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Priska Falin and Helen Felcey

Subtle Ground

Feeling our ways towards a supportive method in ceramic practice



*Finding natural clay for making clay pebbles to be used in the Sensorial Ground workshop's material boxes.
Image: Manne-Sakari Mustonen 2020, Ramsinniemi, Helsinki, Finland.*

Keywords: Clay, Embodied dimension, Subtle body, Practitioner's experience, Aesthetic experience, Creative practice, Dwelling

ABSTRACT

This exposition focuses on the exploration and development of Subtle Ground, a method that directs attention during and through making with clay, in the context of creative practices in ceramics. The method takes a non-conventional approach to making; it focuses on being with the material instead of pursuing a conclusion in the creative process. The method directs the practitioner to follow aesthetic qualities in making understood from a pragmatist view on having *an* experience. In this exposition, the focus is on the author's collaborative work that has shaped the Subtle Ground method, particularly the workshop 'Sensorial Ground'. In Subtle Ground, the idea of dwelling is emphasized offering the specific approach to making. The method consists of a series of exercises that direct attention towards subtle sense perception within the body. Through working with the Subtle Ground method, we suggest that it is possible to begin to understand the embodied dimension and how it influences creative practice. The Subtle Ground method has been built on the

clay's supportive qualities, bringing together sense perception and physicality, thus understanding the practice's aesthetic qualities and connections to meditation.

Practice: In this research, we focus on ceramics practice. By practice, we mean that something has been sustained over a period of time, through which a connection is established between the maker and her material.

Making: In this exposition, when discussing making, we are referring to the physical activity with the clay. Whilst there are many different forms of making with clay, here, the emphasis is on the bodily engagement with the material instead of what is being produced.

1 Introduction

This exposition presents parts of our artistic research that is an ongoing collaboration between two countries. We are two artists working through a material-based dialogue that draws from our practice and shared interests. We have been developing an exploration of clay as a material that grounds our bodies and creates a connection to the surrounding environment. In this exposition, when seeking to understand clay as supportive material, we look into the therapeutic qualities of clay demonstrated by research within the fields of art therapy and psychotherapy. We also consider how ceramic practitioners draw connections between making and meditation practices. In both cases, we recognize the grounding and vitalizing aspects of clay work.

For the basis of our work, we introduce two workshops where we began to develop a direction within a creative practice that uses clay work as a means to focus on the experiential aspects of making. The outcomes of the workshops are developed further in this exposition to form a method that draws upon the experiential aspects of making and is tightly connected to the creative practice. We also discuss the shared research that was used to formulate the structure and aims for the 'Sensorial Ground' workshop. Our work is a continuous journey exploring the clay's possibilities, and in this context, we discuss the clay and its qualities that we find relevant and enable the practice that is sought through the Subtle Ground method.

As ceramic practitioners, we draw upon personal experiences. Through sustained conversation and shared practice, we have explored exercises that extend towards the environment in order to gain an open perceptive state of being before working with the clay. In our conversation, we weaved together our practice and theoretical interests and examined the areas of overlap and the gaps that needed more discovery. We began to discuss our early embodied experiences from our nature that we remember in our childhood. These embodied memories led to new realizations in the research. While beginning to explore through our practice, we found a strong connection to Miller's edition of Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants* (2009). From this edition, we drew the idea of a Poet-Scientist to guide our paths when seeking the embodied relatedness within our material work.

The Subtle Ground supports and upholds a ceramic practitioner's engagement towards her practice. The method aims to direct attention to the subtle level of sensing bringing the aesthetic nature of the material practice to the forefront. Our method comprises a series of exercises that bring attention to sense perception and the embodied dimension as an integral part of making processes. The activities described in this exposition seek to utilize a practitioner's intrinsic qualities

and personal connections towards material and environment in a way that enables them to bring their focus towards within.

In the Subtle Ground method, we connect to the practitioners' existing dimensions of practice alongside initiating a process of self-discovery through the clay. The foundation is in the unity of the body–mind following the embodied cognition theories. Philosopher Mark Johnson states: 'Acknowledging that every aspect of human being is grounded in specific forms of bodily engagement with an environment requires a far-reaching rethinking of who and what we are, in a way that is largely at odds with many of our inherited Western philosophical and religious traditions' (2007: 1). Here, we draw upon meditation and the eastern philosophies of making. Such material has nurtured our dialogue into body–mind unity and has supported our approach to materials and processes.

In this research, we employ the term 'subtle body', which we use to refer to reaching towards the subtler experiences within the body to become more body-aware during creative practice. For the purpose of this discussion, the term enables us to focus on the body's ability to perceive the nuances and details within the material world.

In current theoretical discussions on making activities, which have a close or direct connection to the material, the articulation of embodied knowledge has been located in the dialogue or negotiation between the material and the maker (Brinck and Reddy 2019; Aktaş and Mäkelä 2019). In the context of design research, embodied cognition has been central to gaining an understanding of how practitioners think with their hands (Groth 2017). Research has also shown that practising arts and crafts is tightly connected to the essence of human embodied cognition and well-being (Huotilainen, Rankanen, Groth, Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, and Mäkelä 2018). There is a wide recognition and emphasis on embodied cognition in the research that focuses on creative practice; yet, the research continues to overlook the inherent embodied capacity of the practitioner and how this can be supported.

