zwischen japanischer Keramik und Spiritualität beleuchten, die durch westlich-orientalistische und japanische kulturnationalistische Diskurse geprägt wurde. Anschließend folgt ein Abriss der Verbreitung dieser Ideen im Westen, wobei das Augenmerk auf den Einfluss auf die euro-amerikanischen Avantgarde- und Gegenkulturbewegungen der Nachkriegszeit gelegt wird. Dadurch wird der Einfluss dieser Anschauungen deutlich, die bei den westlichen Keramikherstellenden dazu führten, dass sie nach Japan kamen. In einem letzten Schritt werde ich basierend auf Erzählungen der Befragten und ethnografischen Beobachtungen darstellen, wie die Keramikherstellenden Bedeutungen, Normen und Werte, die dem entsprechen, was ich ›Ethos der japanischen Keramik‹ nenne, im Rahmen ihrer transnationalen Erfahrungen interpretieren. Die Auswertung zeigt, dass die Befragten ihre Identität neu erfinden, indem sie westlich-modernistische Hierarchien, die mit dem Kunstdiskurs verknüpft sind, und ästhetische Konventionen ablehnen. Stattdessen wird das Selbst der Keramikschaffenden durch Normen so-

wie Sensibilitäten geprägt, die im Zusammenhang mit der Tradition der japanischen Keramikschule stehen. Während eine ›Kultur des Anderen‹ als Vehikel fungieren kann, um das Selbst durch Ablehnung westlicher Kunstdiskurse neuzuerfinden, wird in den Aussagen der Befragten deutlich, wie sie Werte, die mit kulturell geprägten Objekten, Materialien und Prozessen verbunden sind, neu verhandeln und interpretieren müssen. Dadurch zeigt sich das Bewusstsein der Befragten für das komplexe Netzwerk, das den Prozess der Herstellung und Verwendung von Dingen umspannt, während gleichzeitig auch ihre ökologischen Bestrebungen, Lebensstilorientierungen und kosmopolitischen Dispositionen deutlich werden. Durch diesen Versuch der neuen Sinnstiftung und geschaffenen Querverbindungen werden neue und hybride Formen des Wissens und des Seins geschaffen, die die binären Gegensätze zwischen Ost und West, Selbst und Anderem, Objekt und Subjekt verwischen.

## 1. Introduction

Ceramics have had a ubiquitous presence in almost every human society since the invention of agriculture around ten thousand years ago. As a nearly universal category of objects, pottery is an especially useful tool to investigate the culturally meanings attached to materials, objects, and processes, particularly through its close relationship with eating, drinking, and the sociability rituals that happen around these. As a tangible outcome of human action and behaviour, ceramics materialize the values, norms, and sensibilities fostered by a particular people, functioning as vehicles of meaning that result from the maker's intent, »standardized recipes«, and historical and technological trajectories that are subject to cultural regulation and interpretation, as well as to political and ideological manipulation.<sup>156</sup> Yet, while being a product of the world they inhabit, objects are simultaneously active agents in the world they create and transform indefinitely.<sup>157</sup> By both triggering and condensing actions, relationships, emotions, values, and ideas, objects are one of the fundamental ways people act, relate, comprehend, and exist in the world. Furthermore, they are important vectors by which interaction between people, between people and materials, and between people and their environment, is made. In short, people make objects, but objects also make people.<sup>158</sup>

As a material testimony of culture, cultural difference, and cultural change, pottery or ceramics has been an object of inquiry within the fields of art history, archaeology, and anthropology, but it has been less often the subject of

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156 Appadurai. *Introduction; Kopytoff. The Cultural Biography of Things.*

157 Latour. *Reassembling the Social.*

158 Miller. *Materiality: An Introduction*, p. 38.

sociological analysis, although they are also important means for social interaction and social change. This article draws on my interdisciplinary background as an archaeologist by training, turned sociologist by accident, with a focus on Area and Cultural studies, particularly Japanese studies. As a technical and artistic object with historical and ideological connections with the tea ceremony and Zen, both of which have become metonyms for Japanese identity in the modern period, Japanese ceramics appear like a valuable tool to explore the connections between materiality and spirituality. In this article, I will investigate the manifold ways Western practitioners in Japan engage with the material and spiritual elements of culturally marked objects such as are Japanese ceramics, through an analysis of their subjective narrative accounts and ethnographic observations. I will explore the ways foreign practitioners negotiate, select, and reinterpret the historically and ideologically marked meanings, norms, and values condensed in what I will call the ›ethos of Japanese ceramics‹ within their transnational experiences of cultural displacement, shaped by bodily and sensory engagements with Japan-nurtured materials, processes, and techniques in their communities of reception.

While the role of objects as social agents in the process of circulation and consumption has been widely examined by scholars in the field of the social sciences, the analysis of the process of production has often been left to art history, which has tended to focus on the autonomous power of objects and on artists' biographies.<sup>159</sup> Recently, social theories of making have started exploring the relationships, emotions, and experiences elicited in the process of production, which happens in collaboration with a complex network of agents and forces outside of the maker's control.<sup>160</sup> Drawing on Miller,<sup>161</sup> this article aims to explore how the process of engaging with objects, their materials and processes, makes the people who make them, that is, shapes identities and ways of being in the world.

The association between Japanese arts, aesthetics, and spirituality is a highly contested one that has been shaped by Western Orientalist and Japanese cultural nationalist discourses. As such, I start by highlighting these trajectories with a focus on the modern period, followed by an outline of the dissemination of these ideas in the West. I will stress their impact in post-war Euro-American avant-garde and countercultural movements and how they tie in with the Western ceramic practitioners' paths to Japan. Then, I explore the

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<sup>159</sup> Rothenberg/Fine. *Art World and their Ethnographers*; Pitelka. *Wrapping and Unwrapping Art*.

<sup>160</sup> Ingold. *Making*; Bunn. *Materials in the Making*; Tokoro/Kawai. *An Anthropology of Things*.

<sup>161</sup> Miller. *Materiality*, p. 38.

participants' negotiations of these trajectories through an analysis of the accounts of their biography and ceramic practice, as well as non-participant observation during visits to some of the participants' homes and studios. Drawing on philosophical aesthetics and recent social theories of making that incorporate Eastern philosophical frameworks, I will explore the role of bodily and sensory relationships in the participants' accounts of their engagement with objects, their materials, processes, and histories generally categorized as Japanese ceramics. While the culture of the Other can function as a path for the reinvention of the self by rejecting Western modernist hierarchies and its normative aesthetic conventions, which have put crafts and craftspeople in a marginal status, we will see how the participants' attraction to and negotiations of the ethos of Japanese ceramics reveals their ecological aspirations, lifestyle orientations, and cosmopolitan dispositions, reflected and shaped by an awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependencies between human and non-human agents.

## **2. Goals, materials, methods, and limitations**

My article focuses on the relationships established with Japanese ceramics by Western ceramic practitioners who went to Japan between 1965 and 2015, based on their narrative accounts and ethnographic fieldwork. It is the result of my doctoral research performed in different areas of Japan, predominantly in rural regions historically known for pottery production. Qualitative semi-structured interviews following the ethnosociological method of life-story,<sup>162</sup> as well as written questionnaires and informal talks were carried out with a total of forty Western nationals who were or had been practicing ceramics in Japan, half of whom have lived in the country for more than three decades. In several cases, participant and non-participant observation was performed on-site, and online ethnography was used to follow up on the interviewees' activities, which also gave insights into their lifestyles, values, and worldviews. The permeable boundaries between research and life, and object and subject, are reflected in the establishment of relationships of trust, collaboration and sometimes friendship that shape the endeavour of the ethnographer of living artists and makers.<sup>163</sup> While grounding our representations of the social world in empirical reality and making use of social theory and an iterative-inductive approach to examine the participants lived experiences, social contexts and their own subjective perceptions of these, a reflexive stance necessitates us to acknowledge our idiosyncratic position in the process of meaning co-creation, ethnographic description, and interpretative

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<sup>162</sup> Bertaux. *Les Récits de Vie*.

<sup>163</sup> Rothenberg/Fine. *Art World and their Ethnographers*.

analysis,<sup>164</sup> which is shaped by these trajectories. Furthermore, the diversity of participants in terms of nationality, age, gender, educational background, and period of arrival in Japan, as well as their heterogeneity in terms of lifestyles, ceramic practices, values, and worldviews, also hinders authoritative descriptions and interpretations that can be applied without reservations to all research participants. Interviewees' narratives should be understood as subjective accounts of their own interpretations of the social world or, conceivably, accounts of what interviewees, as named professional practitioners, wished to transmit to the researcher and potential readership about their work. The analysis and conclusions presented are thus based on common themes and patterns recurring in various participants' narratives, such as: human and non-human collaborations; the relationship between aesthetics and well-being; concerns with sustainability and self-sufficiency; and correspondences between Japanese sensibilities and other non-Western practices.

In terms of national background, participants originated from North America (19 interviewees), Europe (11), South America (8), Africa (1), and Oceania (1),<sup>165</sup> that is, they were nationals of countries beyond what is traditionally conceptualized as ›the West‹. I decided to focus on nationals from any country outside of Asia, drawing on Stuart Hall's »The West and the Rest«<sup>166</sup> but in reverse.<sup>167</sup> Of the forty interviewees, twenty have lived in Japan for thirty years or more, with twelve participants, all of whom arrived after 2010, having stayed in Japan for only five years or less. In terms of gender, fifteen practitioners were women, nine of whom arrived in the country after 2005.

Concerning the period of arrival, eight participants arrived in Japan between 1965 and 1979, fifteen between 1980 and 1993 during the country's phase of rapid economic growth, with only one interviewee arriving between 1994 and 2005, during the so-called ›lost decade‹ of economic recession, and sixteen participants between 2005 and 2018. In terms of age, most participants (16) arrived in Japan in their early twenties, especially those who came to the country between the 1960s and the 1990s, which means that at least one third of the interviewees have been in Japan longer than in their home countries.

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<sup>164</sup> O'Reilly. *Key Concepts in Ethnography*, p. 183-186.

