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Ceramics and Locational Identity: Investigating the symbolism of material culture in relation to a sense of place

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Abstract

This article is an investigation into material culture and its symbolism regarding place and space and addresses the research question ‘why do select ceramic artefacts evoke or become symbolic of a specific location and sense of place?’ The research covers the areas of conceptual ceramic design, craft, culture and practice-led research. Dutch design duo Nadine Sterk and Lonny van Ryswyck – Atelier NL are discussed as an example of contemporary designer makers who create objects that embody social meaning and express an evocative sense of locational identity. The two Eindhoven-based designer-makers’ creative process combines and reveals different strands of academic and material enquiry and representing a creative process that flows between making, scientific knowledge, anthropology, archaeology, geology, art, design and craft. Atelier NL’s practice is representative of a current interest within visual and material culture in both practice-led research and socially engaged practice. The narrative of their research-based practice is unequivocally part of the production and presentation of their work. Atelier NL’s practice stands for a creative partnership that investigates and celebrates their locality as well as responding to a sense of ‘culture loss’ indicative of mainstream patterns of design, production and consumption of goods and services.

Key Words

Locational identity, ceramics, phenomenology, aesthetic experience, practice-led research, socially engaged practice, Atelier NL.

Figure1. Atelier NL. (2010). Tilewall_Polderproject©Jean-Paul.Baptiste.

Introduction

The focus of the article is the creative partnership of Nadine Sterk and Lonny van Ryswyck, Atelier NL (Figure 1). I aim to examine their creative methods and what might be revealed by their use of primary materials such as local clays in the production of their work. As a maker, I want to explore in this article what exists behind the crafted objects in question. What forms of motivation and lines of discourse feed and inform the work? What creative methodologies are employed in the production of the work? What are the social and cultural meanings, function and value of the utilitarian ceramics in question at this point in time? This article attempts to address these questions drawing upon various lines of enquiry, historical forms of ceramics and interdisciplinary inquiry in an attempt to unpick the complexity and context of Atelier NL’s practice. Comparisons with historical vernacular material culture in the form of ‘Barvas Ware’ from a Hebridian community in the 1800’s is drawn upon to contextualise Atelier NL ceramics and their focus on social utility. Both ‘Barvas Ware’ and Atelier NL ceramics are imbued with a sense of locational identity and the vernacular.

Drawing upon the field of architecture, a vernacular dwelling becomes a signifier of a sense of place due to the use and selection of materials, application of specialised regional skills and presentation of regional cultural phenomena. Vernacular buildings, and often the ceramic utilitarian pots that exist within these dwellings become tied to the phenomena of time, space and location (Figure 2). A vernacular form of material culture might not be exclusively rooted in the past, however historically it 'is arrived at either by individuals constructing a shelter for themselves or (more often) by trained craftsmen, both categories of builder drawing upon the traditions of the culture at large, inspired and disciplined by local materials and climate.' (Ayres 2003:1). Atelier NL's ceramics display many of the criteria and symbolism attributed to the vernacular, however their work is very much part of a current, conceptual design craft culture.

Figure 2. 17th Century slipware earthenware jug, Abernodwydd Farmhouse, Llangadfan, Powys, Wales Built 1678 Re-Erected 1955 Museum of Welsh Life.

Locational Identity and Ceramics in a Social and Cultural Context.

In an attempt to contextualise the questions of locational identity and ceramic practice in the face of rapid social economic change, Wilson's paper on 'Barvas Ware' provides a powerful historical case study of the links between a sense of place, social / cultural phenomena and craft production. (Wilson 2008) 'Barvas Ware' was made by generations of women from the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides up until the 1930s. Wilson's paper explores the poetic narrative of the changing social and economic phenomena that shifted this Hebridian community of makers from creating cooking vessels known as 'craggans' for utilitarian need from local clays and resources to creating ceramic curiosities.

'During the 1800s when other cultures began to have impact on their lives, the women started to produce naïve copies of lowland Scottish pottery and Staffordshire Wares.' (Wilson 2008: 2)

In an attempt to make crofting economically sustainable, the potters made tourist wares, in the form of tea sets for a new market and economic exchange. These 'curios' were sold to outsiders, people from urban industrial centres fascinated by the indigenous form of primitivism on our own shores. Barvas Ware and its associated narrative is an acute example of how 'locational specificity' and craft production comes under threat when rapid globalisation and capitalism comes into play. However, what also happens is the creation of new markets and cultural products emerging through modernity and cultural exchange. The links between Barvas Ware and Atelier NL's creative practice are predominantly topographical, however other complex cultural social economic parallels can be drawn. The social, cultural and material narratives that circulate both Barvas Ware ceramics and the recent Polder ceramics of Atelier NL highlight the importance of registering how shifting phenomenological perceptions of time, space and place exist when making comparisons with both case studies. Atelier NL Polder ceramics is desirable not because they stand as 'curios' or because they signify the 'primitive' as Barvas Ware did. Atelier NL Polder ceramics material symbolism is desirable due to a different set of cultural and creative narratives: The evocative stories orbiting Atelier NL creative output are purposefully made visible, mapping social, environmental and material enquiry. The use of local clays and the social utility bound up with both sets of

ceramics stimulates lines of discourse about the links between locational identity and the ceramic artefacts in question.

