

# Clayness **The Emancipation of Matter**

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Agustina Andreoletti (Buenos Aires, Argentina) is a designer, artist and researcher based in Cologne, Germany. She is a media art postgraduate student at the exMedia group from the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. Andreoletti received a bachelor degree in integrated design from Technical University of Cologne and studied graphic design and social communication at Buenos Aires University. She is interested in material practices regarding feminist and postcolonial theory within a technology driven culture.

The position of my practice focuses on clay as material and explores diverse ceramic histories, within a contemporary production context. My work analyses the means by which materiality comes into existence, rather than on finished artifacts; where writing and talking become as important as making.

Stephen Melville suggests that “theory is not something that needs to be brought to objects. It is something at work within them, a constitutive part of what or how they are” (Melville 2001: 8). Later in the same piece Melville writes: “Theory here would be less something a critic or historian brings to the work [...] than something to be traced in it, and writing would belong to such work as part of its unfolding, a continuation of the conditions of its appearing” (Melville 2001: 19).

Engagement with theory influenced the progress of my research and stimulated reflection, but does not have the ability to replace making as a way of understanding. ‘Tacit knowledge,’ a term attributed to Michael Polanyi in 1958, refers to expertise that which cannot be fully expressed or taught through verbal language. Peter Dormer states: “Tacit knowledge is acquired through experience and it is the knowledge that enables you to do things as distinct from talking or writing about them” (Dormer 1997: 147).

My research approach is an interweaving of theory and experience. Not interpreting experience through theory or theorizing finished objects but treating both making and writing as symbiotic partners. I came to see clay and text as different materialities of the same project; a project composed of various artifacts and written documentations in a variety of formats. This paper is only one part of the unfoldings of my work.

### **(New) Materialities**

Materials usually indicate substances in a raw state that will be further handled or modified. Those materials give body to objects, which react to the environment and enable reaction. The focus on materials brings with it a focus on processes, stories of transformation, tools, spaces of production, and the agents involved in that expansion.

The dominant narrative in modern Western culture has deprived material of dynamism; it became an inert servant of human needs to be modified at their will. However under ‘new materialist’ perspectives; material, like discourse, is not a passive entity independently

articulated, nor an empty surface awaiting signification. It does not need the inscription of external drives like culture or history to complete it. Material is an ongoing historicity (Barad 2003: 821) in the process of ‘becoming’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 272). The hope is to open materiality itself to creativity, to suggest that even supposedly stable and robust matter possess certain inherent energy. The more we understand about the physical characteristics of materials like minerals and metals, the more we see potential interplays within those, the more we understand their productive and resistant capacities. (Coole 2015: 43) In this way, Karen Barad asserts that matter is not a thing or an object, but a productive active process. Barad claims that “matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity” (Barad 2003: 822).

However, the problem relies on how to grasp the transformative effects of materials without relying upon animistic and romantic mysticisms (Coole 2010: 92) or logocentric tradition, where language is the primary instrument to transmit meaning. Engaging with materials also involves a critique of the predominance of discourse (Barad 2003). Rather than a text to be read or decoded, the world is a ‘texture’ to feel and to use; a lived fabric of rhythms and relationships understood through praxis (Lefebvre 1991: 222).

New materialism is a philosophical and cultural theory that does not privilege discourse over material or culture over nature. According to Manuel DeLanda, binary oppositions such as the ones between human/non-human, culture/nature, male/female, mind/body, subject/object, live/dead, emerge “when one ignores the zone of overlap and reifies the averages” (DeLanda 2012: 44–45). Postmodern feminist theorists have claimed that the male/female dichotomy informs all the dichotomies that ground Western principles. They additionally have argued that to invert the position of power it is important not to jump from one side of the dichotomy to the other, but to disassemble the dichotomy itself not resting on oppositions (Alaimo and Hekman 2008: 2). DeLanda argues against this dualism and in favor of a new ontology according to which “mechanisms are largely causal, but they do not necessarily involve linear causality” (DeLanda 2006, 19).

Therefore new materialism, especially in its feminist variant, appears as a conceptual framework and a political position. It rejects the authority of the discursive paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power. This interpretation bridges the gap between language and reality, and do not define those ideas as contradictions (Alaimo and Hekman 2008: 92). The close connection between opposites is fundamentally reductive. Negation indicates an association, which is precisely what is reversed. Dualistic thought has the inability to provide a relation between two terms besides the contradiction. Through theories of new materialism there is the possibility to create a meshwork of knowledge rather than categories.