<sup>165</sup> Participants were nationals of Canada (2), the United States (17), Brazil (7), Argentina (1), Portugal (2), Spain (1), France (1), the United Kingdom (3), Germany (1), Holland (1), Hungary (2), Uganda (1), and Australia (1).

<sup>166</sup> Hall. *The West and The Rest*.

<sup>167</sup> While most interviewees could be described as white (although their racial or ethnic identifications were not explicitly asked), five interviewees (all women) had an Asian background, specifically from Taiwan and Japan, the latter being true of all Asian-heritage interviewees from Brazil.

Subsequently, most have Japanese partners, children with Japanese nationality, and are now permanent residents of Japan.

Motivations to come to Japan can be divided into the following categories: practice ceramics (22 participants), university exchanges (7), travel or tourism (7), study other Japanese cultural practices such as Zen, tea ceremony, ›sumie‹, or karate (4), teach English or other non-pottery related professional activities (4), and personal reasons such as marriage (2), with some reasons overlapping. The majority entered the country with tourist, student, or art-related activities visas and, more recently, cultural activities and working holiday visas. While several participants of the first generation initially came to Japan for travel, university exchanges, or other pottery-unrelated activities, becoming interested in ceramics once in the country (5 out of 8), the majority of those who landed in the 1980s and early 1990s came to Japan specifically to study ceramics (8 out of 15), reflecting the successful global dissemination of Japanese culture through various government and private institutions during the country's economic boom. Similarly, nine of a total of ten participants who arrived after 2010 came to Japan specifically to study ceramics. This period coincides with the peak of Japan's cultural diplomatic efforts, colloquially known as Cool Japan, which incorporated everything related to a ›Japanese lifestyle‹, from fashion to food, including traditional handicrafts and the »Japanese sense of beauty«.<sup>168</sup> Finally, the majority of the interviewees held university degrees, mainly in the field of the arts and humanities (26). Of the total of forty respondents, thirteen no longer reside in the country.

The original aim of my doctoral research was to explore the interviewees' life story accounts in their intersections with wider cultural narratives, traditions, and histories born from the transnational trajectories of Japanese culture and its representations, particular in the context of the relationship between the socially created constructs of ›East‹ and ›West‹. I wanted to investigate how images of Japan, especially its traditional culture and ceramics, were embodied, contested, negotiated, and resignified through the practitioners' lived experiences in the country. In this paper, I will focus on their accounts of their bodily and sensory relationships with the values, actions, and sensibilities condensed in what I will call the ethos of Japanese ceramics, in their material and spiritual dimensions.

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<sup>168</sup> Burgess. *Cool Japan and the Struggle with Globalization*; Iwabuchi. *Resilient Borders and Cultural Diversity*.

### **3. The ethos of Japanese ceramics: aesthetics, spirituality, and the construction of modernity**

For the purpose of this article, I will use the term Japanese pottery (or Japanese ceramics) to refer to material cultural objects that condense meanings, values, and ideas commonly translated as ›Japanese culture‹. The use of the term Japanese culture poses the same problems as other references to a cohesive and static sense of national culture, namely, the overlooking of class, gender, ethnic, and regional variations, and the inevitability of cultural change. As with most modern nation-states, the process of building a unified sense of Japanese cultural identity in the modern period involved the institutionalization and dissemination of values and practices that had been restricted to the nobility and warrior elites amongst common people, a process known as the »samuraization« of Japanese society.<sup>169</sup>

Although Japanese ceramics are often understood as embodying idealized images of ›Japaneseness‹, their history and development have been strongly shaped by transnational exchanges since pre-historic times. Similarly, Japan's spiritual and philosophical traditions, namely Shintoism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which have arguably impacted much of the country's traditional arts, are all except for the first the result of foreign cultural transplants. Political, social, and economic forces in both the domestic and international stages have affected how Japan's culture has been internally perceived, constructed, and projected, in relation to a cultural Other, in recent history ›the West‹. This positioning of Japan as the reverse opposite of the West is also present in the discourse on Japanese arts and crafts, which are often described in contrast to Euro-American aesthetic preferences, themselves presented in an ahistorical and simplified manner: a predilection for symmetry and geometry; a tendency to control and hide the natural character of the materials; and the value placed on individual expression and originality, rather than tradition.<sup>170</sup>

While Japanese ceramics have been shaped by particular historical, political, and institutional trajectories, we can highlight some overall aesthetic characteristics that are the result of specific technological developments. As with other East Asian ceramic traditions, Japanese ceramics can generally be characterized by the process of firing clay at high temperatures (above 1250 degrees Celsius) in wood-fuelled kilns, although production of low-temperature wares is not inconspicuous (›raku‹ in Japan being the best-known example). While high-temperature ceramics were produced inconsistently in Europe from the late Middle Ages, in Japan they have dominated domestic

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<sup>169</sup> Befu. *Japan*, p. 50

<sup>170</sup> Chamberlain. *Japanese Things*, p. 52-53.



production since the fifth century. This was the result of transfer of knowledge and technologies from continental East Asia, where production of high-fired wares precedes Japan by several centuries. In particular, the kilns known as ›anagama‹ (literally, ›hole kiln‹) not only allowed for more resistant and durable wares but also brought about new aesthetic possibilities reflected in the development of natural ash glazes, which came to represent a quintessential Japanese aesthetics from the modern period.

Natural ash glazes first appeared in China by accident. Suspended ashes from the firewood used to fuel the kiln melt and vitrify on the surfaces of the ceramic pieces, creating natural-looking colorations and decorative patterns. This contrasts with the prevalence in Europe of bright-coloured glazes made with lead and fired in low temperatures, coloured slips in figurative patterns, or common unglazed wares. In East Asia, ash glazing processes were later perfected, developing into a variety of styles by adding different materials such as clay, minerals, oxides, and even rice straw, which gave birth to an array of aesthetic possibilities that makers learned to control. Ash glazed pottery was especially valued by the sixteenth century religious and military elites and connected to aesthetic preferences encapsulated in the concept of ›wabi-sabi‹, roughly translated as ›humble and rustic beauty‹. With strong connections to the political establishment of the period, tea masters saw the simple, rough, and imperfect wares cheaply made by farmer-potters in Japan's rural provinces as a reflection of the Buddhist ideals of humility, impermanence, and transience.

While the appreciation of the imperfect, asymmetric, and rustic beauty is rooted in the aestheticization of Zen Buddhist ideals by sixteenth-century tea masters, these were elite-fostered sensibilities that had little to do with the practices and preferences of most of the people that inhabited the Japanese archipelago until the modern era. Concepts used to describe traditional Japanese aesthetics, such as ›mujô‹ (impermanence), ›mono no aware‹ (transience), or ›wabi-sabi‹ (simplicity and imperfection), can be found in Japan's classical and medieval literature but were only reinterpreted as archetypical Japanese values by modern Japanese thinkers in light of contemporary Western philosophy and then applied to various areas of Japanese life.<sup>171</sup> Conceptualizing aesthetics as a Western system of knowledge, Marra sees its application to premodern Japan as an ›act of hermeneutical hegemony‹, therefore defining Japanese aesthetics as a process of philosophical negotiation between Japanese thinkers and Western signifying practices in the creation and development of images of Japan.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Marra. *Modern Japanese Aesthetics*.

<sup>172</sup> Marra. *Modern Japanese Aesthetics*, p. 1-2

Through this connection with the elite warrior culture of the tea ceremony, which became a metonym for Japanese identity in the modern period, ash-glazed high-fired and unfinished-looking stoneware became the archetypal style of Japanese pottery. Western interest in this aesthetics came to replace an obsession with the more exuberantly decorated export porcelain produced in China (›kraak‹) and tied to a wider and renewed interest in handicrafts, folk traditions, and the vernacular that swept Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this context, Japanese tea aesthetics and its associated concept of ›wabi-sabi‹ allowed for »a radical renewal of artistic expression«, constituting a »fundamental step towards the construction of modernity«. <sup>173</sup>

Scholars in the field of Japanese studies and the social sciences have explored the relationship between modern Japanese religious discourse and the construction of a collective sense of Japanese identity opposite the modern West, and how it impacted foreign and domestic views of Japanese culture, including the country's traditional arts and crafts. <sup>174</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese scholars and intellectuals engaged in a reinterpretation of Japan's spiritual traditions by hybridizing elements from Taoism and Buddhism with Western ideas, and relating them to a Japanese sense of beauty and national character. <sup>175</sup> In particular, Buddhist scholar Daisetsu Suzuki overlooked Buddhism's historical, religious, political, and institutional features in favour of universal aspirations by hybridizing ascetic aspects of Zen Buddhism with ideas from Western psychology, European Romanticism, and transcendentalism, therefore contributing to reinterpretations of Zen as an inward-directed process or experience that stressed interconnectedness, wholeness, self-fulfilment, spontaneity, transcendence of the ego, and personal development. <sup>176</sup>

Philosopher and art critic Soetsu Yanagi also drew on Suzuki's modern interpretations of Zen in the development of his folk crafts (›mingei‹) theory that aimed to reappraise the beauty of functional objects made for daily use. He hybridized Buddhist thought and medieval tea aesthetics with ideas from the British Arts and Crafts Movement of the late nineteenth century, all the while conceptualizing ›mingei‹ as a peculiarly Japanese philosophy and mode of

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<sup>173</sup> Hladik. *Aesthetic of Imperfection*, p. 203-205.

<sup>174</sup> Cross. *The Ideologies of Japanese Tea*; Surak. *Making Tea, Making Japan*; Yamada. *A Shot in the Dark*.

<sup>175</sup> Kikuchi. *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory*; Odin. *Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West*; McMahan. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*; Yamada. *A Shot in the Dark*.

<sup>176</sup> McMahan. *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*; Cox. *The Zen Arts*.

production.<sup>177</sup> Like Suzuki, Yanagi found a sense of Oriental cultural identity in this hybrid interstice between East and West. As a religious philosophy, ›mingei‹ drew on the Buddhist ideas of intuition or direct seeing (›chokkan‹) and non-dualism to define the beauty of folk crafts in the context of morality.<sup>178</sup> By relating William Blake's concept of ›self-annihilation‹ with the Pure Land Buddhist concept of other power (tariki), as opposed to Zen's stress on self-power (›jiriki‹), Yanagi saw beauty in the transcendence of the individual, presenting the selfless and simple work of the artisan as a means to achieve Buddhist salvation.<sup>179</sup> Praising the collaborative work of anonymous rural craftspeople, the Japanese folk crafts movement exhibited an anti-modernist character that, ironically, contributed to the birth of avant-garde ceramics in the West.