Telling history through ‘things’ promotes exploration of a phenomenological, social-ideological system of objects, their perception and consumption. Historical European ceramic forms and styles that represent locational identity are well documented; one popular example is British slipware with its generous rich utilitarian quality, displaying flamboyant folk regional styles and forms. This ware often made from local clays and, in part, glaze materials locally sourced signifying geological and cultural specificity.

In Britain during the 1950s we saw a growing Studio Pottery movement developing in the face of the hegemony of industrial production and the perceived ‘culture loss’ through industrialisation. Tanya Harrod details in *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century* how the crafts movement emerged in response to a general anxiety about industrialised society, compressively defining the British Studio Craft movement. Martina Margetts underlines Bernard Leach’s influence here,

‘Leach’s holistic vision, too, of life and work together producing beauty, harmony and a sense of useful purpose, was so compelling that the aesthetic he evolved in ceramic prevailed as a badge of allegiance, a symbol of belief. The whole realm of the brown and green betokened these values, became a political and social as much as a cultural statement.’ (Margetts 1993: 216)

The Leach Pottery and aesthetic does not represent ‘locational identity’ in a specific sense to St.Ives, however ‘they found earthen ware clay near St. Erth and obtained stoneware from Dorset and Ball clay from Devon. They burnt bracken for wood ash glazes and experimented widely adapting new materials and rediscovering old skills’. (leachpottery.com – 2018). Leach’s ceramics, writing and influence on potters, ideas about locality and social utility commanded a high level of currency influencing many 20th Century potters, institutions and educational policy. The 1970s studio ceramics movement was an important contributor to the craft revival and counter-culture of the period. Underpinning craft production in many cases was a self-conscious desire to express regional identity. A number of British potters of this period, in an attempt to connect with the land and local traditions, retrieved such traditions, using local clays and raw materials incorporating them into their glazes and clay bodies. This continues today, some studio potters incorporate all or elements of local clays and materials into their work in an attempt to respond and reflect their locality and sense of place.

Jules Lubbock’s book *The Tyranny of Taste: Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550-1960* (1995) eloquently charts and reveals how modernity and industrialisation have impacted upon the localised craft production, consumption and distribution of goods long before the eighteenth century. Lubbock’s book tracks back to the sixteenth century to find the influential beginning and documentary evidence of industrialisation and the complex systems of production and consumption of material culture. Similarly Frank Trentmann’s - *Empire of Things* (2016) shows that rampant consumption is a truly global phenomenon with a much longer history than we realise. Individual craft producers have had to respond to new modes of production, technological change, regional and global economics resulting in some crafts falling away and others changing their cultural meaning and function. Paul Greenhalgh, Glenn Adamson, Richard Sennett and Tania Harrod, amongst other academics, have contributed considerably to our knowledge and understanding of design craft culture, contextualising craft practice within modernist and postmodern

landscapes. Paul Greenhalgh unpacked ‘craft’ and its ‘wardrobe of meanings’ (Greenhalgh 1997: 36) contextualising its meanings in relation to both art and design.

‘After the Second World War, and particularly after 1960, institutional recognition of the class was complete. A class within any hierarchy, however, does not simply arrive through its vulgar omnipresence. It is formed in relation to other classes and groupings. The new system was a tripartite affair - art - craft - design and was largely a result of the perceived need to clarify problems of status, meaning and control of the decorative arts’ (Greenhalgh 1997: 38).

Utility, Craft and Art Today.

If today we broadly accept that Modernist crafted artefacts were born out of, and in response to, an increasingly industrialised world. The postmodernist crafted artefacts are born out of and in response to an increasingly digital, technological and global culture. Today we see the crafted object continues to evolve its meaning, function and value due to the complex cross-disciplinary cultural landscape the handmade emerges from. Today the taxonomy, history and theory of craft is well represented, but it is worth summarising for the purpose of contextualising the work of Atelier NL within a particular cultural frame. The tripartite system of art, design, craft, now bleeds, overlaps or cross-references between these territories, invigorated by the explicit inclusion of other fields of human enquiry including philosophy, the sciences and the humanities. This hybridised postmodern landscape shifts and shapes both avant-gard makers’ creative methodologies as well as our perception and understanding of where their work sits within material culture.

Within the field of ceramic art we see a similar shift in territory from a different direction. Jo Dahn contextualises aspects of current ceramic practice in *New Directions in Ceramics* (2015). The book explores and responds to contemporary ceramicists’ use of innovative modes of practice, investigating how change is happening through the discussion of key works. The book surveys and unpacks what has come to be known as the expanded field of ceramics. This expanded field in most cases represents a move into the territory and methodology of contemporary fine art practice. Craft is in evidence in terms of skilful use of materials and processes, but more prominent is the application of the term ‘craft’ in its older understanding, that is its pre-modernist context of crafting thoughts, ideas, and the possession of secret knowledge. Dahn, within the introductory texts, eloquently maps out how current ceramic practice has been informed by critical theory and what can be broadly defined as an adoption of fine art methodologies. Dahn quotes Jorunn Veiteberg who sees craft as ‘a field in transition’:

“It has been common to describe craft’s position as a borderline area between fine art and design. I have preferred to call this area an intervening space or, to be more precise, the space between function and non-function, tradition and breaking tradition, craftsmanship based art and idea-based art”. (Dahn 2015: 12)

The creative outcomes featured in ‘*New Directions in Ceramics*’ and also in the recently published, *Vitamin C: Clay and Ceramic in Contemporary Art*, edited by Clare Lilley (2017), illustrate the exciting developments within ceramic art. The work featured is predominately ceramic sculpture and installation art. The dominance of

fine art ceramics within the expanded field of ceramics has coincided with the acceptance by the art-world of ceramic sculpture, historically excluded from the fine art galleries and institutions. As with several other recently published books that survey or critically evaluate ceramics as a field, what sits inside and outside the classificatory landscape of craft and studio ceramics has now become very much 'a field in transition' (Veiteberg 2005: 86). Amber Creswell Bell's - *Clay – Contemporary Ceramic Artisans* (2016) includes the functional and decorative, as well as sculptural works and not necessarily selecting international established makers.