There are some notable practices for artists, designers, and craftspersons on how to, for example, tap into their different senses and be more body-aware during practice. In her doctoral research, Ariana Amacker (2017) puts forward the novel idea of using Butoh, a movement improvisation method, for exploring perceptual and physical engagement in the design practice. In her more recent article, Amacker (2019) points to the ability to practise serendipity in the context of creative practices and draws from her training in movement improvisation. In her article, she advocates that "all forms of inquiry share a continuum between a reflective, conscious mode of awareness and an aesthetic, pre-analytic mode of awareness" (ibid.: 1843). This pre-analytic mode of inquiry corresponds to the idea of the Subtle Ground as a dimension where emotions and physicality are in the core instead of rational mind.

Artist Lotte van Gelder situates her practice in 'the intersection of language movement and space'. In her essay 'So This is Where We Meet', she discusses her use of movement-based practice that she offers for students working in creative practices (van Gelder 2016). In her sessions, she places bodywork at the starting point of art and design practice and discusses the body from different perspectives. In her approach, the body can be a destination "serving as a canvas to make work on or around" (ibid.: 36). In addition to working towards the body, she describes the body as a tool where the sessions are "providing makers with an awareness of the functioning of their primary instrument" (ibid.). Gelder encourages the participants to contemplate on their personal, inner experiences and through her sessions she targets something that can only be understood through direct experiencing.

Subtle Ground aims to support practice through understanding the subtle body and how it performs during the practice, understanding the personal connections and the embodied dimension which shapes the act of making. In the following sections, we discuss a series of exercises and highlight the core elements of the method, which brings emphasis to the practitioners' personal directions that ultimately shape the ways in which the method becomes applicable. The overall idea in the Subtle Ground relies on 'dwelling', which is further defined through the notion of 'indwelling'. 'Dwelling' encourages the being with the material in making, while 'indwelling' gives direction to inhale and exhale the material qualities and processes of making..

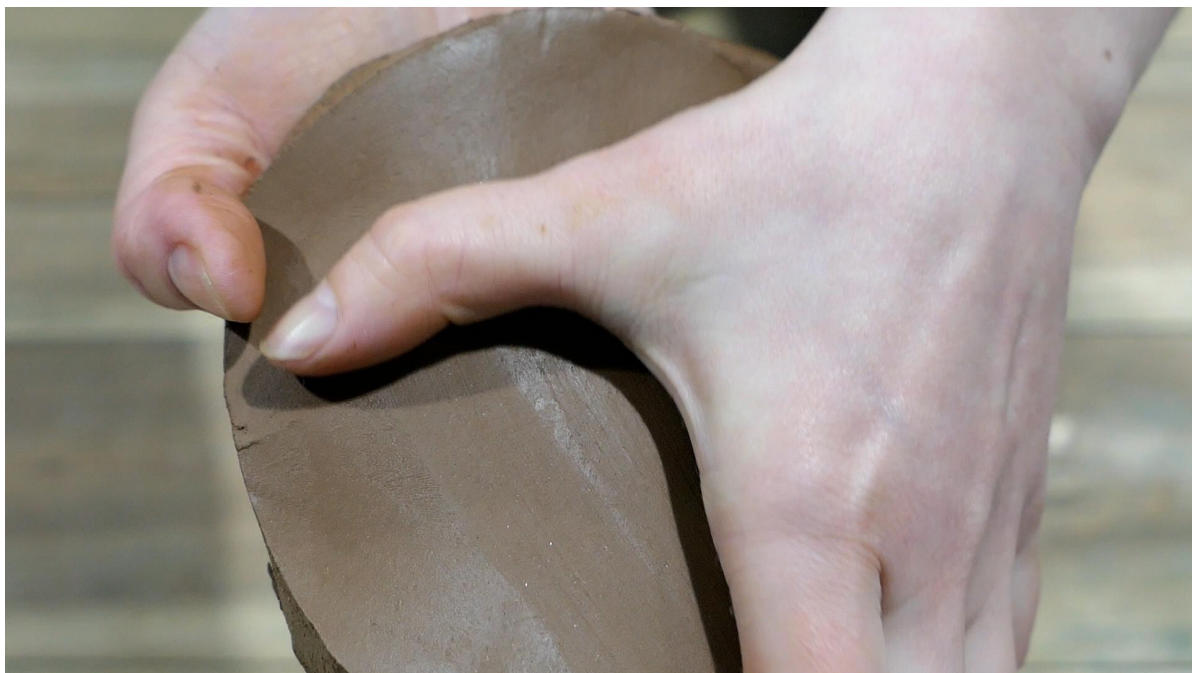
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In this part, we open up the therapeutic qualities of clay and also highlight the practitioners' experiential perspective on how ceramics can be considered as a holistic practice that draws from the body-mind being in its processes.



2 What is it about clay?

Clay, due to its tactile and sensory qualities has been a common material to use in art therapy and psychotherapy. In such fields, the emphasis is on the body — the experience of working with the clay and the effects this has on individuals in terms of healing. For our own research, it is useful to understand the different ways in which clay is used as a supportive material. We have looked into examples from the art therapy fields, as these practices rely on working with the supportive qualities of the materials — a practice that is less common within creative ceramic fields.



Feeling the clay and revealing its qualities. Video: Priska Falin, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/696951850>

In some research, clay has been shown to have greater effects in comparison to other common art-therapy methods for its unique qualities (Nan and Ho 2017). Besides the common use of clay as part of art therapy materials, there is also an established alternative treatment, Clay Art Therapy (CAT), and a trauma-informed art therapy approach: the Clay Field. Clay Field has been developed for children from the age of two to adulthood (Elbrecht and Antcliff 2015) taking into consideration the different stages of development and for different needs in terms of therapy.

