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*Exposition text to RUUKKU
Studies in Artistic Research
Online Publication*

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Connection to materiality

Engaging with Ceramic practice

This exposition introduces an exploration of ceramic material from the perspective of an artist-researcher. The ceramic material is explored through aesthetics and making. In this exposition, the material connection is understood as a broad term introducing the idea of different levels of involvement with the material. The material connections are reflected from two different perspectives, giving a more holistic idea of what influences the act of making and perception. In this exposition, I explore the material connections mainly from the subjective perspective of a ceramic practitioner and partly from the perspective of viewers who have no prior experience of the processes of making. Together with the written content, I show different works, for instance videos and a sound file that reveal parts of the processes in ceramic practice. The video and sound works are discussed here as process aesthetics, exposing the experiences that have aesthetic quality, in the context of making. Through these examples, I discuss different levels of engagement with the material and its processes. The aim is to open up the material connections in a different light, describing the idea of diverse levels of engagement in the ceramic practice.

Materiality and practice

Works presented here show events from the process of making where the knowing and the making are understood as inseparable. The knowledge is not “before” or “after” the making, but “with” the making (Siukonen 2011, 45). The

works are part of an artistic process in which the articulation (of knowing and the making) comes after the process of making. This type of subjective viewpoint has also been acknowledged in practice-led research where the research questions often arise out of the practice itself (Mäkelä 2007, 160). From the subjective perspective of a maker there are similarities between the engagement with the ceramic material and the other materials in arts, crafts and design; therefore, these notions can be generalized. I look at the ceramic practice as a way of life (Leppänen 2000, 29) that engages the maker on multiple levels simultaneously. Time is one aspect of the practice that makes a strong connection to the material processes. Every step of the process takes its own time and in order to fulfill one's curiosity towards the material, lifetime of one person doesn't seem such a long time considering what the material can offer.

The purpose of this exposition is to reflect on specific material qualities that affect our engagement with the ceramic material. Different aspects of ceramic materials are discussed in different contexts, including the perspective of an outside perceiver who has no prior knowledge of the ceramic material or its processes. Reflecting on these aspects of perception, I open up an intrinsic connection to ceramic material that is constantly influencing my engagement to it. I recognize ceramics as "vital materiality" (Bennett 2010, preface) that affects me in a way that is difficult to articulate. As well as exploring the subjective experience of ceramic materials and making I recognize the effectiveness of ceramic material that can engage even without any prior experience of it. Composing a vision of the material with exhibited videos, sounds and images, I will try to introduce what materiality is to a practitioner.

Engagement and experience

The theoretical background is built on the concepts of aesthetic engagement (Berleant 1991) and aesthetic experience (Dewey 2005). In my research, I apply Dewey's (2005, 37) concept of aesthetic experience, focusing on the idea of having *an* experience (see Figure 2.). Dewey explains that *an* experience is a flow from something to something, and in it there is no self-identity of the different parts of it but all the parts lead to one another, and as a part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself (ibid. 38). Dewey says that the *aesthetic* denotes the consumer's rather than the producer's standpoint (ibid. 49). He makes the distinction of "artistic" referring to the act of production and "aesthetic" to that of perception and enjoyment (ibid. 48). Comparing the perception of the consumers and makers it can be simplified that the maker holds both artistic and aesthetic perception towards the art object and the consumers perception is more attached to aesthetic without the experience of making.

Understanding the material connection from the perspective of the maker and the “non-maker”, I apply the concept of engagement in order to bring out the qualities and the levels of involvement in the experience. Arnold Berleant (1991) emphasizes the role of active participation in the aesthetic experience, encompassing both the artists and the perceivers. “Most important for us as creators and appreciators of art is the contribution we ourselves make, a contribution that is active and constitutive. “That is why I call this an aesthetic of engagement, a participatory aesthetics” (Ibid, 4). In order to combine the aesthetic perspectives in the acts of making and perception, this research focuses on the aesthetic experiences that are revealed through process aesthetics. Process aesthetics is understood in this research as experiences that involve aesthetic quality, active engagement and interaction in artistic ceramic practice. Thus, in the context of ceramic art practice process aesthetics combines the acts of making, the perception and the enjoyment. Falin & Falin (2014) have introduced process aesthetics in the context of practice led research: “Through the process aesthetics a part of the practice can be opened from the perspective of making to understand the meaning of the aesthetic experience in the context of artistic practice” (Ibid, 1616).