Atelier NL - Nadine Sterk and Lonny van Ryswyck's work can be seen as coming from a design direction employing a conceptual and material-based enquiry that has a utilitarian focus as well as promoting a discourse between cross-cultural forms of enquiry (Figure1). Ceramics of this nature is emerging from art schools and universities throughout Europe but often from design and applied art courses or postgraduate ceramic courses that promote critically focused, researched-based practice or practice based research. Atelier NL produce ceramic vessels that aim not only to become an actor on the stage of our lives, but also an evocative signifier of a sense of place and social / cultural phenomena. In short, their pots and artefacts are discursive in character and question ideas about social utility. The Dutch art school educational system clearly promotes critical discourse around the relationship between fields of art, design and craft but also a discourse about the sites of production, sites of circulation and the site of the audience. Louise Schouwenberg and Hella Jongerius' discussion around ideas of function explores what can be described as 'conceptual design practice':

'Schouwenberg: Yes, artists get flowers, and then they just grab the nearest pot or bucket to put them in. But it's noticeable that the people who design vases never get flowers. So why do designers design vases?' (Schouwenberg 2003:87).

Jongerius: Because of the 'stories they tell. Vases were originally meant to be used, of course, but like any useful object a vase has a potential that goes beyond functionality. The story can rise above the object itself.' (Schouwenberg 2003: 89)

As with conceptual art, the conceptual design-crafted object can act as a trigger or anchor, potentially engaging the human agent in linking narrative, ideas and function. Function is commonly associated with utility but often we don't consider what we mean by 'functional'. Fine Art could be perceived as functional, its function performing a critically important cultural purpose. Atelier NL's ceramic vessels are both utilitarian and yet discursive in character, potentially revealing a phenomenological narrative that reveals value in the world. Where and what might be its function? Theodor Adorno explored ideas of craft and function, in his paper *Functionalism Today*, (1965), considering the 'the purpose-free and the purposeful'. Adorno picking up where Adolf Loos left off:

'the question of functionalism does not coincide with the question of practical function. The purpose-free (zweckfrei) and the purposeful (zweckgebunden) arts do not form the radical opposition, which he imputed. The difference between the necessary and the superfluous is inherent in a work, and is not defined by the work's relationship or the lack of it to something outside itself'. (Adorno 1966: 397)

Atelier NL stimulates a discourse around function and utility looking beyond the purposeful, questioning the relationship between art, design, craft object and identifying the relationship between the artefact, anthropology and creative provenance.

The taxonomy of craft and function has multiple meaning, fluidity and subjectivity within and outside the world of craft. It is interesting to consider these terms through the lens of fine art and critical theory. Alex Cole's anthology *Designart – documents of Contemporary Art* (2007) offers an evaluation of the type of classificatory term 'Designart' and standpoint that sheds light on a form of artefact and creative methodology that embraces function as well as cultural discourse. Alex Coles states that Designart has not yet been recognized as a legitimate movement, such as Minimalism or as a category such as 'installation'.

'Design and Art differs in that practices which are centred on the interface between design and art have not yet been accorded this legitimacy; they form more of a shifting tendency than a fixed movement or category.' Coles then points to the fact that the overlap between art and design... 'is by no means a new subject with Modernism its has its roots in late nineteenth century in the writings of the British critic John Ruskin and the artists and designers William Morris, and in the twentieth century, early avant-garde movements such as the Soviet Constructivism, De Stijl in the Netherlands, and Bauhaus.' (Coles 2007: 10)

Within the contemporary debate the interface between design and art, artist / maker and the public, often as collaborator, has been building since the late 1990's. 'The practices of Lucy Orta, Rirkrit Tiravanija, N55 and Superflex are premised on using design as a tool to organise the collective to achieve particular goals, be they in ecological or everyday design scenarios' (Coles 2007: 14). Today I would include Atelier NL, Studio van Liesshout, Marjetica Potrč, Formanfantasma and NBH Studios. For the U.S the artist Andrea Zittle and the potter and artist Theaster Gates, specifically for his Soul Food Starter Kit project. Within the British context, I would include Dunne & Raby, Thomas Thwaites, Dominic Wilcox, Jimmy Loizeau, Revital Cohan & Tuur Van Balen, Hefin Jones and emerging artist potter Rupert Brakspear for his Isaac Button project. This list is not comprehensive but represent makers who create objects, re-contextualising or re-frame creative methodologies and human actions developing discourses around visual and material culture.