#### 4. Zen, handicrafts, and counterculture

Modern ideas of Japanese aesthetics, philosophy, and spirituality were disseminated in the West through English-language publications written by Japanese scholars such as Daisetsu Suzuki and Soetsu Yanagi. Their enormous success lies in the fact that the authors were able to digest complex philosophical ideas, making them comprehensible and appealing to the larger Western public partially by hybridizing Eastern elements with Western ones.<sup>180</sup> Besides impacting the development of Zen Buddhism in Europe and the United States, these writings helped make Zen and its related arts into the essence of ›Japaneseness‹.

While widespread academic interest in Zen Buddhism in Europe goes back to the 1920s, it was only in the post-war era that Suzuki's modern and hybridized version of Zen became a fad among young Europeans and Americans.<sup>181</sup> During this time, Western interest in Zen was tied to the rise of New Age movements that reflected a growing interest in Eastern religions and philosophies. In heritage of the Orientalism described by Said,<sup>182</sup> these movements saw the East as a spiritual refuge, an antipode to the individualist and materialist modern West. These developments were accompanied by a series of countercultural movements that rejected normative Western values and

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<sup>177</sup> Kikuchi. *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory*.

<sup>178</sup> Kikuchi. *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory*, p. 6; Carter. *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*.

<sup>179</sup> Nakami. *In Pursuit of Composite Beauty*; Kikuchi. *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory*; Matsui. *Yanagi Muneyoshi to Mingei no Genzai*.

<sup>180</sup> Koné. *Zen in Europe*; Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory*.

<sup>181</sup> Koné. *Zen in Europe*, p. 142.

<sup>182</sup> Said. *Orientalism*.

drew on Eastern spirituality and the handicrafts to explore ideas outside of the conventional status quo, stirring a mindset of freedom and experimentation that impacted the Euro-American art world.<sup>183</sup>

Suzuki also spread his modern version of Zen through international travels and lectures held at Columbia University between 1952 and 1955. These became popular among the artistic and intellectual elites, adding to the so-called ›Zen boom‹ in North America, and contributing to the development of avant-garde movements in literature, music, performance, and beyond. Hybrid modern versions of Zen were especially appealing to artists who were looking for ways to integrate art and life, taking it out of the confined space of the museum, and relating it to the present moment.<sup>184</sup> On the one hand, modern Zen reinforced Orientalist images of the East as intuitive and connected to nature. On the other, it offered an alternative to Cartesian rationality and the conventional Western modern system of art that had long rejected the handicrafts, attracting the attention of practitioners eager to explore the physical character of traditional craft media, such as clay. However, while such tendencies have impacted contemporary art movements in the West since the 1960s, they have not contributed to the inclusion of crafts (generally understood as the production of utilitarian items in specific media) and craftspeople into the art world, with a few exceptions. In fact, the so-called »craft formation«<sup>185</sup> or »material consciousness«<sup>186</sup> that some see has a distinctive characteristic of the work of the craftspeople, has been »cannibalized« by the same art world that still largely marginalizes handicrafts by rejecting utility and the actual incorporation of ordinary objects into everyday life.<sup>187</sup>

At the same time Zen was sweeping the Western art world, Soetsu Yanagi, Shoji Hamada, and Bernard Leach, the leaders of the Japanese folk crafts movement, travelled the West giving lectures and demonstrations to disseminate their hybrid ›mingei‹ philosophy. While adding to restore Japan's militaristic images after the Second World War,<sup>188</sup> the activities of the *mingei* leaders also contributed to bridging romantic images of Japan as a paradise of crafts, propagated since the Meiji period (1868-1912), with a growing Western interest in Zen. This dual influence of ›mingei‹ and modern Zen within the Euro-American intellectual and artistic circles transformed West-

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<sup>183</sup> Auther/Lerner. *West of Center*.

<sup>184</sup> Pearlman. *Nothing & Everything*.

<sup>185</sup> Kaneko. *Studio Craft and Craftical Formation*.

<sup>186</sup> Sennet. *The Craftsman*.

<sup>187</sup> Becker. *Arts and Crafts*; Wisnoski. *An Aesthetics of Everything Else*.

<sup>188</sup> Jones. *Hamada Shôji, Kitaôji Rosanjin, and the Reception of Japanese Pottery*.

ern perceptions of ceramics from a functional and industrial object to an appropriate means for creative self-expression. In particular, the act of throwing at the potters' wheel, until then seen as something repetitive and conditioned, was associated with the Zen concept of ›mushin‹ (no-mind) and seen as akin to meditation. For some, Japanese craftspeople personified the authentic »Oriental Guru«, greatly impacting the idea of the modern artist.<sup>189</sup> The image of the Japanese craftsman as the incarnation of modern ideas of Zen is echoed in the account of one of my interviewees:

»Just being with Japanese potters gives a serene feeling, makes you quiet and open and more susceptible to the environment. It is a Zen country.«<sup>190</sup>

›Mingei‹ potter Shoji Hamada's performances fulfilled the Western audience's desires for Japan as the exotic and mysterious East inherited from nineteenth-century Orientalism. Hamada's way of silently working at the potter's wheel in a cross-legged position, together with his relaxed calligraphic brushwork, greatly impressed practitioners who were delving into the possibilities of clay as »an exploratory, improvisational art«.<sup>191</sup> For one of my interviewees, Bizen-based American potter John Wells, sixteenth-century Japanese tea wares, which have come to represent the quintessential Zen ideals of beauty as expressed in the concept of ›wabi-sabi‹, are »even more modern than American modern art«:

»It's like action painting or something like that. The material is important and the way it is thrown, the action, is important. But the Momoyama<sup>192</sup> tea wares are even deeper than that. Not only the action, the making, the look, and the material, but also the touch and use. It's even deeper.«<sup>193</sup>

›Mingei‹ and Zen contributed to transforming Western understandings of ceramics from craft to modern art, inspiring artists to engage with clay in a spontaneous and intuitive manner. This shaped the development of abstract expressionist ceramics in the post-war era at the hands of Peter Volkos and others, characterized by a spur-of-the-moment and material-led attitude to working with clay in a sculptural and conceptual manner. Thus, through the combination of Yanagi's folk craft philosophy and Daisetsu Suzuki's modern

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<sup>189</sup> De Waal. *Homo Orientalis*; Winther-Tamaki. *Art in the Encounter of Nations*; Winther-Tamaki. *The ›Oriental Guru‹ in the Modern Artist*.

<sup>190</sup> Written questionnaire, February 2014.

<sup>191</sup> De Wall. *20<sup>th</sup> century ceramics*, p. 156.

<sup>192</sup> Momoyama, or Azuchi-Momoyama, refers to a period of Japanese history between 1568 and 1600, often described by historians as the early modern period of Japan.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with John Wells (United States, 1957-) in February 2017.

hybridized Zen, Western images of Japanese ceramics, the tea ceremony, Zen Buddhism, and medieval Japanese aesthetics have become intertwined.<sup>194</sup>

The ›mingei‹ leaders' efforts resulted in the ›mingei‹ ideas, together with tea ceramics and the six old kilns of Japan (›rokkoyô‹), coming to represent the quintessence of Japanese ceramics, especially abroad. This is reflected in a predilection for simple, irregular, and rustic aesthetics; a production process centred on traditional techniques that value the traces of natural processes; and a focus on utility and function. From the 1950s, Japanese ceramics started gradually appearing in American magazines and journals, leading to the expansion of the use of the techniques and discourse of Japanese ceramics by American artists and studio potters in the 1970s and a rapid rise in interest in Japan among makers and collectors of American ceramics in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>195</sup> The influence of Japanese tea and folk aesthetic norms is visible in the tendency to show the materials and the making processes, translated in the presence of unglazed fired clay, rocks, and other »imperfections«, with some Japan-born styles even receiving their own transcultural versions.<sup>196</sup> The international dissemination of Japanese ceramics has also led to the explosion of the worldwide popularity of the traditional ›anagama‹ and ›norigama‹ wood-firing kilns, which use has been declining in Japan.

This Zen and folk ethos of Japanese ceramics provided a link between the yearning for an imagined mystical, spontaneous, and intuitive East that followed Western anxieties with modernity and the desire of some Westerners to free themselves from their society's artistic, cultural, and even social conventions. These were reflected in an attempt to bring together art and life, visible not only in various avant-garde movements but in the envisioning of alternative and autonomous ways of living and working that rejected dominant social norms.<sup>197</sup> The so-called back to the land movement of the 1960s and 1970s was tied to countercultural experiments that led some people to leave large urban centres to settle in rural and suburban areas to engage in unconventional artistic ventures and small-business enterprises that sometimes drew on the handicrafts and other do-it-yourself practices that rejected the capitalist employee-consumer nexus and engaged in a resacralization of nature, community, and tradition.<sup>198</sup> Wood-firing in particular seemed to offer an experience of making that was grounded not only in the recognition of clay as a living, active material but also on the manipulation of fire and an

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<sup>194</sup> Kikuchi. *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory*, p. 206.

<sup>195</sup> Pitelka. *Japanophilic Objects of Desire*.

<sup>196</sup> Pitelka. *Handmade Culture*, p. 2.

<sup>197</sup> Wisnoski. *An Aesthetics of Everything Else*; Auther/Lerner. *West of Center*.

<sup>198</sup> Auther. *Craft and the Handmade*; Farber. *Self-Invention in the Realm of Production*.

awareness of role of other natural phenomena in artist creation, thus bringing countercultural artistic experiments and a search for alternative lifestyles with an environmentalist ethics that often drew on Eastern and Indigenous cosmologies to reject the dualistic separation between humans and nature.