Exploring the level of engagement through process aesthetics

The videos, sound file and pictures presented in this exposition have been made in the context of my artistic research, which focuses on the process of aesthetic engagement in the ceramic practice. Through making, reflecting and presenting these works, my understanding of the research question has become more clear. In my research, making is a means to realize what is meaningful in the context of practice. The engagement with ceramic material, which has been a natural part of the practice, but not properly articulated, is now under scrutiny. Edmund De Waal questions the silence that seems to be part of the ceramic practice: “If theory is of value, why is not this more apparent to potters – and why are not more makers of ceramic art writing about their work?” (De Waal 2000, 32). This silence might be related to the difficult task of verbalizing the entangled issues of ceramics and making, but the maker’s position is valuable and should be exploited more. Mäkelä points out that the spectatorial engagement together with thought, material and reflection is at the root of the process, and the research targets the unknown without knowing where the outcomes of the research might settle (Mäkelä & O’Riley 2012, 11).

With the three videos presented here, I have been able to articulate the material reactions and other influential aspects directing the process. But most of all, I have been able to bring out the aesthetic experiences and focus on the different aspects of the process that engage us with the material. This

research follows a similar methodological route to that which Maarit Mäkelä established in her dissertation on *Memories of clay. Representations of gender and subjective creative process* (Mäkelä 2003). She introduced a framework for the dialogue between art and research in which she stresses that the making is the initiative for understanding (Mäkelä 2006, 73). For me, it is also interesting how others might perceive the works that are part of a research process – not in a way that I would be trying to convey my perception through the works, but rather to compare how the knowledge of the making influences the perception.

Three videos and the sound of crackling

The video: *Ink Absorption 2* was made by dropping different colored inks on a hot ceramic plate that has a crackle glaze on it. At the right temperature, the surface absorbs the ink and the cracks of the glaze become visible. This moment when the cracks become visible is very beautiful, possibly even more beautiful than the trace that remains at the end.

This video of crackling flux was made for capturing the moments when the sounds of crackling occur. The plate with the thick layer of flux was made to produce the sounds of crackling, but the actual event of crackling is also an experience in itself when enhanced like this. Something that is normally perceived as an unchangeable in the final artefact becomes alive.

This video: *Ink absorption 1* was taken when the ceramic object's temperature was about 400 degrees Celsius. This shows that the surface is too hot to absorb the ink in the glaze; instead, it boils and burns on the surface instantly when it touches it. This unexpected boiling was an aesthetic experience that left no trace after it was gone.

The sound of ceramic crackling is familiar to me from the experience of making. Often glazes on the surface of ceramic objects tend to crackle when taken out of the kiln. Rapid temperature change and the possible tension between the ceramic object and the surface glazing can produce cracks. The sound is very beautiful, but not very commonly used as a material for artistic expressions.

The very first notion of material aesthetics to me was the sound of crackling. This aesthetic experience from the process of making was the initiative that led me further toward ceramic materiality.

Material offerings

I exhibited ceramic experimentations in a design research conference to

gather feedback on material aesthetics. I asked the exhibition participants to comment on their experiences of the exhibited ceramic test pieces (see Figures 1. and 2.). The purpose of collecting comments from the exhibition viewers was to gain a broader understanding of material aesthetics (Falin 2013, 487). I asked the viewers to give their comments on how they experienced the materiality and the aesthetics of the exhibited ceramic experimentations (see Figures 1. and 2.). Some of the feedback from the aesthetic experimentations revealed an interesting aesthetic approach to the ceramic objects. Perceivers wanted to touch or even taste the exhibited experiments:

“It looks like food – in some cases delicious, in others like it stayed in the fridge too long! The ‘control’ of the dishes (some shape) is lovely! Sets it up well for comparison.”

“I cannot resist touching them”

“I longed to lick them or put them in my mouth, the more structural objects looked like lozenges, so I wanted to feel them warm up to my body temperature + feel the textures with my lips, where it is more sensitive touch.”

*Comments from the viewers of Nordes13 conference exhibition, 9.-13.6.2013
Copenhagen*

Having the form of a cup, these pieces offer something to the perceiver. The material is *an offering* to the viewer. If the perceiver has understanding of the ceramic materials, the offering is directed at the behavior of the materials. For the non-practitioner, the offerings are directed at feelings and emotions. It does not matter if the artifact is an experimentation or an art object; the material offerings can still provide experiences for the perceiver. This notion of an offering that I am referring to is related to the concept of affordance (Gibson 1986), with the difference that affordance is connected to action and offerings are connected to subjective thinking.