Evocative Objects & Aesthetic Experience

Sherry Turkle writing on 'Evocative Objects' comments that

'we find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscored the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.' (Turkle 2011: 5)

Figure 3 (a) Atelier NL (2009) Still life, PolderCeramics_Atelier NL© Paul Scala

To illustrate Turkle's point, I would like to juxtapose two evocative objects, an Atelier NL jug from the Noordoostpolder project (Figure 3) and a utilitarian Slipware jug from Wales made in the 17th century (Figure 2). Both jugs represent the cultural

heritage, geological, and anthropological value of a moment in time. Both jugs could be said to have a robust utilitarian quality, represent cultural value and possess a high ontological status. Both are made up of distinct local clays honestly displaying alchemical nature, locational specificity, cultural heritage and the hand of the maker. The differences include the intentions of the makers and the social, economic and cultural context they originated from. Within the field of philosophical aesthetics, utilitarian objects were not usually the focus of philosophical enquiry as it was believed the human agent had to be in a 'disinterested' state of mind to attain a pure aesthetic experience. By definition the perception of a utilitarian object was approached with 'interest' due to their functional nature. Pre 20th Century philosophers focused upon classical music or the fine arts when discussing ideas of perception an aesthetic experience. However, Martin Heidegger explores ideas about how one might perceive a ceramic jug in a lecture titled 'The Thing' (1950). Heidegger questions 'the relationship between what is perceived and what is 'real'. Heidegger uses a handmade jug as an example questioning "How are we to think about this 'thingness'? (Heidegger 1950; 404)

I believe both jugs have the potential of inducing a deep phenomenological form of enquiry and felt response, what could be described as an aesthetic experience. If we move to discuss the Atelier NL Noordoostpolder jug and how it might appear to us, and if the jug is given focused attention, what might that focused contemplation reveal? (Figure 3) It might induce what is defined as an aesthetic experience, in short, an engaged dialogue between subject and object. An aesthetic experience has been interpreted by many rationalist thinkers as simply a pleasurable experience and not now worthy of further investigation. Although many other thinkers believe a particularly intense aesthetic experience can be more than just pleasure, Jeffery Petts in his paper 'Aesthetic Experience & Revelation of Value' (2000) challenges the scepticism in relation to the value of investigating aesthetic experience. An aesthetic experience is more than a pleasurable experience, it is a process or 'movement' basic to human life and this has a distinctive end or 'consummation'; a phenomenological investigation between the human subject object relationship. I understand the term 'movement' here to mean both physical and emotional movement, both mind and body; 'Consummation' to mean the coming together, an end, a point in time and space when you can articulate your thoughts and feelings. Jeffery Petts states

'art celebrates with peculiar intensity the consummatory moment of aesthetic experiences. When an aesthetic experience comes to an end, defining aesthetic experience, so that we can talk about that unusual encounter, exalted experience. An aesthetic experience has a special kind of ending that John Dewey calls a consummation – so a job is felt to be satisfactory, completed, a problem is felt to be solved, a game is played through fair and square. John Dewey feels it is more than this, it is harmony.' (Petts 2000:61)

Jeffery Petts adds to Dewey by suggesting within the movement and consummation of aesthetic experience is the distinct human practice of criticism. Aesthetic experience, then, can be said to be revelatory of real value because it makes an adaptive felt response from humans to their environment, and thus adaptability is grounded in human needs. Aesthetic experience is revelatory of value. In short, aesthetic experience is a critical, adaptive felt response, revealing value in the world.

The creative strategies and intentions of the unknown seventeenth century potter and Nadine Sterk and Lonny van Rijswijk, are clearly quite different. The

jugs' practical functions have a familiar relationship, however both share an intense relationship with their locational identity. Our perception of the jugs' meaning, function and value today is different when we factor in the perceived intensions of both sets of makers. Although both jugs can be studied by trying to get close to their original social and cultural contexts, both jugs will continue on their life cycle as will our changing perception of them.

Atelier NL Creative Methodologies

Figure 4 Atelier NL (2009) Nadine Sterk and Lonny Van Rijswijck
Polderproject_Atelier NL© Paul Scala.

Nadine Sterk and Lonny Van Rijswijck of Atelier NL are based in Eindhoven and studied together at the Eindhoven Design Academy. They work out of a converted chapel within a socially mixed community. The chapel and their working relationship with the local community has its own inspiring story. Bound up with or integral to their collaborative design craft practice and the products they produce is a sense of locational identity;

‘Their work now translates the convergence of environment, history, and human experience into objects and systems that enrich everyday life. Atelier NL uses design as a method to reveal hidden informational patterns and stories that lie beneath the mundane. By researching and rearranging what already exists, Atelier NL touches on what it means to be human in an ever-evolving world, (Atelier NL, website 2017)

In May of 2017, I interviewed Sterk & Van Rijswijck at their Earth Alchemy Factory in Eindhoven to discuss Polderceramics, the Drawn From Clay – Noordoostpolder project and their work in progress (figure 8). We walked around the neighborhood and discussed ideas about their creative methodologies and roles within their collaborative practice. The discussions included ideas about socially engaged practice, anthropology, the use of scientific knowledge, forms of documentation, social history, globalization, and the role of the designer / maker within their local community and beyond.