In sum, post-war interest in a specific ethos of Japanese ceramics in the West resulted from the muddled articulation of multiple factors, amongst them: Western Orientalism and the allure of an imagined exotic East; widespread interest in Zen, especially in its modern hybridized version; the transnational activities and networks of the leaders of the folk crafts movement; countercultural movements and their attraction to the ›East‹ as spiritual refuge and a path for self-invention; Western anxieties with modernity, environmental ethics, and a search for alternative lifestyles, amongst others. Finally, the increasable accessibility of transcontinental travel facilitated middle-class Westerners to come to study, travel, work, and practice ceramics in Japan from the 1960s.

## 5. Westerners come to Japan

While Japanese artists and intellectuals were crossing the ocean to promote their hybrid Oriental philosophies in the West, Western artists and intellectuals were traveling in the opposite direction for study, work, and travel. Some were drawn by images of the ›authentic‹ East, as the lifestyle migrants in India described by Korpela, for whom the imagined non-Western Other became a way to explore radically different ways of being in the world.<sup>199</sup> Other people were empowered by the mindset of freedom and experimentation that accompanied social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s to adventure themselves in the culture of the Other, taking advantage of the quickly expanding network of youth hostels and the growing accessibility of international travel. While increasingly a viable leisure activity for the middle-class, travel also functioned as a tool of social and cultural capital and as a path of self-improvement, resulting in some Westerners coming to Japan by engaging in university exchanges or taking up a job in the country.

Although Japan remained an unusual tourist destination throughout the 1960s, the 1970 World Exhibition in Osaka encouraged people from foreign countries to visit the archipelago en masse for the first time.<sup>200</sup> Amongst the forty Western ceramic practitioners interviewed, Randy Woosley was the one who arrived in Japan the earliest, in 1965, after taking a plane from Canada to Scotland and backpacking around Europe for one year before ending up

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<sup>199</sup> Korpela. *A Postcolonial Imagination?*

<sup>200</sup> Eguchi. *A Brief Review of Tourism in Japan after World War II*, p. 146

in Japan. For some, interest in Japanese culture in general, and Japanese ceramics in particular, emerged only after their arrival in the country, as was Woolsey's case. Yet, at least five of the eight interviewees who came to Japan in the 1960s and 1970s were driven by a prior interest in Zen and the tea ceremony. That was the case of Canadian Tracey Glass, who arrived in 1979 as an exchange student to study at a Soto Zen Buddhist monastery and then discovered ceramics, drawn by its strong connections with eating and drinking, a feature shared with other interviewees. The link between Zen, the Japanese word for meditation, and ceramics is present in the accounts of participants of other generations. Douglas Black, who arrived in Japan from the United States in 1990 with an artist visa to train at an individual potter's studio, referred to his ceramic work as akin to the contemplative practice, allowing him to reach a state of deep focus and immersion.<sup>201</sup> American ›millennial‹ Andrew Vlock stated that he stumbled upon ceramics in the 2010s through his interest in meditation, for it aligned with the idea of finding presentness through repetitive effort.<sup>202</sup> This shows the enduring role of images of Zen in drawing foreign visitors to Japan.



Hamada Noborigama's Revival Firing, Mashiko, February 2018. Photo by the author.

Amongst the one third of the interviewees who arrived in Japan between the 1980s and the early 1990s, during the period of Japan's rapid economic growth, some came as exchange students in the fields of arts and humanities, or to work as language teachers. Yet, half of them were driven by an opportunity to study under a master potter in a historical region of ceramics production. For many of the participants of the first and second generations, initial contact with Japanese culture and ceramics happened at their home universities through professors who had been in Japan during the American Occupation, Japanese professors working there, or from books available at the library, most commonly Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book* (1940) and Soetsu Yanagi's *The Unknown Craftsman* (1972). The impact of the ›mingei‹ movement and its transnational connections is visible in the number of Westerners who ended up practicing ceramics in the rural town of Mashiko, Tochigi

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<sup>201</sup> Interview with Douglas Black (USA, 1967-) in June 2016.

<sup>202</sup> Written questionnaire with Andrew Vlock (United States, 1988-) in April 2017.



prefecture (15 out of the 40 participants), where Shoji Hamada, one of the main figures of the Japanese folk crafts movement, established his pottery studio in the 1920s. Because of Hamada's transnational connections, the town has become a small cosmopolitan hub, where university-trained artists and traditional potters from around Japan and different parts of the world gathered, drawn by a common interest in ceramics, food, handicrafts, and rural life.

In the 2010s, a new wave of ceramic practitioners arrived in Japan, half of them women. Many came drawn by or in search of an opportunity to practice ceramics and learn Japanese styles and techniques, either at a master potter's studio, at a university, or at a ceramic technical institution. Among them, several expressed a dissatisfaction with post-secondary art education in the West for its tendency to disregard the learning of technical skills in favour of intellectual frameworks for individual expression. This translates Western modern hierarchies of knowledge that have put the intellectual above the physical and the sensory, artificially separating thinking from making, and thus artist from craftsman, a mindset that still dominates Western art history and other fields of knowledge.<sup>203</sup> Anthropologist Trevor Marchand also notes how, in Britain, craft trades are seen as something that is for »the intellectually and academically challenged«.<sup>204</sup> The marginal status of craft and craftspeople in the West, and its role in attracting the participants to come and practice ceramics in Japan, was alluded to during interviews:

»In the United States, you get a lot more people's respect if you're making sculptural ceramics than if you're making functional ceramics.«<sup>205</sup>

»In Germany, there is almost no public interest in/ or appreciation of craftsmen. That is why most ceramicists call themselves either Designer or Artist.«<sup>206</sup>

»In England (...) if you choose to be a potter, you're a bit out of the centre [...], whereas in Japan, pottery is a central part of the culture and you, as a potter, are a well-respected person.«<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Dormer. *The salon de refuse* ; Sennett. *The Craftsman*; Crawford. *Shop Class as Soulcraft*; Ingold/Hallam. *Making and Growing*.

<sup>204</sup> Marchand. *Vocational Migrants and a Tradition of Longing*, p. 31.

<sup>205</sup> Interview with Richard Milgrim (the United States, 1955-) in February 2017.

<sup>206</sup> Written questionnaire with Mirjam Watajima (Germany, 1983-) in July 2018.

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Richard Truckle (England, 1947-2017) in February 2017.

»The Japanese consumer buys more pottery than the American. I feel it is almost impossible to be a potter and survive economically in America, almost all potters there teach full time.«<sup>208</sup>

Contrary to the West, where the rejection of craft from the art world and its long-lasting connection to the world of amateurism has entrusted craftspeople to a lower status than that of the fine artist, in Japan craft is seen, for the most part, as a highly specialized and respected activity, with craftspeople enjoying a status equivalent to or higher than that of a fine artist.<sup>209</sup> At its extreme, craftspeople with an excellent resumé, the right contacts, and whose knowledge and skill are perceived as being historically and culturally important, can be nominated by the Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs as holders of Important Cultural Properties, a title colloquially known as Living National Treasure. The policy has been a strong source of soft power, contributing to sustaining the international image of Japan as a ›Mecca‹ of craftsmanship endorsed by the Meiji government (1868-1912) and the nominations are intertwined with a political agenda with ties to cultural nationalism.<sup>210</sup>

Thus, for Western ceramic practitioners, Japan afforded an opportunity to acquire hands-on pottery training with an individual craftsman in a historical (and in Mashiko's case transnational) community of ceramic production, as well as the prospect of being socially recognized and economically compensated for their ceramic work. Even for those planning to return to their home countries, the high status of Japanese ceramic techniques and aesthetics have acquired in the West would mean that their experiences in Japan would award them with significant cultural and symbolic capital.<sup>211</sup> While not disregarding these elements in the interviewees choice to remain in Japan, in the remaining sections, we will explore how the narratives of their engagement with the materials, processes, and histories of Japanese ceramics reveals their ecological aspirations, cosmopolitan dispositions, and visions of the good life.

## 6. Material and Spiritual Entanglements

Unlike traditionally elite aesthetic pursuits such as ›sadô‹ (the way of the tea) or ›kadô‹ (flower arrangement) that incorporate ceramic objects in their performance, pottery is not formally designated as a Taoist ›way‹, identifiable

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<sup>208</sup> Written questionnaire with Derek Larsen (United States, 1975-) in April 2017.

<sup>209</sup> Kikuchi. *The craft debate at the crossroads of global visual culture*.

<sup>210</sup> Faulkner. *Cultural Identity and Japanese Studio Ceramics*.

<sup>211</sup> Bourdieu. *The Forms of Capital*.

by the Japanese suffix ›dô‹. Yet, like the so-called arts of self-cultivation, it is often treated as a means of personal development at a philosophical, social, ethical, and psychological level, that is, it can function as a path for the transformation of the self.<sup>212</sup> Taoism was introduced from China together with Buddhism and Confucianism around the sixth century and although it did not develop as a sectarian tradition in Japan, it strongly impacted different areas of Japanese thought and practice, being later assimilated into the domestic Buddhist discourse, most notably Zen.<sup>213</sup>

›Dô‹ (in English, ›dao‹ or ›tao‹) refers to the metaphysical foundation that underpins all disciplines of study, that is, it is both a philosophy and a sense of ethics, but it can sometimes refer to a »skill« or »technique«.<sup>214</sup> In Japan, it was believed that, by mastering a skill, that is, honing an ability to its fullest extent, one could grasp the true principle of the universe, the unity of all living things, thus synchronizing oneself with the energy of the cosmos.<sup>215</sup> The absence of mind-body dualism in Japanese traditional ontologies also means that, even today, bodily practices are seen as a path for self-improvement beyond just physiology or appearance, and both modern sport and traditional Japanese arts still play an important role in Japanese education and socialization, for they are believed to foster desirable qualities for becoming an apt member of Japanese society, such as discipline, endurance, and obedience to hierarchy and authority.<sup>216</sup> In fact, the interviewees' apprenticeship experiences were often shaped by conflict with, anxiety about, or tolerance of authoritative or ambiguous masters, with some leaving before the end of their training.