This perspective recognizes the importance of the study of material and discursive aspects in their entanglement. Regarding artworks, it would be interesting to discover how material conditions and the sensations as they come about are being presented in one another. In that way, the artwork is actualized through the intra-action between matter and meaning. The material informs the discursive, and vice versa.

The physicist and philosopher Karen Barad articulates “how matter comes to matter” and defines what she calls “posthumanist performativity.” Her ideas challenge the dichotomies, including the material/discursive, and the unquestionability of categorization. Barad establishes her position as “agential realism,” incorporating insights from language poststructuralists like Michael Foucault and Judith Butler.

She believes that material’s significance does not reside solely in culture, nor the non-human is only formed by anthropocentric forces. Her theories try to challenge discourse and culture as the ones which have been granted with agency and historicity. Meanwhile, material and nature remain passive or attributed with characteristics secondary to language and subscribed under culture domain. In this way:

“Matter is neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agential, not a fixed essence or property of things. Mattering is differentiating, and which differences come to matter, matter in the iterative production of different differences” (Barad 2007: 137).

The origin of Barad's work in agential realism is based on her analysis of the philosophical views of quantum physicist Niels Bohr. In her elaboration of agential realism, Bohr's phenomena are the referents for reality, which is composed of things-in-phenomena. Phenomena constitute a non-dualistic whole. Barad explains that "phenomena are differential patterns of mattering" (Barad 2007: 206) created through intra-actions of different material and discursive practices of production. It is through those intra-actions, involving or not humans, when differential boundaries, properties, and meanings are determined. Phenomena become real through performance. Discourse and material are not strange to each other, but they are reciprocally related in the dynamics of intra-activity. Therefore, different societies give particular value to different things because their experiences are different. This open materiality develops in non-linear ways, where performance gives space to a variety trajectories.

### **Decolonizing materiality**

In 1941, the English artist Henry Moore wrote: "[o]ne of the first principles of art so clearly seen in primitive work is truth to material; the artist shows an instinctive understanding of his material, its right use, and possibilities" (Moore 1941: 104). He went further explaining the difference between African wood and Mexican stone sculptures. The African sculptors knew the fibrous characteristics of wood, and that it could be carved into thin forms without breaking. When sculpting human figures, they were "able to free arms from the body, to have space between the legs, and to give [the] figures long necks" (Ibid.). In contrast, discussing Mexican sculpture, Moore observed the truth to material in "[i]t's 'stoniness' [...] its tremendous power without loss of sensitiveness, its astonishing variety and fertility of form invention and its approach to a full three-dimensional conception of form" (Ibid.).

Henry Moore has been particularly interested in the Chac Mool, a particular form of precolonial Mesoamerican sculpture portraying a reclining pose, which inspired his reclining figures. The Mayan Chac Mool sculptures have a characteristic stoniness about them because the artists have avoided the more strongly carved and slim forms which are easily possible in wood. They instead exhibit the natural capacity of stone. The forms have been fully accomplished in the round,

imagining the human figure in a new manner (Hiller 2003: 54).

‘New materialism’ is no longer ‘new’ when indigenous knowledge and practice are taken into account (Horton and Berlo 2013: 18). When we add ‘new’ to ‘materialism,’ it does not become a globally self-reflexive term but suggests a European perspective of the topic. Although ‘new materialism’ proclaims a non-binary foundation, it does not necessary disarticulate the framework of colonialism. Decolonizing materiality is a significant action for the equity of local knowledge and material relations. Engagement with indigenous actors on their own terms calls for a transcultural commitment, where “[m]aterial might act as a bridge, instead of a mirror” (Horton and Berlo 2013: 20).

This paper adopts the term decolonization as an opening to understand the globalized and local present and the contemporary importance of materials. This view is engaged not only in material power but also in social conflicts for justice and equity. According to Gabi Ngcobo, the appointed curator of the 10th Berlin Biennale in 2018, “[d]ecolonising means creating new configurations of knowledge and power – and that can be a messy procedure” (Ngcobo 2017). Messy indeed, not only in its discursivity but also in its materiality. Materials, things, and spaces in the process of decolonization play a crucial role in organizing relations, generate identity, and express ideologies. Even when they have been abandoned and in ruin, they become part of politics, economics, and culture. The way in which indigenous materiality can be locally actualized presents a frame to understand different issues about identification, transformation of knowledge, and the analysis of social and political movement.