Being in and around their studio it became clear that their work does not comfortably fit into the traditional classifications of forms of material culture - design, craft or fine art. As discussed before, their practice overlaps these worlds and represents a way of working that is closest to ‘Designart’. The term ‘Designart’ as a movement is its self a disputed ground or field, the discourse covered within Alex Coles anthology *Designart Documents of Contemporary Art* (2007). What is clear a characteristic of ‘Designart’ is mixing disciplines and ideologies. In doing so ‘Designart’ blurs boundaries between the fields of art, design and craft. Maybe the term Conceptual Design / Craft could be applied but these terms don’t seem to stick or fit completely. Atelier NL practice and outcomes move between fixed movements and categories. It can be placed broadly within the Dutch tradition of Conceptual Design, but again this does not fully frame their practice. The work of Tim Ingold is helpful in defining what the Atelier NL creative process includes and demonstrates ; ‘thinking through making and learning through doing’ (Ingold 2013: 6).

Atelier NL challenges the traditional tripartite classification of art, design and craft, a classification born out of the industrial revolution and a Western value system. But clearly many makers and thinkers have long challenged this classification system, although, you can argue that Dutch design, craft and art have always maintained a closer dialogue with each other than their British counterparts. The taxonomy of these fields is evidently fluid, as discussed, and clearly aligned to time and space.

Postmodernity has created a cultural space where it could be argued that, in part, fine art now occupies the field traditionally occupied by philosophy, the craft world occupies some of the ground the fine art and design world occupies, the design world correspondingly occupies aspects of its neighbours' territories.

Postmodernity has delivered an interdisciplinary creative landscape invigorating the discourse between art, design and craft. In recent years, aspects of what could be perceived as the progressive design world have become more interested in the craft world and its creative methodologies. Today, large elements of the design world still concern themselves with designing and making objects, which are framed by utilitarian function, emotional attitude and cultural style. Atelier NL and other current select designer makers build into the fabric of their practice an importance fourth element - ethical ideas about 'belief' and 'purpose'. This constituency of design / craft community self-consciously embrace small batch production, making objects with a high ontological status, referencing the hand of the maker, often socially engaged underpinned by ethical, ecological and interdisciplinary enquiry. Sterk and Van Ryswyck's Noordoostpolder project exemplifies this form of making. I would say their creative practice includes two subcategories of current fine art practice:

(i) 'Research Based Practice', which can be defined within context of art, design and craft as a creative practice that generates knowledge and innovations that integrate and often challenge established research styles and methods. Research based practice-led projects by their nature are very flexible in their implementation and are able to draw together a variety of methodologies and creative outcomes. Artists like Simon Starling from Scotland exemplify this form of 'art of enquiry', works such as 'Shedboatshed' 2005.

(ii) 'Socially Engaged Practice' associated with arts such as the American artists and potter Theaster Gates, including the inspiring '*Dorchester Project*' 2009 or '*Soul Food Pavilion*' project 2012. The British artist Jeremy Deller Jeremy Deller '*All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*' 2014, where Deller takes a personal look at the impact of the Industrial Revolution on British popular culture. UK based Assemble Collective who promote a democratic and co-operative method of working that enables built, social and research-based works to take place through a series of collaborations. Projects such as the *Granby Four Streets* project started in 2011 or the more recent *Art Academy* project 2017 illustrate both socially engaged and research based practice methods. Atelier NL's working methodology is similar to these artists in the way they systematically, methodically documenting and presenting itself as a cross disciplinary creative practice. Similarly their working methods are socially engaged, deeply rooted in a sense of material enquiry and sense of place. Both 'Research Based Practice' and aspects of 'Socially Engaged Practice' draw from cross-disciplinary academic forms of enquiry. Tim Ingold has observed:

'Certain practices of art, for example, suggest new ways of doing anthropology? If there are similarities between the ways in which artists and anthropologists study with the world, then could we not regard the art work as a result of something like the anthropological call study, rather anthropological research need

not be confined to written texts. They may also include photography and film. But could they also include drawings, paintings or sculpture? Or works of craft? Or musical compositions? Or even buildings? Conversely, could not works of art be regarded as forms of anthropology, albeit 'written' in non-verbal media?' (Ingold 2013: 8)

Atelier NL's *Drawn From Clay Noordoostpolder* project included taking clay from a town in the south-east of Holland and making a small series of functional ceramics and tiles. The first experiments inspired them to investigate the huge variety of natural clays identified: the project also took them into the rich history and lives of that farming community. Once the first prototypes started to emerge, Sterk and Van Ryswyck's repeated the process actively drawing in scientists, archaeologist, anthropologist, historians and local farmers to form a deep map of not just the material extracted but also the narratives associated with the geographic location. During the early stages of Sterk and Van Ryswyck's collaboration the links between theory and practice cannot be separated. 'Thus thinking is inseparable from doing, thought is embodied and enacted and cognition is seamlessly distributed across persons, activity and setting' (Ingold 2013: 162)

'When you go digging for clay and hold the particles in your hands, all of a sudden more stories come alive. Then when we process the materials, be it clay or sand, more questions and stories come alive. If the partials have a lot of chalk or iron in its make up, what is the geological story behind that? Where and how far have these partials travelled?' (Van Ryswyck 2017, interview)

Through this project Sterk and Van Ryswyck's learned to work not only with the farmers and their specialist knowledge of their own land and its history but also to bring in other specialists such as geologists, archaeologists and historians creating a complex and evocative dialogue between patterns of study, individuals and communities. (Figures 5&6)