In recent decades, Eastern philosophical frameworks and other non-Western cosmologies have been incorporated into social theories of making.<sup>217</sup> Blurring the boundaries between subjects and objects, humans and non-humans, born from anthropocentric and Eurocentric modernist dualistic thinking, these studies have highlighted the role of tools and materials as active social agents. According to anthropologist and craft practitioner Stephanie Bunn, making is generally perceived as a goal-oriented practice in which the maker starts with a pre-conceived image of the desired outcome (›project‹) that would be achieved through the execution of a series of pre-established steps,

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<sup>212</sup> Carter. *The Japanese Arts and Self-Cultivation*.

<sup>213</sup> Richey. *Introduction*.

<sup>214</sup> Miura. *Onmyôdô divination techniques and Daoism*, p. 89.

<sup>215</sup> Miura. *Onmyôdô divination techniques and Daoism*, p. 90.

<sup>216</sup> McDonald/Hallinam. *Seishin Habitus*, p. 187; Kondo. *Crafting Selves*, p. 76-115; Singleton. *Apprenticeship*, p. 13.

<sup>217</sup> Ingold. *Making*; Bunn. *Materials in the Making*. Tokoro/Kawai. *An Anthropology of Things*.

or technical procedures, all of which the maker would be in control of.<sup>218</sup> The more skilful the maker, the more control they would have over these procedures and, therefore, the end result. Differently from this common understanding, anthropologist Tim Ingold sees making as a ›process‹ in which the maker is but one of many participants in a world of active materials.<sup>219</sup> Bunn also highlights how ›working with‹ rather than ›doing to‹ materials is a more accurate description of the experience of making.<sup>220</sup> The idea of ›joining forces‹ with the material and letting the forces present in nature participate in the process of making was ubiquitous to the interviewees' accounts:

»When I am making pots, I am allowing the universal forces at work, centrifugal force, gravity, friction, all sorts of forces, to work upon the amorphous clay, and I'm giving it direction [...]. The clay being an amorphous material wants to align itself with the forces at work upon it. It wants to be balanced [...]. And so, when I throw on the wheel, the pots are making themselves. I am giving them direction, I'm not in total control. I am recognizing the forces of nature and I am allowing them to take control [...]. I'm not surrendering control completely, I'm sharing it.«<sup>221</sup>

»In the ›anagama‹ [Japanese hole kiln], it's the same forces that are in Nature, you get the energy that comes from the sun, they're placed inside the wood [...]. So you have all of these [...] natural forces in this little universe, this small microcosm that is the kiln, playing out there.«<sup>222</sup>

The above descriptions reflect Ingold's definition of making as »the gradual unfolding of that field of forces set up through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material«,<sup>223</sup> evoking Taoist understandings of mastery as a state in which the self is in synchrony with the cosmic forces at

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<sup>218</sup> Bunn. *Materials in Making*, p. 21.

<sup>219</sup> Ingold. *Making*, p. 13.

<sup>220</sup> Bunn. *Materials in Making*.

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Euan Craig (Australia, 1964-) in January 2016.

<sup>222</sup> Interview with Gary Moler (United States, 1951-) in February 2017.

<sup>223</sup> Ingold. *The Perception of the Environment*, p. 342.

work.<sup>224</sup> Similarly, the Japanese concept of ›mushin‹ (no-mindedness), derived from the Chinese Taoist principle of ›wu wei‹,<sup>225</sup> refers to a state of freeing one's mind of any intellectualization and desire to assume control through the application of technique that leads to the unification of mind, body, and environment. Rather than a culture-specific disposition, this feeling of being so deeply immersed in something that the body moves intuitively with no direct consciousness translates the biological »condition of haptic immersion«, when knowledge and skill have become embodied.<sup>226</sup> Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described this universal human experience in the concept of ›flow‹, a mental state of concentration that stimulates creativity, fulfilment, and enjoyment.<sup>227</sup> Thus, by prizing simplicity, imperfection, and naturalness but also utility and function, the Zen and folk ethos of Japanese ceramics seems to provide Western practitioners a set of limitations that are motivating to work with and that serve as a starting point for creative self-expression.<sup>228</sup>



American Gary Moler (1951-) self-built ›anagama‹ wood-fired kiln in Shigaraki (Shiga) in February 2017. Photo by the author.

More than a series of techniques, making can thus be understood as »an embodied relationship with something outside of ourselves« and therefore constrained by the limits of the body, as well as the materials and environment in which the body is working.<sup>229</sup> Rather than the sole consequence of the maker's intent, what makers often describe is a reciprocal engagement between the various human and non-human agents that is more like a conversation or ›correspondence‹.<sup>230</sup> This requires attentive listening to materials, and appropriately responding.<sup>231</sup> By stressing the participation of nature in the process of making, which is also shaped by Japanese Shintoist and other

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<sup>224</sup> Miura. *Onmyōdō divination techniques and Daoism*, p. 90.

<sup>225</sup> Bar-On Cohen. *Japanese religions and Kyudo*, p. 147.

<sup>226</sup> Pallasmaa in Bunn. *Making Plants and Growing Baskets*, p. 174

<sup>227</sup> Csikszentmihalyi. *Flow*.

<sup>228</sup> Kaneko. *Studio Craft and Craftical Formation*, p. 29.

<sup>229</sup> Bunn. *Materials in Making*, p. 21-22.

<sup>230</sup> Ingold. *Correspondence*.

<sup>231</sup> Bunn. *Making Plants and Growing Baskets*, p. 166, 171.

native animist cosmologies, the ethos of Japanese ceramics seems to provide Western practitioners with an aesthetic (in the classificatory sense of bodily and sensory perception<sup>232</sup>) sensibility that encourages them to explore the depth and complexity of the social relationships nurtured with objects, tools, and materials, opening up a curiosity and awareness about their proprieties and processes that acknowledges their agency, thus bridging art and science, two fields of knowledge that have been artificially separated.<sup>233</sup>

»I became interest in Japan [when I was in the United States] through my teacher, who was a good friend and a [Japanese] artist of sculptural, monumental, and architectural ceramics. I worked for him [...] and I was very excited about ceramics, like an ›otaku‹ [geek], crushing rocks and, when they melt, see what it becomes, so it opened up to chemistry and geology.«<sup>234</sup>

The genesis of the division between science and art is grounded on the modern split between nature and culture, thus separating natural from the artefactual, a reality that has been transposed to the Western museum.<sup>235</sup> In her analysis of the ecology of craft production in early modern Japan, art historian Christine Guth exemplifies the various ways in which crafts-



Douglas Black's ›hikidashi‹ firing at his studio in February 2016. Photo by the author.

people pragmatically and empirically engaged with the natural world. The author argues for a recognition of the discerning knowledge that pre-modern Japanese craftspeople had of both the materials and the limits of the human body that reflected a deep understanding of the natural laws of physics, highlighting the links between craft, agriculture, technological development, and scientific explorations.<sup>236</sup> Furthermore, the Japanese pre-modern understanding of art inherited from China, encapsulated in the word ›geijutsu‹, also included practices such as ›ikebana‹ (flower arrangement), ›bonsai‹ (literally, cultivation in a tray) and ›suiseki‹ (viewing stone), thus illustrating the permeable boundaries between making things and growing plants. Accordingly, Ingold and Hallam have argued for making as a process of growth: »In each case what the grower does is to contribute, in some way or other, to

<sup>232</sup> Saito. *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, p. 27-28.

<sup>233</sup> Latour. *Reassembling the Social*; Ingold/Hallam. *Making and Growing*.

<sup>234</sup> Interview with Douglas Black (United States, 1967-) in December 2015.

<sup>235</sup> Ingold/Hallam. *Making and Growing*.

<sup>236</sup> Guth. *Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan*.

setting up the conditions under which the growth of the things in question proceeds«. <sup>237</sup> Much like a farmer who helps a seed along in the process of becoming a plant, making can also be described as a process of transformation, that is, the attitude of helping one thing ›becoming‹ another, in the case of pottery, helping clay become a ceramic object. The parallel between making pottery and growing plants was brought up by interviewees:

»When you work with the universe and you are just borrowing the forces, you are working with these forces [...]. So, in my point of view, pottery has a lot in common with agriculture, you sort of help things along.« <sup>238</sup>

Indeed, the Japanese word ›tsuchi‹, which can be used to describe ›potter's clay‹ and ›ceramics‹ as a craft, means both ›soil‹ and ›earth‹, one of the four classical elements (together with water, wood, and fire, all involved in the making of ceramics before the use of gas and electricity) essential for both pottery and agriculture. <sup>239</sup> Clay is also a ›very‹ raw material that comes straight out of the ground and can be used with very little processing, which is often true for potters working with styles associated with the tea ceremony. Furthermore, ›tsuchi aji‹, or earth flavour, is a privileged aesthetic in the Japanese ceramic art world, as it reflects the feeling of naturalness, imperfection, and irregularity encapsulated in the concept of ›wabi-sabi‹. Finally, besides the fact that many potters in pre-modern Japan were also farmers during the winter, several interviewees were also engaged in gardening and beekeeping, and their lifestyles are often impacted by seasons, the climate, and their surrounding rural environments.

The value given to the aesthetic expression of nature within the ethos of Japanese ceramics is also visible in many potters' preference for using raw or unprocessed materials in the process of production. <sup>240</sup> Whereas in Europe and the United States is common for studio potters to buy and use ready-made or synthetic materials from industry, many of my interviewees engage in and value procuring raw clays, ground minerals, and other natural and locally sourced materials themselves:

»I make my own clay. I pick the clay and I sort the clay. I think you have to do that or it's not really your own work if you let somebody else make those decisions for you [...]. When I was a student in the States, clay looked like concrete. It's a powder. You mix it in a machine and it has the exact same

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<sup>237</sup> Ingold/Hallam. *Making and Growing*, p. 3

<sup>238</sup> Interview with Gary Moler (United States, 1951-) in February 2017.

<sup>239</sup> Winther-Tamaki. *Tsuchi*, p. 1.