Material and discourse are intensely entangled ontologically, epistemologically, socially and politically. Materiality is not close, neither is time. The ‘past’ is open to change, to actualization. Barad argues that it is not that we can undo the past but that:

“[the past] can be redeemed, productively reconfigured in an iterative unfolding of spacetime matter. But its sedimenting effects, its trace, can not be erased. The memory of its materializing effects is written into the world. So changing the past is never without costs, or responsibility” (Barad 2012: 67).

Barad, discussing from a quantum mechanics viewpoint, describes this the making of temporality; where 'past,' 'present,' and 'future' are entangled in intra-active relations. Destruction might try to reverse time and development to a blank slate on which new beginnings could be articulated. However, this practice does not erase the past but transforms things into ruins, which likewise may last for decades (Petti, Hilal, & Weizman 2013: 20). Materials do not disappear, "the fantasy of erasure is not possible, but possibilities for reparation exist" (Barad 2012: 66). Time and transformation cannot be reversed, but they can be reconfigured and actualized through matter.

There is a recognizable demand for postcolonial theory to engage with material practices rather than solely analyze the discourse. Precolonial and Colonial material practices may become a source of re-appropriations, engineered decay, and activation within the politics of the present. This return lies in the middle ground between the desire to remember and the necessity to embrace the new familiar environment (Petti, Hilal, & Weizman 2013: 51).

### **Making with clay and ceramics**

Clay is a time-based medium: performative, relational and responsive. The ability to empathetically trace the maker's finger marks on its surface provides a sense of intimacy and immediacy. Clay is a key material for its easily interpreted condition, and for its reflection of continual change. It is composed of the oldest igneous rocks that have been broken down to a very, very fine particulate and have sat, amalgamating over millions of years. Clay is not simply a material that allows being mold as one likes; with its geological formation, it is also part of the land.

Fired clay becomes ceramics. Ceramics are central to our lives. We live in brick buildings with ceramic tiles. We eat and drink from ceramics. As a material it works close to the body, it is encountered in the everyday as utilitarian objects and decorative ornaments.

The long history of cultural resonances gives clay and ceramics a special place of understanding about fragility and time. As a mode of signification, they are uniquely poised to engage a range of theoretical perspectives. They permeate different cultures, they are material and conceptual, they are both



lasting and ephemeral. Their abundance and availability enable it to cross from the private domain into the public sphere and back again.

Clay is not passive matter relying on external agents to set it in motion, but a materiality that carries its own power and energy of transformation. Clay offers itself to the possibility of being worked, modeled, put into form. However, this openness requires a physical understanding to be experienced. If the material is too flexible, too new, too wet, a form will not set. Neither will a form take, for the opposite reasons, in clay that is too hard, too old or too dry (Didi-Huberman 1999: 44).

Dry clay brittles quickly because it lost its plasticity, but this plasticity can be regenerated through hydration and wedging. The first step in working with wild, store bought or recovered clay is to wedge it. This process involves kneading, slapping and squeezing. Touching the material returns and enhances its plasticity and eliminates any air bubbles that might lead to explosions in the kiln later.

However, this notion of physical and direct interaction is not an innocent form of engagement. It is not free of culture, history, and politics. When two surfaces touch, there is an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, a proximity of otherness (Barad 2015: 153). Clay carries the sign of touching; it documents the encounter between a responsive material and the hand (or other non-human being or thing). The dichotomy of touching and being touched grants the ability for double sensations. This physicality unfolds other relations, meanings, and transformations; and productive differentiation occurs (Coole 2010: 107).

### **Firing ceramics as social practice**

Raw clay is not a stable material; allowed to dry out, it exhibits a range of relatively subtle qualities of tone and surface, as it becomes increasingly brittle. But in a wet state it is more dramatic: it sweats when it is enclosed, and drops of condensation form on the inside of its container; left for long enough, moulds will grow on the surface. The moist clay is no inert agglomeration, no finished artwork. It allows a system-based approach that references not only its materiality, but also in the domains of ecology, industry and history.