Figures 5&6 Atelier NL (2009) PolderFarmers_Atelier NL©Paul Scala

'Polderceramics tableware is made directly from the earth of individual farms so that the vegetables eaten for dinner can be served from the same soil that grew them. Each clay body was excavated from the land of a Noordoostpolder farmer, refined, and transformed into usable vessels. Polderceramic line retains evidence of the handmade process and reflects the rectilinear shape of Noordoostpolder farm plots. Simultaneously, contemporary identity arises from the addition of legs, handles, and spouts designed by the famous Dutch companies Royal Tichelaar Makkum, Royal Leerdam, and Tingerij Leerdam. Upon the completion of the line, Atelier NL invited photographer Paul Scala to document the tableware via compositions that pair the ceramics with local crops. This led to a series of vibrant still lifes that allude to the mood of 17th-century Dutch painting'. (Atelier NL: web-page Polderceramics, 2017)

The project taught Sterk and Van Ryswyck's the importance of provenance, the need to accurately record and document their research.

'From the farmer project we learnt that when you have all the buckets of clay

and you throw them together on one pile the clay has little value. If the bucket is labelled say from plot number A1, farmer Ben, he grows potatoes, the historical story about the farm, the chemical make up of the clay sample, its geology, the material has a value – documentation and accurate records are critically important in our work. Often we construct a library accurately recording the map of our journey. Often we don't think of the knowledge first, we follow our intuition, and then make it. What happens we dig the clay, record the stories, do the research then the connections are made and the work develops.' (Van Ryswyck; interview 2017)

Out of this first signature work a maturing of their creative working methodology took place alongside a system and rhythm emerging in line with agrarian working practices.

'Following the farmer project we adopted an agricultural methodology. There is a time for everything, for the farmer when it's raining you cannot harvest. We use this philosophy in the studio, so in the summer we do more fieldwork and in winter we work more indoors. Also you have to seed first, then it has to grow and then you harvest, you cannot harvest immediately. Now we don't tend to force any project, yes we work hard and projects often take a long period of time.' (Van Ryswyck 2017 interview)

The phenomenological nature of Sterk and Van Ryswyck's creative methodology can be represented in diagrammatic form. The diagram (Figure 7) is inspired by and adapted from the work of Dr Gerald Cipriani who built upon Maurice Merleau – Ponty's ideas. Its aim is to illustrate the phenomenology of perception, what is going on in the mind and body of the human agent when he or she engages with an artwork, artefact and in this case a material and site. It references the importance of 'the self, art, time and space' within the process of perception. The adaptation of the diagram is an attempt to model and illustrate the creative methodology, mapping the arc of Sterk and Van Ryswyck's Noordoostpolder project.

Figure 7. Bodenham.P (2017) Atelier NL Phenomenology & Creative Methodology, The Self, Space & Time © Peter Bodenham.

Social engagement and how to buy a church with local dirt

'While the accelerated speed, access, and exchange of information, images, commodities, and even bodies is being celebrated in one circle, the concomitant breakdown of traditional temporal-spatial experiences and the accompanying homogenization of places and erasure of cultural differences is being decried in another. The intensifying conditions of spatial indifferenciation and departicularization – that is, the increasing instances of locational unspecificity – are seen to exacerbate the sense of alienation and fragmentation in contemporary life. Consequently, the nature of the tie between subject / objects and location, as well as the interplay between place in space, received much critical attention in the past two decades.' (Kwon 2004: 8)

In 2007, shortly after graduation, Sterk and Van Ryswyck's moved into the chapel, a space they still work in today. Slowly, Atelier NL introduced the surrounding

community to their creative practice by sharing the space, putting on communal activities. The chapel is at the centre of a mixed multi cultural community made up of homeowners and tenants of social housing. Until 2015, projects happily took place, but at this point Atelier NL came under pressure from developers to move unless they purchased the building. It is a social economic phenomenon, repeated time and again all over the world when artist and designers play a significant part in urban regeneration only to be forced out by developers and rising rents. Sterk and Van Ryswyck's response was to again invite the local community into the chapel and canvass support. This was warmly received and gave them energy to explore how they could buy the chapel. Initially the bank's response was negative, only looking at the balance sheet and not at the cultural value of Atelier NL to the community. The only capital the creative partnership owned was a basement full of clay and the community on their side. So they invited the community in to help make small clay tiles from their library of material gathered from Holland and other parts of the world. The clay tiles became their own currency through a form of crowd funding. The production, publicity and sale of the tiles also became a way of creating a greater engagement with a wider community of people who shared their enthusiasm and passion for Atelier NL projects. (Figure 8) Sterk and Van Ryswyck, their assistants and the community managed to make over 3000 tiles, the story made the local and national press, capturing the passion of the people. The 3000 tiles were displayed on the walls of the Chapel forming a visible index of their work and the success of the crowd funding. Next they took part in Dutch Design Week and the enthusiasm for buying the tiles and the desire to be part of the story took off. This enabled Sterk and Van Ryswyck to obtain a mortgage and buy the Chapel, securing the home of Atelier NL.

Figure 8: Atelier NL (2010) ClayMAchine_Atelier NL© Patricia Rehe.