In Clay Field, there is a clear emphasis on the body and sensorimotor development. Embedded within the body's felt sense, such sensory experiences are understood as lasting, 'known' to the body. Taking such sensory knowledge as their focal point, as opposed to a specific problem understood by the client, Clay Field describes that sensorimotor achievements can "allow us to rewrite our biography towards a more authentic, alive sense of self" (Elbrecht 2019). In here, we are particularly interested in this ability that working with clay has in returning to the body — to the experience of the felt senses, embedded deeply within the body. In our perspective, the re-writing points to the malleability of clay, which supports the body's ability to transform through material experiences. Clay-work is an opportunity to create new, positive experiences through the felt senses, enabling individuals to access this "alive sense of self" (ibid.).



Turning into clay. Gathering clay and rocks from the Kaolin quarries on the Ivö island, Sweden. It takes millions of years to form clay or raw materials such as kaolin. Image: Priska Falin, 2019.

The use of clay as a material within therapy, especially its use with adult patients, is often described as 'clay-work' — meaning that the special usage of the material and interest in how to understand its potential lies within its handling, manipulating, and sculpting the clay (Sholt and Gavron 2006: 66). In this context, Sholt and Gavron find that "clay-work involves body expression through the physical work with clay, and mental processes through the act of modelling and through observing the product. Thus it allows integration of emotions, memories, and fantasies from different levels of

consciousness” (ibid.: 71). In therapy, Sholt and Gavron also recognize clay’s quality as an elementary substance connecting it to our early stages in human history.

In the Clay Field, the clay is offered in a smooth non-gritty form within a rectangular wooden box together with a bowl of water (Elbrecht and Antcliff 2015: 210). The work at the Clay Field focuses on the haptic perception as opposed to producing physical outcomes: “At the end of a Clay Field session, only intense body memories will be taken home. The kinaesthetic motor action combined with sensory perception will have lasting therapeutic benefits, especially in cases of developmental delays in children and trauma healing” (Elbrecht 2019). The material is open and gives a safe place to be with it: “At the Clay Field, the clay is perceived as there somehow, it has a being-quality as the hands’ search for a contact, for a tangible supportive base on which they can rest. Hands here are dreamy, they are not doing anything” (Elbrecht and Antcliff 2015: 213).

In this research, we appreciate this being quality with clay and particularly the notion of ‘being with’ material in the context of practice and making. The haptic and tactile experiences of the subtle senses draw us into our being. We emphasize the idea that instead of pursuing end results in making (as understood from the traditional perspective), trying to stay with the material in the acts of making can support different kinds of learning that are more to do with the body-based discovery of the self that is also at the core of the Clay Field (Elbrecht and Antcliff 2015: 215). Instead of focusing on the healing body, however, we aim to discuss the potential of understanding the workings of the subtle body within creative practice.

While clay and clay-work have been recognized in the context of therapy for supporting the discovery and understanding of the self, ceramic practitioners have been valuing relationships to meditation practice, and within this, how the physical nature of the ceramics discipline can support us to ‘keep the mind in the body’. There is a long history of Eastern master-apprentice teaching and learning that supported the transference of bodily and tacit knowledge gained through an engaged practice over a long period of time. Potter and educator Kenneth R. Beittel published the book *Zen and the Art of Pottery* in 1989 describing his experiences of practising ceramics and exploring the links between pottery and Zen. Beittel was an apprentice in Japan and trained under the Arita tradition of porcelain pottery for one year. He describes the study of the craft, the development of knowledge and insight passed down within the context of a spiritual tradition, where all the activities, processes, and actions support the spiritual practice towards ever-increasing awareness through a form of meditation.

The study of pottery (traditionally speaking) is a long and perhaps arduous process, beginning with the ground. So much has to happen to the clay before it may be worked in the hands; somebody must dig the clay from the ground, and before even taking it from the ground, it takes millions of years to form. Such a practice can involve a deep appreciation of things as they are — dependent on that which has come before and is inherently interconnected. Working the material takes time, focused attention, and discipline, which can be found in the most basic acts, such as wedging a mass of clay. In describing the outcome of such a practice Beittel writes, “the bamboo branch sings through the brush, the spherical jar through the clay on the wheel, naturally and effortlessly” (ibid.: 7). He doesn’t describe something deliberately orchestrated by the artist — a deliberate expression is not sought. On the contrary, articulated in such a way, the artist is no longer present. He describes a natural, effortless togetherness, where the maker has become simply a part of the process.



Participants exploring clay slurry. Embodied Clay explored clay in different states, which enabled different personal responses. Image: Jenny Harper, 2018, Stoke-on-Trent, UK.

Pottery making is a physical craft that engages the whole body in the process. It is body–mind training, which requires us to be mindful of how we handle the clay, moment by moment. Whilst we use the term ‘mindful’ — to be mindful, to be aware, in fact, requires us to keep the mind grounded ‘in the body’.