Figure 1 shows a row of ceramic test pieces that exhibit the offerings. The bases are thrown ceramic cup-shaped objects inside of which there is colemanite and quartz mixed together in different percentage variations. The test pieces show different possibilities of the material usage and its aesthetic potentialities. The test pieces demonstrate not only the material behavior, but also the connection to the making process. The amount of water used in the mixture and the shape of the base cup both influence the end results. These aspects are traceable to the maker or to a person with experience of making (with ceramic materials or similar processes). The aesthetic potentiality in the case of a non-practitioner is dependent on the imagination that draws from the life-world.

The different relations towards materiality became evident to me when making my MA thesis where I concentrated on ceramic furniture. Ceramic material, for example in a living room context, used in furniture, would seem abnormal and alien. According to Mary Douglas, the ceramic material would in this way be seen as *an anomaly* (Douglas 2002, 47). By making a ceramic stool, I created an anomaly that did not fit in the existing environment because of its material. When directly pointing out that this stool is made out of porcelain the impulsive reaction was: *Can you sit on it? Will it break?*

Individually, the objects can address cultural, social, personal and even political aspects (Cooper 2009, 6), but the life-world experiences that influence the perception of the materiality can provide a larger scale of associations towards the material.

Sensing the material

Throughout the history of ceramics, the different modalities of sensing the material have been used. Tasting the ceramic material is not a very far-fetched idea as a means of experiencing it. Tasting the surface of a ceramic object can tell us about the porosity of the piece. For example, in the case of porcelain, the material is so dense, due to material composition and high firing, that the material has no moisture absorption at all. It is therefore possible to recognize real porcelain from other lower-fired ceramic materials by tasting it. Sound is also a way to test the material. By ringing the rim of a ceramic object, one can hear from the sound if the object is intact. Smelling is a way to know the level of moisture in the greenware (unfired clay). In some of the still working brick factories, this is an continuing part of the process that the workers use. Even though machines at the factories may replace other processes, smelling of the drying clay is still used to identify the correct stage of the process.

In addition to different sense modalities, intuition and sensibility are also ways of sensing the material. These aspects are familiar to artists in their practice, but at the same time they are very hard to point out. Still they seem to play a vital role in the act of making. These relate more to who you are as a person and what kind of qualities you have: the way you are built. Jeweler Bruce Metcalf recognizes this connection towards the materials:

“I also believe that some people have a strong intuitive reaction to the working of specific materials. A kid takes a ceramics class and suddenly the material speaks to her. She likes the mud, the deep and pre-literate engagement with the material. She recognizes the material and labor as being perfectly matched to her sensibility, and it changes her life.” (Metcalf 1994, 15)

The specific reasons why the material engages us in the first place are hard to identify. I feel that I have a strong sensitivity towards ceramics as a material and that this sensitivity is an important driver that engages me in my practice. Revealing the connection between sensitivities to tactile or emotional aspects seems to be impossible. Different aspects of the sensitivity are equal and cannot be divided into different parts. Using a metaphor, I could say that I understand the language of ceramics, but this would be something that I have learned through experience. When Metcalf writes: “the material speaks to her”, he suggests that the material engages the person in an intrinsic manner and on a very profound level. The initial sensitivity towards the material, the appeal and the impact it made on me in the first place, is what has enabled me to continue being inspired by the material. This may be a similar notion to “an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality” (Bennett 2010, x preface). This is where the curiosity (Sennett 2008, 120) towards the material starts. How the practice will evolve depends on the level of curiosity about the material (Ibid).

This initial stage of an engagement with the material is different from the continuous work that creates new knowledge of the material and engages with the practice. Making and creating artifacts bring out the material qualities. According to David Pye, the material *qualities* are subjective, inside our heads, in contrast to the material *features* which are objective and measurable (Pye 1978, 38). As making brings out the qualities, so does the offerings that I mentioned in the previous chapter. The difference between the qualities and the offerings is that the material qualities are not only tied to aesthetics but also to the subjective perspective of the maker. When I discuss offerings, I stress that depending on the perceiver the offerings are different, but nevertheless they still are offerings whether the perceiver is the maker or not.

Conclusions

Understanding the ceramic material and the different perspectives of perception makes the notion of ceramic materiality more abstract. In this case, the abstract is not a negative notion, but an idea of a universe of potentialities. For a practitioner, the material engagements manifest themselves on multiple levels. These different engagements intertwine in an experience with aesthetic quality. This kind of experience can be called an aesthetic experience. The material aspects are not limited to visual or functional qualities, but go deeper into human experiences and connections in the lived world. The complexity of ceramic material hinders the layman’s perception of the material. At the same time, the complexity provides a specific universe, where a creative mind can lose itself, committing a whole life to the ceramic practice.

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