Capitalising on the provenance of ideas and stories around the projects of Sterk and Van Ryswyck is part of their portfolio of funding mechanisms. Each Atelier NL project has a heavy investment in research making it difficult to financially support just through the production of artefacts and products. Part of their creative output is teaching, telling stories and sharing their expertise all over the world about their creative endeavours surrounding the objects and images they make. The currency of the handmade in the face of highly sophisticated industrial production / digital culture makes it very difficult for the designer maker to trade exclusively on traditional criteria of utilitarian function, emotional attitude and cultural style. In a sense, the supporting phenomenological narrative that is shot through their creative methodology and production of their work is a highly prized cultural function, which has its own form of currency today.

‘Walter Benjamin’s own braiding of craft and narration in ‘The Storyteller’ goes further to illuminate a historical, practical affinity between craft skills and storytelling. The ability to tell stories, Benjamin tells us, is rooted in two factors; travel to faraway places and knowledge of past lore.’ (Leslie 2007: 386)

Sterk and Van Ryswyck’s collaboration and work started with a creative project in South America and a desire to travel the world exploring global culture and experiencing ‘other’ worldly phenomena. However, their very local socially engaged

practice has revealed an incredibly rich fertile productive vein and established a mature creative methodology which has global connections.

Sterk and Van Ryswyck's international connections continue to expand through their interdisciplinary practice working with scientists, artist, designers, writers, and photographers. Atelier NL clay and glass experiments are featured in a book by Richard Fortey a highly respected British palaeontologist, author and collaborator. 'The Wood For The Trees' (Fortey 2016) takes a long view of nature through a small section of woodland employing a lifetime of scientific experience. The focus of the book is a four-acre ancient beech-and-bluebell woodland in the Chiltern Hills owned by him and his wife. Their methods of enquiry overlap in the sense of taking a section of land to interrogate, investigate and record, undertaking a detailed cross disciplinary research programme of study, ultimately forming a deep map revealing the locational identity of a given space and place at a given time.

Currently Sterk and Van Ryswyck are developing a project titled 'To see the world in a grain of sand'. Since 2010 they have been collecting sand from dunes, beaches, rivers, mountains and quarries to melt into glass. They are invited people through their website to send samples of sand from all over the world along with their connected stories. During Dutch Design Week 2017, they revealed the unique colours and textures of the sand and shared the origins and stories of both sand and people from all corners of the globe. In an increasingly digitally connected world and phenomena linked with liberal capitalism we often experience a homogenised decentred existence. That being said, Sterk and Van Ryswyck use and are empowered by technological resources, enabling them to make resonant objects and engage in social and cultural discourse.

'We believe as designer makers you should question what your standpoint as a designer is. How do you position yourself in the world? What's your added value to what you make? How can you contribute to the world? How can you embed and promote ethical & environmental issues? Globalisation is problematic, when you buy clay from a pottery supplier and it states firing temperature, shrink percentage, colour etc. it's convenient but predictable, it is similar to buying a ready cake mix from a supermarket, the outcomes are always very similar. However, when you look at the range of colours and properties of clay from a small area it is amazingly diverse. Globalisation has lots of positives and it's good the cake mix is available but we tend to overlook the value of individual places and their particular qualities' (Sterk 2017, interview)

The social affection and desire to engage with Atelier NL projects is in part due to the fact that the global production system lacks ethical and locational connectedness. The current lack of social engagement and connection between designers, manufacturers and local retailers with their local communities has created a sea of products that have very little gravity or locational specificity. The high street brands which exist in every western city all look very similar, even though they are selling the idea of difference. Atelier NL and other designer makers who forge links with local resources, materials and communities as well as a global constituency are carving out a space where people can make social and cultural connections between objects and their own life narrative.

Conclusion

This research has drawn together ideas about aspects of material culture and its symbolism regarding time, place and space. Out of the investigation of Sterk and Van Ryswyck's creative practice, the project synthesized historical and contemporary ideas about the 'handmade,' and social utility. Observations focused upon how utilitarian ceramics might be embodied with social meaning and become symbolic of a sense of place. The Polderceramics tableware combined ideas of perceptions of the handmade, aesthetic experience and the vernacular quality of Sterk and Van Ryswyck's creative output. The writing of Tim Ingold and his focus upon interdisciplinary inquiry has made a contribution to how we might understand and perceive Atelier NL creative methods. Sterk and Van Ryswyck's themselves acknowledge how the British palaeontologist and natural historian Richard Fortey has influenced their form of interdisciplinary inquiry drawing upon anthropology, archaeology, palaeontology and geology through their practice led research. The process of contextualising Atelier NL's work within the fields of art, design and craft highlighted the fluid and exciting nature of current design craft practice in the face of postmodernity. The investigation explored how avant-garde makers draw upon the fields of social and environmental enquiry, placing Atelier NL's work within a wider context of visual and material culture.