Nowadays commonly referred to as ‘mindfulness meditation’, Shamatha (Skt. Śamatha; Tib. ལྷོ་ལྷོ་ལྷོ་, shyiné), means ‘calm abiding’ and works with the conceptual mind to calm disturbing emotions. In Shamatha meditation, the body is often used as the primary focus: ‘The most widespread and generally accepted form of Shamatha with focus involves placing attention on the movement of our breath or on an object, like a pebble, a stick, and image of the Buddha, or the like’ (Nyima 2004: 19). When beginning to practice meditation, the practitioner begins to notice when the mind is no longer ‘with’ the breath, or ‘with’ the object. The mind has wandered away on a pathway of thought and at this moment, whilst we are still breathing, we are not aware of our breath or the object that sits before us. But then comes a moment of noticing. We notice that we have ‘gone away’ and we are aware of a moment of ‘coming back’ — to the body, to the present moment. The practitioner trains the mind by simply noticing. In this small moment of noticing and returning to the body, we keep the mind in the body.



A participant exploring hand processes during the Embodied Clay workshop. The participant is pressing clay in her palm repeatedly creating impressions of her hand. Soft, malleable clay was particularly favored, yet perhaps understood in contrast to other more coarse clays. Image: Jenny Harper, 2018, Stoke-on-Trent, UK.

As our process has unfolded, we have found increasing resonance with such age-old methods. We have focused on those methods and clay processes that encourage the practitioner to stay within the ‘stripped back’ nature of processes — perhaps an early phase of a process, where we bring our attention to the body and feel a subtle sense of location.

In seeking to explore the human experience, Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch (2003) set out to understand how we might become aware of our own mental life. In their book *On Becoming Aware: A Pragmatics of Experiencing* they discuss the ‘unreflected’ level of our lives and point to an inward quality of consciousness that ‘is able to perceive its very self at work’ (ibid.: 2). Within this, they point to a quality of knowing: that ‘I am thinking’, ‘I am feeling’. Drawing on the practice of meditation in Buddhism, they note that ‘we will not understand anything important about the tradition of mindfulness/awareness if we remain in an intellectual apprehension of it’ (ibid.: 208). An intellectual understanding of meditation cannot lead to realization; realization can only be reached through experience, through practice.

Designer, Artist, and educator Nathalie Lautenbacher sums up her experiences from her career in ceramic practice: “Clay is a satisfying and addictive material to process. The process is slow, and the process slows one down. At the same time, one feels intensely alive. I have come to believe that is a small but important element for the preservation of diversity within design — and in life for that matter. This connection to materiality is what grounds us” (Lautenbacher 2020: 25).

Whilst we are focused on the embodied level of being or rather the embodied dimension in our being we also recognize the complexity of what it is to be a human, with all its human materiality which Jane Bennett discusses in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Bennett writes “in a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are ‘embodied’. We are, rather, an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes” (2010: 113). In highlighting this, Bennett begins to loosen the perception of ‘one fixed body’ or one fixed ‘material’, which softens our boundaries as we take in the idea that this body that we call our own, is also home to many others.

To be aware of the vibrant nature of matter requires a level of attention — a willingness to tune into the intricacies and complexities of the material and being within the body. As Bennett notes in *Vibrant Matter*, these intricacies are not to do with any singular entity, it is the vibrancy of interconnectedness, where each embodies another.

In discovering what it is about clay, we are simultaneously discovering the body. Rather more, we are recognizing that working with clay is a method by which we can come back to the body. To bring our attention back to our own body is not in any way to separate ourselves from the world around us — it is quite the opposite. In bringing our attention back to our bodies, we begin to delve into the qualities we embody with those beings and materials that surround us. This requires us to engage deeply with the felt experience — the subtle experiences found within the body.

As we have begun to familiarize ourselves with the clay, we have also begun to familiarize with our bodies. In doing so we have begun to shift our feeling towards this body and the subtlety of the senses. The subtle capacities of the body have been brought into view, or rather more have been ‘felt’. The experiences of the subtle body expand our perception and feeling towards the body as we discover the vitality within the clay. Through the process of familiarizing the Subtle Ground begins to develop.

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In this part, we discuss the practice that formed our collaborative work, which began with the 'Embodied Clay' workshop and continued towards the 'Sensorial Ground' workshop, through our shared and individual practices. We open the ideas around the Poet–Scientist that influenced our approach towards how we can perceive our common surroundings in a new way.



Tactile experiences and creating embodied memories. Image: Priska Falin, 2020.

3 The Poet-Scientist approach: Home to the wilderness

During the planning phase of the 'Sensorial Ground' workshop, we worked with different forms of practice to explore the notions and ways of thinking that arose in our discussions. We wished to understand (through experience) what exercises would genuinely support our intentions and to define them in such a way that others might echo this experience, whilst finding a personal connection. One of our primary activities was to walk in our respective home areas. We spoke frequently, sharing our experiences, reflections, and visuals from our small journeys. Alongside this, we shared readings that we felt drawn to and places of overlapping interest, which held connection and meaning.

In the beginning of our work, we found Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's book *The Metamorphosis of Plants* intriguing and especially the new edition of the book with Gordon L. Miller's introduction and photography (Goethe 2009). Miller's lifelong fascination with Goethe's approaches and his own endeavour to produce this edition inspired us. In his search for specimens, Miller travelled far and wide as had Goethe many years before him. Miller had deep motivation to experience and reveal the world that Goethe unfolds in his writings and he went to great lengths of finding the exact same plants or details that Goethe had drawn in his original version of the book.

This endeavour inspired us in our practice to experience the surrounding nature in new ways. Finding the poet–scientist in our practice helped to discover the nuanced and detailed aspects of our environment that supported the attuning to the subtle senses.