Firing turns clay into ceramics. Indeed, in some opinions, anything made of clay that is not fired has nothing to do with ceramics. Both 'raw' and 'unfired' clay feature-in exploratory

approaches to making. Raw and unfired, I would argue, are not necessarily the same thing: those words elide or overlay concepts that call for further consideration. To describe clay artefacts as unfired suggests that they have yet to be fired: that they ought to be fired, because that is their proper and true state. Firing is the climax of the traditional making process, which can also be regarded as a process of socialization. This line of thought has folded within itself essentialist notions of raw clay as pre-industrial and unsocialized: a primordial element, whose transformation into permanent form, denotes the roots of civilization.

Capable of preserving the immediacy of a work, cooked ceramics are especially suitable to achieve the sense of bodily presence. Clay as a medium is one of the best things to connect life and the record of life. Fired clay never loses the reverberation of its making; it is a frozen moment that embodies the act of its production, a strong connection between maker and the one holding the work. It is often said that when we handle ancient ceramics, as when we excite at the performance of firing, the experience connects us to past makers and users. On a fundamental level, when we touch what others have touched across the centuries we feel a particular sense of continuity as if the artifact itself embodies and conveys a haptic memory.

Clay is the earth where we live and an archeological material, intertwined with the progressive development of humankind since the beginning of recorded time. Once the particles are fused, clay is irreversibly modified and is permanently fixed. Without fire, there are no traces of old clay material cultures, because those inscriptions were left to degrade. However, if fire did not preserve this representation of knowledge, it does not mean that the knowledge did not exist or had materiality. Withholding the closure that firing engenders and denying permanence to an artifact means that, although work that is not fired can be articulated regarding an expanded field, it is overtly transgressive of traditional core ceramics values.

If not reaches the vitrification temperature, clay has a propensity to split open and reveal an inner rugosity that contrasts with the smoothness of their finished surfaces. Clay's splits and cracks are commonly understood by all with any familiarity with the material, but are not something normally exploited

as an inherently positive attribute. If clay remains wet when fired or the temperature increases quickly, the heat causes the material to break and fissure in a manner reminiscent of the earth's crust. Clay in the kiln is subject to chance beyond the will of the maker. The transition from clay to ceramic at the moment of firing allows freedom from any certainty about how the work would emerge.

However, this process of change has the potential to be opened and shared. Ceramics has always incorporated performance. Rituals that address the uncertain alchemy of firing, have been enacted since immemorial time; and the transformation from 'raw' clay to 'cooked' ceramic still excites a sense of wonder, in practitioners and audiences alike. The excitement of firing, and the emotional response that it is capable of bring out, suggest that it is more than a means to a material end.

To open up the kiln involves a risk. Much damage can occur if ceramic is allowed to experience a rapid change in temperature. The chance taken offers the possibility to witness the transformation. The visual display of glowing fire or wire comes alongside a range of sensory experiences: the evocative smell of the smoke, the heat of the piece, the hiss and crackle as the suddenly exposed ceramic surface cools. The experience is as important as the resultant object.

### **Conclusion**

Clay is not just a material to be tamed, but its intrinsic forces demand to be involved with it directly. My engagement with clay started with wanting to have a confrontation with the material. I wanted something that could capture a physical expression while at the same time posing its own set of questions and challenges through its nature. A whole world developed from the specificity of the process, pushing the capabilities of the material, interacting with processes and artifacts already immerse in the ceramic history.

My aim is to find a material expression that does not belong to other materials and to detect processes that have not been idealized. While the historical experience of working with clay teach the fundamental principles of ceramics, eventually it is necessary to respond to the material experience itself, embracing chaos, failure, and collapse. Ceramic objects lend themselves to being broken. Breaking and collapse are a part of the risk of the making

process, where success is contingent beyond the control of the maker.

Materials concern the gradual pace of change, the becoming or turning into another, as well as the porous borders between different states and processes. Clay brings up how even rigid materials taken for granted as historically stable are in fact continually mutating. It sets in motion both matter and mind. In this way, clay practice, with its sensitiveness for the fragile and mutable, offsets solidification and hardening inclinations, whether on a material or a discursive level. □

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Cologne, Germany

**Firing one cube of soft clay a day #2**

09. October - 04. November 2017

Stoneware clay, ceramic, non-clay non-ceramic material, nichrome wire, electricity.