Within the current postmodern landscape, the territories or tectonic plates of art, design and craft continue to shift, sliding over each other, similar to a period of high geological activity. Just within the conceptual currents of ceramics, Joe Dahn's book *New Directions in ceramics*, illustrated how the inclusion of 'critical theory' into ceramics education and research contributed to a wide divergence of studio craft practice and theory. A similar divergence within the field of conceptual design craft has taken place, highlighting the benefits of deploying an interdisciplinary inquiry, socially engaged and research-based practice within the field. One could make a claim that Atelier NL's method of interdisciplinary inquiry has injected elements of innovation into the field of ceramics and craft practice. The paper started by linking 'Barvas Ware' from the Outer Hebrides and Atelier NL ceramics, highlighting the rich social and economic narratives that orbit the artefacts both sets of women have produced. 'Barvas Ware' is symbolic of locational identity, as well as illustrating the social economic realities of a given time and place. Atelier NL's share the phenomena that their ceramics is embodied with a sense of locational identity, however favours more of a social environmental activism through the process of social engagement and material enquiry. The effects of modernity and postmodernity are playing their part in shaping the meaning, function and value of not only the handmade but also ideas of locational identity in an ever expanding global village. The weathering of rocks over time and the geological forces of heat and pressure play their part in the formations of distinct clay bodies. The cultural forces characterised by postmodernity are inevitably changing the social and cultural landscape we inhabit along with the material culture we construct.

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Author biography

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Illustrations - Ceramics and Locational Identity

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Figures 1, 2 & 7 from the article:



Figure 1. Atelier NL. (2010). Tilewall_Polderproject ©Jean-Paul.Baptiste.



Figure 2. 17th Century slipware earthenware jug, Abernodwydd Farmhouse, Llangadfan, Powys, Wales Built 1678 Re-Erected 1955 Museum of Welsh Life. Photo credit: Peter Bodenham.

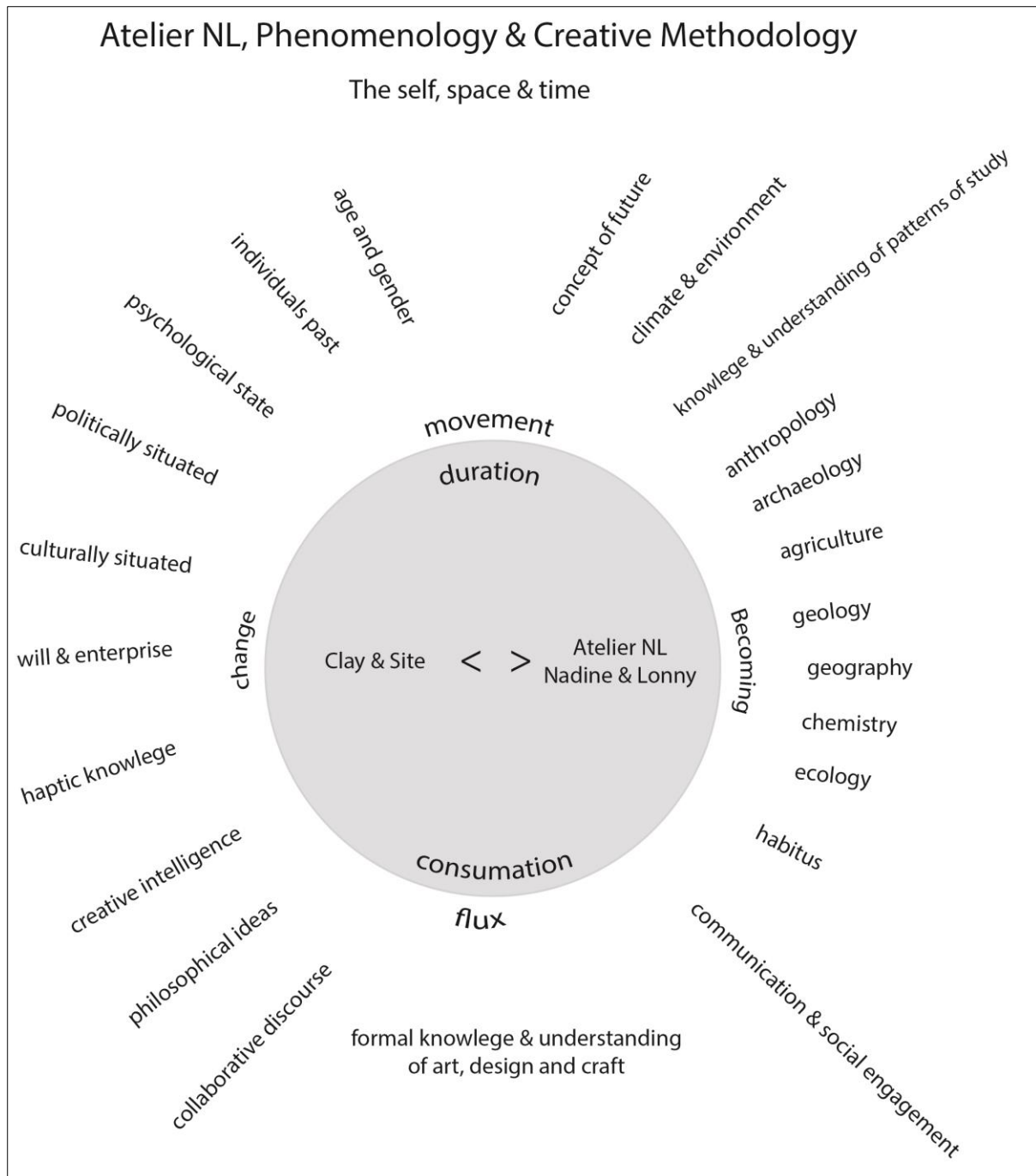


Figure 7. Bodenham.P (2017) Atelier NL Phenomenology & Creative Methodology, The Self, Space & Time © Peter Bodenham.