Standing still in the landscape. Video: Priska Falin, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/698528842>

This newly illustrated version became almost like a ‘teacher’ as we began to walk and explore our local environments. In Goethe’s work on understanding plant life, he shed light on the different forms and aspects of individual plants, instead of solely looking into the best specimens. He sought to understand the conditions that influence the growth and form (Miller 2009: xxii). Goethe’s poetic inquiry was for him a way of achieving a better understanding of plant life as a whole. In his writings, he examined irregular, or accidental metamorphosis in comparison to regular. Through irregular metamorphosis he discovered insights that would have been hidden had he only focused on the regular metamorphosis (Goethe 2009: 6–7). His approach brings forward the subjective experience of perceiving plants, which teaches us about interconnection and interdependence. We began to recognize and embrace this approach in our practice and research.

Within our daily lives, we found the walks to be useful for directing our attention to the body with ease, through our subtle senses. We found ourselves naturally returning to aspects of our experiences over and over and they came to support the foundation of our thinking.

First, there was a feeling of openness — of being open to the environment and at the same time opening the senses, our use of embodied tactility in our perception, being aware of the sounds that turned our bodies in different directions, and the piercing spring light which would stop us in our tracks. Watching and experiencing how nature comes to life around us, seeing the shades of luminous green where it was all brown just the other day.

This was a process of tuning into the aesthetics of our everyday experience. It was about revealing our personal connections that took our curiosity by the hand, to explore nature and our

experiences in this material world as material beings. This basis of our research was informed by organism-environment interaction where it is recognized that we are biological organisms and in our understanding of our world all is dependent on our bodily makeup and patterns of engagement with our world (Johnson 2015: 1).

In order to understand and direct the personal experiences that are mostly based on sensorial perception we employed the theoretical framing of having *an* experience according to John Dewey (2005). In his writings, Dewey builds his theory on everyday experiences in order to be open for all and not limit the experiencing of art to any specific group of people. The process of having *an* experience is based on an organism-environment interaction. Dewey writes: “experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (ibid.: 22). In the ‘Sensorial Ground’ workshop, we concentrated on this active participation and sought to share the aesthetic nature of our experiences.

Starting to open his idea of having an experience, Dewey says that in order to understand the aesthetic, one must begin with the experience in the raw. He continues to unfold a way of attentive appreciation, of being able to enjoy the surrounding life with all its nuances, being open to subtle qualities, of happenings, and not remaining as a “cold spectator” (2005: 3). Similarly, we began the workshop with the idea of being attentive observers who approach the qualities we find with gentle delight, who notice the details and are drawn to the utterances that we so often miss. This began by bringing attention to the fresh sensory experience of each moment, where there is always something new to learn. For this approach, we sought to bring attention to one sense at a time. In this way, we might gently discourage deciding what is seen before it is ‘felt’ within.



*Zooming into details to enjoy the colors and the feeling of growing.
Image: Priska Falin, 2020.*

Opening our senses to the environment was the beginning of starting to explore and understand the individual connections that created an interest towards something. During the first week, participants were asked to explore the embodied tactile experiences, to simply follow a willingness to touch — to notice the urge to touch. They were asked the question, why do you want to touch it and to imagine what it would feel like to touch? We wished to give the sense of how the tactile experience feels in our bodies before touching and then how it feels in our bodies when touching, feeling the discovered rock, or surface. Taking this approach, we began to open up our sense perceptions and linger with them in the body.

Priska's walks: Embodied connections with nature

During the springtime of 2020 while Covid-19 had confined us to our homes, I, like many others, found myself walking more and more in the nearby surroundings of our home. I remembered from previous springtimes, how much I enjoyed nature coming to life, especially here, living in Helsinki, the southern parts of Finland. I explored with great enthusiasm the gradual growth of the leaves, different kinds of leaves in different trees and bushes. I tried to catch the morning light or the beautiful shades of early evening when the setting sun and its rays filtered through the new light green fresh leaves that would eventually become filled with greenness, marking the end of the springtime.



Spring leaves forming. Images: Priska Falin, 2020.

While these walks were also a process to explore the sense perception and firstly the embodied tactile perception in my experiences, I became more and more curious about my strong interest and enjoyment towards the spring growth that I witnessed every day during my walks. I posed a question to myself: what is it, why I am so drawn into this growth, and why do I feel such joy growing within me along with the leaves and shades of green that are growing around me?

The place where I grew up is almost 600 km north of Helsinki. It is not Lapland but it is definitely different considering nature and how the spring arrives compared to the southern parts of Finland. The climate has changed during the years since my childhood and the winters are not

anymore as cold as they used to be. I remember that when eventually the spring feeling came in the air and the sun started to get warmer, melting the ice and snow little by little, we started making the spring. This was something that helped the spring come faster, at least in our yard. We moved the snow piles to sunnier spots and I watched how the piles would gradually disappear. But the snow felt like an endless resource and all this felt like forever. Thinking back at that time, springtime was about this, trying hard to get rid of the winter. And when eventually the snow finally melted away, it was already June and the beginning of summer. The spring was over before it really even started.

Moving down to Helsinki, the experience of springtime is very strong for me. I can't get enough of wondering and looking closely at the first spring flowers and tracing leaves where they first start to open. The spring starts early and there is time to truly enjoy the different nuances of colours and forms of leaves when they burst out of the buds and start finding their leaf-like forms. At first, they are so cramped together, like they are cuddling each other through the coldness of winter. The first green shades are translucent and yellow. The growing leaves, that I remember observing during springtime in my childhood, were bright green birch leaves. Small cat ear-like birch leaves together with bright yellow dandelions were marking the spring and early summer.

