



STATE OF CERAMICS | February 9, 2020

Phoebe Cummings

Ephemerality, Recording, and Clay as a Time-Based Medium

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In attendance:

Phoebe Cummings, Nicole Seisler, Kenna Dworsky, Kristen Morgin, Julie Schustack, Taylor Kibby, Addison Woolsey, Sarah Julig, Marina Weiner, Mary Little, Rosie Brand, Sherry Shieh, Thomas Müller, Maria Lam, Megan Bartley Mattheus, Gerardo Monterrubio, Sameul Jernigan, Humberto Reynoso ('Beto'), Andrea Nhuch, Armando Ramos

Questions from Phoebe:

- How does ceramics operate through and across time?
- How can we understand ceramics as a form of material performance?
- If the ephemeral, changeable nature of raw clay connects with human existence and this moment in time, then how does it translate into the future, beyond the object?
- How do museums encompass expanded forms of ceramic practice?
- How is such practice supported by museums and how does it pose challenges to their structure and collecting policies?

Summary:

Clay is never static; it is bound to time. It can become fired into permanence (but even then, nothing is permanent, and fired ceramics are susceptible to breakage) or can exist as an experience or an act. Sometimes the artist performs with the clay, sometimes the material enacts its own performance, or the work performs itself.

Working with unfired clay is sometimes arrived at out of necessity (not having a kiln or ceramic facilities). Is this encouraged by academic institutions? Should we refer to what we do as working with 'clay' or 'ceramics' and does our terminology reflect a hierarchy of clay-based practices? There is value or worth associated with 'dirt' vs 'ceramics'. Market-constructed value places more worth upon permanence than impermanence. Raw clay embodies a potential for change/growth/decay. The survival of a ceramic object often relates to our own mortality, and potentially a rebirth.

A permanent object can be burdensome—heavy, large, in need of storage, taking up space in the world; an impermanent object or installation can be powerful—existing at almost any scale and then completely ceasing to exist. If, however it ceases to exist, does that form a gap in art history? What are adequate forms of recording an ephemeral work? It might exist in the form of instructions for re-creation, as video, photographs, or more abstractly in other means and matter. In her exhibition CUT, Phoebe presents poetry and a fictional account of a previous work, within the same humid conditions it was originally displayed. It is possible that an evocation, a fiction or perhaps a myth, could provide a more vivid transfer of knowledge and reinterpretation of the original experience. A written or spoken account can be both commonplace and otherworldly, creating a space for imagination and visualization. The story of Chris Burden's performance Shoot makes it possible to vividly imagine—or physically re-enact—the original work. Has land art perhaps set a precedent for the documentation of ephemeral work?

Is it necessary to record or reproduce a work that is intended to degrade and disappear? Artists of course need documents for future applications; Galleries, collectors, and museums otherwise have nothing to archive. Museums are still reluctant to collect ephemeral or changing work but are seeking solutions. A photograph of an ephemeral clay work could be collected by a museum, but then it might be located in a photography department. A fragile and degrading work may itself be collected but is unlikely to be shown or taken out of storage (Is all unfired clay work ephemeral? An unfired clay work that is not intended to degrade—a permanent impermanent object, aka a very fragile object—is easier to collect). Does it even make sense for museums to collect ephemeral work? Perhaps other methods or systems could function better; for example, the V&A in London has a residency studio, where artists make work on-site. This implies that the museum is collecting a moment or experience, but not necessarily an object.

Ephemeral work is an opportunity for establishing new constructs of value. An ephemeral work has capital because it can go away. Dirt is valueless but completely valuable because it is essential for life. An ephemeral work teaches us to value experience instead of an end product. Removing the need to fire work can be freeing. When facilities to fire work are unavailable, raw clay becomes a necessity and we have the opportunity to look more deeply at other elements of the material.

Other important ideas:

Clay listens to everyone.

The bisque state is like a pause in time, in between the more desirable states. Is it possible to make a 'good' bisque object? Bisque-fired objects are frequently left behind at residencies and often become part of small collections.

The definition of ceramics depends upon our attitude, how we approach it, and how we take ownership of it.