<sup>240</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the paradox between Japanese aesthetic appreciation of nature and environmental attitudes towards nature proper in the Japanese archipelago see Shirane (2012) and Kalland/Asquith (1997).

amount of feeling as concrete. You get a totally different feeling if you pick it yourself. It's organic, you know everything about it. You know where it came from. [...]. It's alive.«<sup>241</sup>

»Before I came here, I always used clay from a factory and somehow, I felt bad, because it's not so honest, I just go to the shop and pick up the clay and make my things... And then I came here and I started working with this local clay. It was really stressful at first because it contains so much sand and I liked smooth, even things... [...]. But the most important thing I learned is that the clay will teach me to understand it and let it form itself.«<sup>242</sup>

The above accounts exemplify how Western practitioners in Japan embody and discursively reproduce the Japanese normative aesthetic values, judgments, and sensibilities condensed in what I have called the ethos of Japanese ceramics, which have been shaped by Zen aestheticism, medieval tea aesthetics and, more recently, the Japanese folk craft philosophy. This adherence to the aesthetic rules that govern both the process of production and appreciation of ceramics in Japan by interviewed Western practitioners can be understood as the materialization of their bodily experiences in a particular setting and society,<sup>243</sup> as expressed in the following account:

»Basically, my work is a development of the kind of work that I was making in England but having lived in Japan over 26 years has affected me. By seeing Japanese pottery, using Japanese pottery, seeing how Japanese pottery is used, seeing the huge variety of Japanese pottery, living with it.«<sup>244</sup>

As residents of historical pottery communities and participants of a ceramic art world that includes »a tight-knit network of critics, department store representatives, media journalists and eminent named potters«,<sup>245</sup> amongst other institutions and actors that define the rules of participation and success (or failure), participants must conform to a set of standards if they want to be widely recognized, although many are happy to make a living from selling their work in local galleries and pottery markets. Yet, given that they market their works in Japan, they often produce wares that suit that market's values, preferences, and needs:

»The color and the traditional glazes are one of the things [about my work that have a Japanese quality to it]. A lot of the shapes [as well]. The thing is,

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<sup>241</sup> Interview with Gary Moler (United States, 1951-) in February 2017.

<sup>242</sup> Interview with Timi Lantos (Hungary, 1985-) in November 2016.

<sup>243</sup> Geertz. *Art as a Cultural System*, p. 1497.

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Richard Truckle (England, 1947-2017) in February 2017.

<sup>245</sup> Moeran. *Evaluating Ceramic Art in Japan*, p. 5.



I live in Japan, so I make things for Japan. I'm not making nice dinner sets, like Western tableware. I make things for Japanese customers.«<sup>246</sup>

»I make a living mostly from functional pottery and most of my customers are normal people that I meet, so it must be functional [...]. Most people who buy my work are not from Mashiko but use my work in their houses and resonate with the feeling I put out.«<sup>247</sup>

»My customers are people with a passion for food, ›sake‹, tea, flowers, and hospitality. Mentally, they all seem to desire the same thing: time to relax, switch off, unwind, and enjoy a life filled with beautiful things.«<sup>248</sup>

The aesthetic choices and sensibilities of interviewed practitioners can be also interpreted as the result of the embodiment of the skills, values, and norms acquired during their apprenticeships in Japan, which have traditionally privileged a process of ›learning through the body‹ (›karada de oboeru‹) and ›entering through the form‹ (›katachi de hairu‹) that stresses observation, repetition, and imitation of established movements, styles, and standards.<sup>249</sup> By leading to the acquisition of bodily memory and patterns of action, traditional apprenticeships and other forms of training in Japan can thus function as a type of acculturation by which Japanese aesthetic values and norms, as well as cultural and technical knowledge, are transmitted and further reproduced, thus providing practitioners with cultural capital and a certain amount of authority.<sup>250</sup> Finally, we should also consider the possible ›story-telling‹ aspects of some of the participants' narratives for, as anthropologist Brian Moeran puts it, »the creator is expected to weave a tale around his or her cultural products« that draws on the values fostered in the specific art world in which they participate.<sup>251</sup>



Wood-fired pitcher with Shigaraki clay and natural wood ash by Gary Moler. Photo by the author, February 2017.

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<sup>246</sup> Interview with Andrew Gemrich (United States, 1967-) in July 2016.

<sup>247</sup> Interview with Douglas Black (United States, 1967-) in December 2015.

<sup>248</sup> Written questionnaire with Derek Larsen (United States, 1975-) in June 2017.

<sup>249</sup> See Singleton. *Japanese Folkcraft Pottery Apprenticeship*.

<sup>250</sup> Bourdieu. *The Forms of Capital*.

<sup>251</sup> Moeran. *Evaluating Ceramic Art in Japan*, p. 14.

Nonetheless, as mostly white foreigners, Western ceramic practitioners in Japan are confined to a permanent position of outsiders that can nonetheless be freeing. As one interviewee said: »as a ›gaijin‹<sup>252</sup> you can make many mistakes. You are exempt and they accept that and find it already very good when you make an effort«.<sup>253</sup> By virtue of their racial visibility, working within the constraints of certain Japanese traditions and aesthetic standards can also add to the allure of their work from the perspective of the Japanese customer, who often feels flattered by seeing ›their culture‹ being taken up by foreigners, as several Japanese television programs will demonstrate. Nonetheless, the process of corporeal modeling and imitation fostered in traditional apprenticeships necessarily leads to change and innovation, which are a consequence of the physical individuality of each person.<sup>254</sup> And while some interviewees work exclusively within the historical style dominant in their regional pottery communities, as is the case of some practitioners that work in the more traditional six old kilns (›rokkoyô‹), the majority draws from a mixture of shapes, styles, and traditions to produce works that reflect their own unique individual approach and preferences. Specific features of Japanese culinary culture (and the market for Japanese ceramics), which makes use of various dishes in one single meal, also provides practitioners with an opportunity to experiment with a variety of materials and processes without forgoing utility altogether, an aspect that plays an important role in their livelihood as professional makers:

»There are so many different plates in Japan that whatever I made could be used for something, so I was always playful when I made things, even when I made simple things.«<sup>255</sup>

»Japanese culture definitely gives you a lot of advantage for that, because they appreciate a mixture of different kinds of vessels, different contrasts of colour, bringing out the quality of the food or putting it in the context of the season. And the other thing that's good about Japanese culture is that you can use chopsticks and that gives you a totally different element of freedom. If it's a knife and fork you have to have flat things.«<sup>256</sup>

Thus, like some of their fellow Japanese potters working in the same communities of production, interviewed Western practitioners often engage in a reinterpretation of historical styles and aesthetic canons in light of their own interests, changing market tastes, and other circumstances, such as access to

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<sup>252</sup> Literally outsider, also used to refer to a (especially) white foreigner in Japanese.

<sup>253</sup> Written questionnaire, January 2014.

<sup>254</sup> Guth. *Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan*.

<sup>255</sup> Interview with Douglas Black (United States, 1967-) in December 2015.

<sup>256</sup> Interview with Gary Moler (United States, 1951-) in February 2017.

materials and tools. And while they are part of the Japanese art world by sometimes exhibiting in department stores, selling in established ceramic galleries, or taking orders from restaurants, many sell their works directly to customers in their studios or at local pottery markets. Thus, by being able to create a customer base made of people who resonate, to use one interviewee's wording, with their own individual style and often hybrid approach to pottery making, participants can engage with Japanese tradition in a relatively free and playful manner, all the while still being able to make a livelihood from creative and autonomous work. As such and in this context, rather than the rigid perpetuation of prescribed actions and ritualized practices, the participants' attraction to the ethos of Japanese ceramics bridges nostalgia with utopia through a desire to engage in pleasurable, meaningful, and aesthetic work and with alternative and authentic ways of living<sup>257</sup> that involve both technical mastery and creativity, direct interaction with customers and raw materials, and a sense of ethics through the creation of useful, ›honest‹, and healthy objects, thus echoing the values propagated by the British Arts and Crafts movement, the Japanese Folk Crafts movement, and the 1960s and 1970s counterculture.

## 7. Ethics, aesthetics, and the good life

Due to its presence in the sociability rituals that involve the acts of eating and drinking, and the central character that nature, the body, and the senses play in both production and use, Japanese ceramic norms and sensibilities can add to our understanding of the role of objects, materials, and our patterns of interaction with them to the everyday aesthetic experience. In this section, we will further explore the participants' allure and negotiation of the ethos of Japanese ceramics within their ecological aspirations, cosmopolitan dispositions, and search for a good life. These are visible in their explicit awareness of the multifaceted network of human-nature relationships involved in the process of making, explored in the previous section, but also in the interviewees' lifestyles, worldviews, and meaning and value negotiations that seek to bring local sensibilities into a universal conversation about what it means to be human in a material world.

Besides the process of production, proper use of ceramics in Japan, particularly in the context of socially bound practices such as eating and drinking, stresses conscious attention to the ways one interacts with the object and its materiality, with these interactions sometimes being seen as a model of behaviour towards other humans in a cultivated society. This is especially true in activities associated with Zen, such as the tea ceremony, where patterns of

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<sup>257</sup> Marchand. *Vocational Migrants and a Tradition of Longing*, p. 24.

interaction through gestures and other bodily movements have become codified to the slightest detail not only with the goal of making movements »more enjoyable and graceful« but also to »enhance the sensory pleasures of these activities«. <sup>258</sup>

In traditional Japanese haute cuisine (›kaiseki ryori‹), which has its roots in the Zen monastery and the tea ceremony, interaction with the object highlights an experience of aesthetic appreciation that is made through the various senses. Unlike, for example, French ›haute cuisine‹, with its focus on sight through the interplay between the large white plate and the colours and shapes of the ingredients, like paints on a canvas, aesthetic enjoyment in the context of food consumption in Japan emphasizes the role of the haptic sense besides sight, taste, and smell, with sound also playing a role. Due to the importance that this multisensorial experience plays in the connoisseurial appreciation of Japanese ceramics, aesthetic qualities beyond visual appearance, such as texture or weight, must be taken into consideration during the process of production. The possibility of heightening one's aesthetic sensibility through an attentive interaction between the body and the senses with materiality was mentioned by several interviewees as a feature that has attracted them to Japanese ceramics:

»A lot of potters talk about how a pot feels in one's hands [...]. Because Western tableware is not one which you would constantly hold a bowl in one hand while juggling a utensil [chopsticks] in the other, our senses are not trained as those who might. Therefore, the Japanese use of ware led me to want to heighten my understanding of touch.« <sup>259</sup>

»Another difference [between Japanese and European pottery] is that they [the Japanese] like very much to touch the object. We have handles, so... They have a very close contact with the material.« <sup>260</sup>

»When you touch the skin of a new-born baby, you get some feeling. Well, ceramics should have that too [...]. If it's a tea bowl or a teacup, the rim of a cup is very important. Your lips are very sensitive, so the sensation you get when that is touching your lips and when the liquid is flowing over that [is important]. So, not just looking, but also all of your senses. And weight is important, and the feel of the clay is important, and the way it looks from far away and the way it looks up close [...]. If it is drinking ›sake‹ with Japanese rice wine flask and cup, the length and width of the neck will determine if it

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<sup>258</sup> Saito. *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, p. 56

<sup>259</sup> Questionnaire with Kate Strachan (United States, 1982-) in January 2016.