The ground doesn't freeze here as it does in Kainuu, where I am from. The ground is ready to go and it smells of rotten leaves and fresh soil after the winter. When I was a child, it was such a joy when the summer came. Sometimes, there was still a bit of snow left up in the skiing hills, but it didn't matter, the spring had won again over the winter. Now, when it is summer again, I can't find myself to be as joyful as the growth has stopped and the spring is over.

This overwhelming feeling during the springtime was there as I was exploring the embodied tactility during my walks. Eventually, it brought out the connectedness that we have in our bodies, surfacing through feelings. The environment where I grew up had become embodied in me. The main outcome in this springtime experience was that the embodied connectedness can be traced back and by doing so it reveals the embodied dimension in our experience.



Early evening light illuminating the fresh shades of green. Images: Priska Falin, 2020.

Helen's embodied memories: Embodied connections with nature

Between our conversations, I came across a picture from my childhood. I am standing with my sister, by the wall at the bottom of our garden. We are both wearing animal masks and have been feeding the cows. I can feel my hands on the rocky wall and smell the sweetness of the cows' noses as they come closer to our outstretched arms. I can feel the grass in my hand and recall the snapping of stems as I yank them from the ground. The cows and I are looking at one another; I am reflected in their deep, dark eyes. The potent scent of their noses fills the air and their wet, rough tongues are on my fingertips.



Helen and Anna in the garden, 1986. Image: Felcey family photo.

This was a time when I didn't think or talk about connecting to nature. The presence of nature and all the things in my garden were just everyday life, as was wearing animal masks, becoming a bear, or a lion. I grew up in Lancashire, in a small village. The garden provided many places of refuge and play — from having my own 'patch' to sitting underneath the weeping elm or climbing the apple tree. It has been twenty-five years since I have been in this garden, yet, recalling the cows by the wall along with these familiar corners, comes to me with such ease. I feel their textures in my body and a warmth bubbles up inside.

After finding this picture, I began to notice the cows in the field near my mum's home, and I watched a little girl feeding them as I had, she was absorbed and joyful. I watched as one determined cow tried, again and again, to reach the fresh young leaves of a tree by the fence. I enjoyed taking it all in, the softness of the breeze on the cows' ears ruffling her fur, the strained muscles in the neck. What I see and feel is different now, but somewhere in this feeling I find a sense of being able to 'return'.



The cows on Brick Kiln Lane (left image) and Park Lane (right image). Images: Helen Felcey, 2020.

I feel it is a process of connecting. Such a process of connecting was described to me recently as like the sun's rays meeting the plant, a point of connection, to work together. (Personal notes, from a talk given by Khenpo Tokpa Tulku 2020). I think about this; this meeting, this point of nourishment. Somehow, I feel that the picture from my childhood was like a light beam — a moment of nourishment, which can still illuminate my being.

There is a continuum that flows through me, from long ago. It is full of images, exchanges, and feelings of every kind, each with varying potency. Branches layered against a smoky sky, light settling on glass-like water at dusk, the wetness of the cows' noses, the residue of ground rose petals on the garden wall. Momentary connections tinged with subtle inner feelings, soft colours, and odours.

Now, whenever I can, I make a point of pausing and watching the cows, even if only for a few moments; they will still pull me inwards, providing a connection, a refuge.



Being With cows. Video: Priska Falin, 2013. <https://vimeo.com/696950964>

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In this section we discuss the ‘Sensorial Ground’ workshop, unfolding the process and exercises that helped to define the Subtle Ground method. We also draw upon our first collaborative workshop, ‘Embodied Clay’, where the initial ideas began to form.

4 ‘Sensorial Ground’ and ‘Embodied Clay’: Workshops

Our first significant collaboration was the workshop ‘Embodied Clay’, organised as part of the British Ceramic Biennial’s Summer School in 2018 and held at the Spode Factory Site in Stoke-on-Trent. During the workshop we focused on how we can support individuals to discover an increased self-awareness through making with clay. Based on the insights of ‘Embodied Clay’, we continued to explore the subtle senses and how making can be directed towards the body. This became the premise for the workshop ‘Sensorial Ground’ where we aimed to unfold a personal path that would support practitioners in their ongoing practice. The insights of both workshops have encouraged us to shape the Subtle Ground method, to draw together our research and practice in order to recognize where and how our approaches might further support creative practitioners. In this exposition, however, the main focus is on the ‘Sensorial Ground’ workshop, recognizing this as the place where much of our understanding was formed.



The two workshops were commissioned by the British Ceramic Biennial (BCB) for their National Summer School

Sensorial Ground boxes were posted to each participant containing: Practice Intentions, General weekly overview, Sensorial tools (pebbles and stick), Etruscan Red clay and porcelain. Image: Helen Felcey, 2020.

Programme. As artists, we had autonomy in shaping, designing, and delivering the workshops. ‘Sensorial Ground’ was a 4-week long workshop offered entirely online due to the global pandemic of Covid-19. This was the first time that we had planned and held an online workshop and it was also the first time for the BCB to offer such as part of their Summer School. We needed to adjust to the online environment and consider carefully how we would ‘hold’ the virtual space.

In our earlier workshop, ‘Embodied Clay’, the physical space was a significant part of the workshop makeup, providing a safe, creative environment. In our discussions, we carefully considered how to bring the sense of space to the online working environment and decided to adapt our plans to Google Classroom, a free service offering a platform that brings the participants together and offers a possibility to discuss and share. At the moment, the platform is still open for the

participants for getting in touch with the group.

Adopting the words ‘from home to the wilderness’ in the early stages of planning, we recognized a need to bridge worlds — between the physical and the digital, the experience of being together whilst being in isolation, quite literally. Given the nature of our work and research, we felt well placed to do this. At a time of uncertainty, ‘Sensorial Ground’ was an opportunity to bring people together — a place where connection and meaning might be found.

The overarching aim of the workshop was to enable participants to uncover personal connections and meaning within their practice, through bringing attention (back) to the body and to the embodied nature of the practice. Working with our subtle sense perception was at the root of our methods, encouraging participants to notice and turn towards the personal nature of their aesthetic experiences. Over the course of the workshop, we gradually moved from a sense of ‘encountering’ to a sense of ‘dwelling’ in the sensorial ground — reaching towards the subtle experiences of the body and a place where we believe that lasting meaning can be found.



Processing natural clay. Image: Priska Falin, 2020.



Making pebbles out of the natural clay. These pebbles were used as ‘sensorial tools’ in the Sensorial Ground boxes. Image: Priska Falin, 2020.

Inhaling and exhaling: Weeks, themes, and exercises

The workshop was structured around four weekly themes of tactility, light, sound, and dwelling. Each theme was designed to engage our subtle senses through an appreciation of our nuanced experiences of daily activities and our surrounding environment. Themes, methods and exercises were introduced on Monday morning and we re-grouped on Friday afternoon to share our experiences.

We gave a suggestive duration for each exercise — manageable amounts of time to encourage participants to carve out a distinct time within their daily activities. In addition to these exercises, a short daily practice of pebble making was offered to introduce our approach to making. We maintained a repetition of the daily exercises each week — a steady pattern of sharing materials, applying methods, and reflecting on practice together.

The first independent activity of the week was to access the provided reading material, which was the first step in bringing our attention to the theme, for example, Embodied Tactility. Along with our own introductions and talks, the reading material seemed essential in capturing attention and encouraging an open mind towards the theme. Our process was carefully planned in a way that supported the individual path and directed attention towards within. Just like returning to the rhythm of the breath, the weekly activities were seen as a slow process of inhaling and exhaling, focusing on sensory perception, and recognizing the intrinsic qualities discovered or rediscovered in one's experience.

Directing the practitioner's focus in such aspects as personal connections to material and environment began as a slow, gradual process. As the workshop was conducted online and the participants were in their homes and studios, we could start building these connections within familiar surroundings and the rhythms of daily life. Being in a familiar environment also made it safe for participants, supporting a process of turning the focus toward within without any social pressure of performing before others or the distractions that this naturally brings.

One of the main efforts was to encourage participants to 'stay within the process'. Often the decisions when planning the workshop were made from this point of view: how do we keep the focus on the embodied experience, rather than following the urge of the creative mind that seeks outcomes, forms, and conclusions. Simply encouraging slowness and a sense of 'just staying where you are' (focusing on the body), without the need to 'progress' in the usual senses were important aspects throughout. Slowing down to appreciate a new level of detail would enable us to reveal connections or tap into one's memory of past experiences: What was it in that made *me* want to touch, feel, mould, and make?

In the metaphor of the breath, we drew attention to the steadiness and continuity of this bodily process, as well as the 'inward' and 'outward' directions that it implied. On the inward, we recognized a process of reaching in — of slowly taking in one aspect at a time, a process of discovery where we brought attention to the experience within our body; on the outward, we recognized a process of reaching out — of connecting and reconnecting to our surroundings and the value in sharing our personal insights with others.

Reflections on the workshop experience

During 'Sensorial Ground', whilst working remotely with participants, our online meetings enabled a dialogue that found increasing depth over the course of the month. The coming together at the end of each week to discuss and share the weekly experiences was meaningful for the participants and for their processes. During the workshop, it was clear that the sense of belonging to a group and having a comfortable and safe feeling in the group was important. Although this wasn't part of the actual aims of the workshop, the idea of creating a space that allowed the individual and personal processes to open and develop was an important consideration during the planning phase. In addition to the group sessions, we also had one-on-one tutorials with participants.

Another aspect that surfaced during the workshop was the positive effect of working remotely from our homes. The 'Sensorial Ground' workshop accessed the participants' daily lives and routines, which was in contrast to the 'Embodied Clay' workshop that was organized on the Spode Factory site. In the 'Embodied Clay' workshop the participants had the opportunity to live and breathe the intensive workshop, and of being in a tight group throughout the five days. In 'Sensorial Ground' participants carried out the exercises and practices from their homes, studios, and work, over a much longer period. Becoming a part of their everyday lives, the workshop gave them the possibility to access routines and habits, or even establish new ones, directly within their normal life. The duration of four full weeks also supported this as participants repeatedly went out for walks, continued their weekly processes and became familiar with the aims of the workshop.