<sup>260</sup> Interview with Timi Lantos (Hungary, 1985-) in November 2016.

has a nice sound: ›toku toku toku‹ [onomatopoeia]. [Living National Treasure] Kaneshige Toyo wrote that even when he hears that sound, he starts to feel drunk.«<sup>261</sup>

Zen-fostered sensibilities highlight the role of aesthetics in mundane activities, thus subverting Western modernist views of art as a primarily contemplative and extraordinary experience, a feature that has in turn impacted post-war avant-garde attempts to reunite art and life,<sup>262</sup> as explore in the earlier sections. Through its connections with Zen and the tea ceremony, Japanese ceramics appear like a valuable tool for understanding the role of objects and materials in the everyday aesthetic experience and their connection to ethical concerns and visions of the good life.<sup>263</sup> Interviewees often hinted at the relationship between aesthetic enjoyment, in its everyday, bodily, material, and multisensory dimensions, and subjective well-being:

»I like eating, so I fell in love with the way things are presented in Japan, it shows much more appreciation and gratitude than eating out of a plastic bag. People are appreciating the ware and what's in it at the same time, so it's a much healthier experience of enjoyment.«<sup>264</sup>

»If you use it in daily life, it's something that enriches your life [...]. The quality of life becomes higher at a philosophical level.«<sup>265</sup>

In the past decade, scholars in the fields of philosophical aesthetics, feminist theory, sociology, and development studies have started stressing the political, social, environmental, and moral implications of aesthetics in daily life, pointing to its role in world-making projects that aim to create a more equitable society. If we understand aesthetics in a broader sense, beyond Western modernist views of art and beauty, but as the bodily and sensory experiences embedded in social life, and thus a cross-cultural category,<sup>266</sup> we can bridge the participants' allure of Japanese ceramics with their environmental ethics and lifestyle orientations. As one participant highlighted, »I and my lifestyle are part of the story of the pieces I make, it resonates. It's a total product«,<sup>267</sup> echoing the countercultural mindset of the 1960s and 1970s that sought to integrate work, artistic practice, and everyday life.

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<sup>261</sup> Interview with John Wells (United States, 1957-) in February 2017.

<sup>262</sup> Wisnoski. *An Aesthetics of Everything Else*.

<sup>263</sup> Wisnoski. *An Aesthetics of Everything Else*; Saito. *Aesthetics of the Familiar*.

<sup>264</sup> Interview with Douglas Black (United States, 1967-) in December 2015.

<sup>265</sup> Interview with Gary Moler (United States, 1951-) in February 2017.

<sup>266</sup> Morphy. *Part I: The Presentations*.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with Douglas Black (United States, 1967-) in December 2015.

Sociologist John Clammer has called for a democratization of aesthetics beyond Western, fixed, and elitist views of what constitutes art.<sup>268</sup> Following Michel Maffesoli's view of ethics and aesthetics as intrinsically connected, the author argues for a concept of development that goes beyond economic and material concerns and recognizes humans as cultural and spiritual creatures whose needs include leisure, beauty, and creative expression.<sup>269</sup> Regarding art as material expressions of culture and social imagination, he calls for a more »humane, ecologically responsible, poetic, spiritual, and holistic« concept of development that takes these needs into consideration.<sup>270</sup> Thus, as a source of artistic and social imaginaries, the power of art, creativity, and imagination in envisioning and constructing a healthier and happier world are emphasized.<sup>271</sup>

Japanese philosopher Yuriko Saito also underscores the role of aesthetics in expressing, appreciating, and cultivating moral values such as care, consideration, sensitivity, and respect.<sup>272</sup> The author argues that »in addition to ensuring justice, freedom, equality, and welfare«, any good society must nurture these moral virtues through the »creation« of humane environments and artifacts made with care in order to provide a good life to its citizens«. <sup>273</sup> This moral view of aesthetics seems particularly relevant to the Japanese case, where Confucianism has framed bad manners as immoral for their lack of aesthetic order,<sup>274</sup> a position that has also ironically served to maintain social inequalities along class and gender lines.

Aesthetic concerns in traditional Japanese cultural practices, especially in the so-called arts of self-cultivation, merge with ethics by understanding bodily movements as a reflection of thoughtfulness and consideration towards materials, users, and dwellers. This position also reflects the animism that has shaped Japanese indigenous Shinto beliefs. By stressing the unit of spirit and matter, animism views all things, animate and inanimate, including natural phenomena, as having ›anima‹, that is a soul or spirit, in short, as being alive and having will, desires, emotions, feelings, and intelligence. By rejecting the human-nature dichotomy that has shaped much of modernity's understanding of and relationship to nature, sociologist Shoko

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<sup>268</sup> Clammer. *Culture, Development and Social Theory*, p. 220-223; Clammer. *Art, Culture and International Development*, p. 14-16.

<sup>269</sup> Clammer. *Art, Culture and International Development*, p. 3.

<sup>270</sup> Clammer. *Culture, Development and Social Theory*, p. 220-223.

<sup>271</sup> Clammer. *Art, Culture and International Development*, p. 8-13.

<sup>272</sup> Saito. *Aesthetics of the Familiar*.

<sup>273</sup> Saito. *Everyday Aesthetics*, p. 8.

<sup>274</sup> Saito. *Aesthetics of the Familiar*, p. 179.

Yoneyama sees animism as a valuable tool to re-think human-nature relationships by providing an ethical foundation for human-nature coexistence in a post-Anthropocene world.<sup>275</sup> The equation of gentleness in the handling of objects and respect for makers and materials, and their understanding as a result of spiritual values, is visible in one of the accounts:

»[Japanese people] are very much in touch with nature and with their spiritual life. They become one with the piece and this is a wonderful thing to behold [...]. It is completely different how people look at my work here in the US and how they pick it up there in Japan.«<sup>276</sup>

The conceptualization of making as growing, as ›helping things along‹, explored in the previous section, also alludes to the concept of nurturing and care, which some see as an essential component of craft making, with presence and attentiveness.<sup>277</sup> Sociologist Richard Sennet, who defined craftsmanship as a »an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake«, compares craftwork with other care activities such as nursing and child-rearing.<sup>278</sup> Yet, because of their association with femininity, both care work and handicrafts have been devalued in the modern West. In pre-modern Japan, professional craft endeavours were also seen as traditionally male activities, with women being confined to menial tasks, which meant that interviewed female participants often faced difficulty entering traditional apprenticeships in Japan. Nevertheless, craft as a reflection of care for both materials and users is reflected in the following account:

»[...] the objective is to make good craft, good art and to enrich other people's lives not in a monetary sense, to enrich their own life by the making of those things. And to enrich other people's lives by the using of those things.«<sup>279</sup>

Beyond stating the contribution of ordinary aesthetic experiences to enriching daily life, Saito also highlights the social and environmental consequences of everyday aesthetic preferences, judgments, and decisions, drawing on criticism of the current capitalist system and consumer society advanced by nineteenth century intellectuals such as Karl Marx, John Ruskin, and William Morris.<sup>280</sup> Inspired by Marx's concept of alienation and his condemnation of the extreme division of labour in the industrial factory system,

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<sup>275</sup> Yoneyama. *Animism in Contemporary Japan*.

<sup>276</sup> Written questionnaire with Swanica Ligtenberg (1955-) in February 2014.

<sup>277</sup> Spayde. *Crafting a Culture of Care*.

<sup>278</sup> Sennet. *The Craftsman*, p. 9.

<sup>279</sup> Interview with Euan Craig (Australia, 1964-) in February 2016.

<sup>280</sup> Saito. *Everyday Aesthetics*; Saito. *Aesthetics of the Familiar*.

the Arts and Crafts Movement leaders saw craftwork as inherently meaningful, creative, and pleasurable for it integrated mind and body through skill, thus connecting handicrafts with a sense of ethics and morality. For them, the skilful execution of useful objects through the use high-quality and natural materials would add to the well-being of makers, users, and society itself.<sup>281</sup> In this way, craftsmanship, or what sociologist John Lie has called the »artisanal ethos«, present in various activities beyond the handmaking of so-called craft objects, epitomizes the antithesis to the »modernist ethos of production and service« that »is characterized by division of labour, technology and efficiency, scale and scope, and productivity and profit«. <sup>282</sup> In his most recent work, the author sees this artisanal ethos, which he defines as »a distinct orientation to work and to what work entails« that is not omnipresent in or unique to Japan, as a path to a sustainable future. Current visions of degrowth also highlight how the increase of material prosperity and accumulation will be replaced by a search for the good life,<sup>283</sup> with a craft ethics being seen as playing an important role in these alternative visions of the future.<sup>284</sup>

The practices and aspirations of interviewed practitioners embody elements of nostalgia for an idealized pre-industrial past, shaped by anxieties with modernity and a look East and other non-Western societies for alternative epistemologies, but also elements of utopia, marked by conceptions of a post-industrial future that is committed to the local through a global environmental vision.<sup>285</sup> For some interviewed practitioners, the importance of sustainability and self-sufficiency is visible not only in the use of natural materials and processes within the context of pottery production, but also in their



Tracey Glass's (Canada, 1961-) ›tangama‹ wood-fired kiln with Shinto-style rice and sake offerings on the right and a sign that reads ›No Nukes‹ on the left. Photo by the author, January 2018.

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<sup>281</sup> Morris. *The Revival of Handicraft*; Yanagi. *The Unknown Craftsman*; Carter. *The Japanese Arts of Self-Cultivation*; Sennett. *The Craftsman*.

<sup>282</sup> Lie. *The Sustainable Society*, p. 147.

<sup>283</sup> Vansintjan et al. *The Future is Degrowth*, p. 97.

<sup>284</sup> Rennstam. *Craft and Degrowth*.

<sup>285</sup> Marchand. *Vocational Migrants and a Tradition of Longing*, p. 24.



engagement with practices of repair and DIY (do-it-yourself), with several participants making their own pottery tools, kilns, and even hand building their own homes and studios with scavenged or recycled materials. The fact that almost all interviewees live and work in rural areas of Japan means that their lifestyles are closely interrelated not only with their historical pottery communities, but also with local farming and forestry activities. Moreover, participants face frequent natural disasters, such as floods, landslides, and earthquakes, with a few having been directly impacted by the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster and earthquake, which damaged homes, studios, and equipment and even forced some to relocate homes and studios elsewhere. Others have played a role in anti-nuclear activist movements, taking roles as volunteers and interpreters in citizen-led associations in Japan. These ›risk‹ experiences and environmental consciousness may be one of the factors that add to their awareness of the interconnections between humans and nature beyond national and geographical boundaries.<sup>286</sup>

Furthermore, participants of the first generation comprise the genesis of the Japanese back to the land movement, which took off in the 1970s with white-collar workers leaving the city to pursue alternative and organic lifestyles in the countryside. Many of these pioneering Japanese rural resettlers ended up engaging in handicrafts and farming and were inspired by New Age spiritualities that hybridized ancient Celtic and North American indigenous traditions with the Japanese native Shintoism.<sup>287</sup> And while for some interviewees, self-sufficiency is simply a consequence of economic precarity, a topic that was underexplored during interviews, for others, it translates an environmental ethics and identity reflected in an »old-fashioned care-taking of our descendants that is our own flesh and blood«:<sup>288</sup>

»My children learn how to chop wood, light fires, cook, and they use hand-crafted pots [...]. They know where everything came from, and they understand their place in the grand scheme of things. Hopefully that will lead on to a greater understanding of our responsibility to maintain the health of this whole organism. I think crafts are a very important part of that.«<sup>289</sup>

Many participants echoed the 1960s and 1970s countercultural desire for self-determined modes of living and working that stress self-sufficiency,

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<sup>286</sup> Beck. *Risk Society*; Yoneyama. *Animism in Japan*.

<sup>287</sup> Knight. *The Soil as a Teacher*, p. 248.

<sup>288</sup> Castells. *The Power of Identity*, p. 183-184

<sup>289</sup> Interview with Euan Craig (Australia, 1964-) in February 2016.

pride in one's work, and an artistic and spiritual yearning for radically different experiences afforded by the culture of the Other. In the case of the Western practitioners interviewed, the Zen and folk ethos of Japanese ceramics seems to function as a means to subvert Western modernist hierarchies of art and its



View of Douglas Black's farming-based neighborhood from his self-built home and studio in Motegi (Tochigi). Photo by the author, December 2015.

normative aesthetic conventions that have put craft and craftspeople in a marginal position. By stressing the role of the body, materials, and natural processes in the making and using of ceramics, Eastern cosmologies and other non-Western epistemologies can serve as a means to question the Eurocentric separation between nature and the human-culture-society triad, and between art and science, allowing for a recognition of the interdependencies between humans and non-humans that link to some of the participants' ecological aspirations and environmental ethos. At the same time, knowledge of Japanese ceramics provides access to a ›library‹ of historical styles and techniques, which are shared by a community of practice that has knowledge of and access to resources, materials, and processes, as well as to a network of producers, consumers, and other actors and institutions who can afford practitioners with social recognition and an economic means to make an autonomous livelihood from pottery making, thus showing their lifestyle orientations. Finally, in their negotiations and reinterpretations of the material and spiritual values tied to the production, appreciation, and use of Japanese ceramics, interviewees reveal their cosmopolitan dispositions by establishing correlations and correspondences with other non-Western practices and universal aspirations that emphasize both the commonality and multiplicity of the human experience in their interconnections with a reenchant<sup>290</sup> material world:

»Wood-firing is a cleansing experience. Have you ever been to a sweat lodge? It's a Native-American purification ceremony (...). Wood-firing feels similar to that in the sense that you're so close to the fire and you're keeping the kiln

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<sup>290</sup> Here I am alluding to Bruno Latour's criticism of the disenchantment of the modern world. In Latour. *We have never been modern*, p. 114.

alive [...]. So there's a connection between the fire and all the work that's been made.«<sup>291</sup>

»A lot of my work was very spiritual and using different components together and how they spoke to each other and symbols and things like this and [...] I was interested in different kinds of like ritual things. [...] I was always very influenced by [my] native American [godfather] before I went to college. So that is close to Shinto, I think.«<sup>292</sup>

»»Mingei« [Japanese Folk Craft philosophy] is about human lifestyle, about humans being humans, not being part of the industrial complex. It's about the importance of handmade objects in everyday life [...]. I think there's a real need for »mingei« now and not just as protecting tradition, but as something which is about understanding human beings as part of the natural world.«<sup>293</sup>

In this manner, in their selective negotiation, reinterpretation, and correlation of the Japanese norms, values, sensibilities, and epistemologies condensed in what I called the ethos of Japanese ceramics, interviewees draw on and reveal their cosmopolitan orientations, which entail »an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity« and »a willingness to engage with the Other«.<sup>294</sup> Here, Other can be understood in a three-fold way as a cultural Other (»Japanese« versus »Westerner«), a conceptual other (»craft« versus »art« and »modern industry«), and an ecological Other (»nature« versus »human«), all of which are both opposite and complementary, like an image in a mirror, for they depend on each other for their existence. However, by involving »an openness to diversity and mutual willingness to engage with new cultural patterns«<sup>295</sup> that facilitates transfer and co-creation of knowledge, cosmopolitanism can eventually bring about new and hybrid forms of knowing and being in the world. Beyond their embodiment and negotiation of Japanese values, norms, sensibilities, and epistemologies, by finding divergences, commonalities, and correspondences beyond culturally and artificially constructed borders, practitioners blur the binary oppositions between East and West, Self and Other, subject and object. Their entanglements with cultural, conceptual, and ecological Others highlight the complexity and fluidity of identity and belonging that result from the transnational experience

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<sup>291</sup> Interview with Suzanne Wang (Taiwan / United States, 1970-) in July 2017.

<sup>292</sup> Interview with Douglas Black (United States, 1967-) in December 2015.

<sup>293</sup> Interview with Euan Craig (Australia, 1964-) in February 2016.

<sup>294</sup> Hannerz. *Transnational Connections*, p. 103.

<sup>295</sup> Druzenko. *Academic hyper-mobility and cosmopolitan dispositions*, para. 4.

of cultural displacement, but also from an explicit awareness of the interdependencies between humans and non-humans, thus illustrating the active role that objects, materials, and their social interactions with human bodies and senses, play in the making of people, their identities, and ways of being in the world.

## **8. Conclusion: beyond East and West**

In this article, I investigated the manifold ways Western practitioners in Japan engage with the material and spiritual elements of culturally marked objects such as are Japanese ceramics, through an analysis of their narrative accounts and ethnographic observations. Due to its strong connections with the tea ceremony and other Zen-related practices, the aesthetic norms and sensibilities involved in the production, use, and appreciation of Japanese ceramics can offer valuable insights on the role of the body and the senses in the process of interacting with objects, their materials, and processes, thus bridging aesthetics, materiality, and spirituality. The participant's accounts of their attraction to and negotiations of the ethos of Japanese ceramics illustrates the complex entanglement of human and non-human agents and forces that are implicated in the process of making and engaging with objects and how these shape people. We saw that, while Western ceramic practitioners in Japan embody and reproduce normative Japanese aesthetics, values, sensibilities, and epistemologies as a way of rejecting Western modernist artistic conventions and the marginal status of craft and craftspeople in the West, they selectively incorporate, synthesize, and resignify them in light of their ecological aspirations, lifestyle orientations, and cosmopolitan dispositions, thus creating new and hybrid forms of knowing and being that subvert Eurocentric, Orientalist, and Japanese exceptionalist discourses, bridging local and universal.

Highlighting a de-territorialized sense of belonging beyond the nation-state, cosmopolitanism can be understood as a condition of the contemporary world where everything and everyone is increasingly interconnected.<sup>296</sup> By emphasizing hybridism, syncretism, and diversity, cosmopolitanism, in its post-modern understanding, acknowledges difference, its coexistence, and compatibility and can thus bridge the dichotomies between relativism and universalism by proposing a multiversal, polytheistic vision.<sup>297</sup> Going beyond cosmopolitanism as a humanistic orientation, the practitioners' accounts, lifestyles, values, and worldviews allude to the concept of planetarity, a sense

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<sup>296</sup> Beck. *The cosmopolitan condition*.

<sup>297</sup> Sugimoto. *Turning towards a cosmopolitan Japanese Studies*, p. 176.

of belonging that stresses multiplicity, heterogeneity, and ecological awareness, emphasizing an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness between humans and non-humans across geographic and social borders.<sup>298</sup> The craft ethos fostered by participants also connects to planetarity for its rejection of the uniformity, homogeneity, and environmental exploitation intensified by industrialization and economic globalization, and its emphasis on more than human conviviality.

Through the practitioners' entanglements with and negotiations of the culturally and ideologically bound norms, values, meanings, and sensibilities encapsulated in the ethos of Japanese ceramics, objects, materials, and processes move freely between cultural domains, and beyond political and institutional arrangements, without being essentially compromised, thus showing their promiscuous and fluid character at the hands of various actors, in various historical and geographical contexts.<sup>299</sup> Ceramics in particular lend itself to this plasticity because of its ubiquity and universal features, exemplifying the manifold ways by which the human experience is shaped, mediated, and defined by their engagement with the material world comprised of a network of non-human agents and forces that exist and act within and beyond geographically, culturally, and nationally defined spaces.

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<sup>298</sup> Spivak. *Death of a Discipline*.

<sup>299</sup> Gell. *Vogel's Net*, p. 234.

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