Following the workshop, the BCB conducted an outsourced evaluation for their own purposes. Particularly relevant to this research was the question: How, if at all, have these workshops impacted in your creative development? Out of the 12 participants who were able to fully engage with the workshop over 80% found the workshop very relevant or relevant. Participants described feeling 'more rooted in my connection with the material' [...] 'taking the time to notice and to sit with things and view them from different sense perspectives' and how the workshop 'acted as a bridge between previous practice and starting afresh after several months away from my studio'. Similar results can also be drawn from the evaluation of 'Embodied Clay', where nearly all of the participants stated that they found the workshop to be highly useful for their creative practices, and all participants stated they felt more connected to the embodied nature of clay after the workshop.

Core exercises offered as part of the 'Sensorial Ground' workshop

Here we describe three core exercises that were offered during 'Sensorial Ground': Sensory Walks, Pebble Making and Being With. Only one of the exercises worked directly with clay, namely pebble making, which was encouraged as a daily exercise. Participants were also encouraged to explore their personal experiences through working with clay in the latter part of the week.

Sensory walks

In 'Sensorial Ground', we encouraged participants to bring their attention to the everyday process of walking, to return to the breath and the stride. Walking is something that our bodies are built to do. It is largely a muscular act that goes unnoticed. Having learned how to walk, we no longer consider it to be a skill. The movement of walking flows seamlessly with the inclination 'to walk'; little or no thought activity is required to undertake the process.

Within our knowledge production processes, there is much that goes unnoticed. As we develop, many processes of the mind and body become second nature. These subtle inclinations can be both healthy and unhealthy. For example, the lack of attention we bring to the daily activity of walking can sometimes affect the body in an unhealthy way; our repeatedly poor walking posture results in the deterioration of supportive muscles and ligaments. Through physiotherapy, we relearn how to use our body during walking, bringing our attention to our posture and the use of specific muscles.

We can bring our attention to the rhythm of our steps with relative ease. Like the breath, it provides an 'uncomplicated role' for the mind, and in this way can be a support for bringing our

attention to the body, although our aim is not only to support the practitioner's physical ability, but to begin to unfold the embodied being as a capacity that can be supported through practice.

Our guidance for the walks encouraged an open, attentive approach — encouraging participants to focus on one sense initially and allowing this sense to lead, to take them deeper into the 'wilderness' and deeper into the subtle world of their embodied awareness. The sensory walk encourages us to observe the world around us in more detail and tap into our 'child-like wonder' — a state of being where you feel present and with the qualities that you have encountered.

Amy Davies describes her experience of an urban garden:

I pass this garden on my usual walk, and often sit here when I need a pause during my day. This small haven faces a building that is covered in reflective glass and echoes the pursuit of a break in time. I am drawn to these windows; their qualities and what they represent, they offer a familiarity, the glossy surfaces like glazed clay, the transient images that flow within them remind me of the notion of 'dwelling' and residing in place being temporary.

As I sit, I engage my senses, the most prominent this week, is the fragrance from the herbs. Sweet, savoury and sour; I can't taste them, but the aromatic, fragrant air is soothing, not jarring. I collect samples to study once home, in my fingertips they feel soft, waxy, downy, sharp and delicate. Already, now picked, they are beginning to dry out, their properties changing and I am again reminded of the clay.

The breeze moves the leaves and flowers like a breath, the chirrup of birds in the trees infuse the sound of the hum of the ring road while butterflies flicker past. The light rebounding from the mirrored windows dances in the shadows, and this restorative place seems to offer a fitting culmination to my journey exploring the tactile.

Pebble making

Clay pebbles set the tone for making, providing an immediate, gentle way to stay within a process and to simply explore the experience. A pebble is a familiar, uncomplicated natural object. As we hold a pebble in our hand, we might feel in awe of this small thing, formed over thousands of years or more. It won't break if we drop it, in fact, we might take joy in throwing it back to the ocean, or perhaps we will take it home in our pocket to hold our memories, feeling its surface as we walk. Making a pebble, rolling a ball of clay in the palm of your hand is an action that could be described as second nature — something which we will do spontaneously, without much thought.

Held between our palms, we don't watch the pebble as it's formed, it's only 'seen' by the centre of our palms, the circular movements, the feeling of the clay moving round and round, pressed, held in hands. The feeling of roundness grows, a snugness with the palm. When we open our hands and glance down, we might be pleasantly surprised at the spherical form and notice the gentle spirals moving inwards towards the centre, which wasn't created on our usual watch. Instead, it's the palms that 'watch' the pebble and feel the clay.



Image on the left: Rolling pebbles during the Embodied Clay workshop. Image: Jenny Harper, 2018.

Image on the right: Feeling the clay in hands: making pebbles. Image: Priska Falin, 2018.

The pebble does not require skills or ideas in the usual sense. In fact, it's quite difficult to attach much to it — to form an expectation of a 'good pebble' or a 'bad pebble' — although, even with the humble pebble, we will still try! It only requires attention to form the pebble, an attention that comes through the centre of the palms.

When making clay pebbles, the making becomes feeling the material in the hands. In the hands, it is the centre of the palms that hold the feeling function; it is in touch with the heart and lungs (Elbrecht and Antcliff 2015: 212). The 'seeing' through the tactile perception is through the use of fingertips, where most of the touch sensors are found. In pebble making, the clay is rolled in the centre of the palms; the fingers or fingertips are not in use. From this perspective, the making is directed towards feeling, towards the experiential body.

Being With: 3-minute video

The Being With -exercise introduced during the 'Sensorial Ground' workshop sought to gather all sense perceptions together. Video, as such, was already encouraged as a capturing method at the beginning of the workshop, but with the use of this more focused use of video, the aim was to give time to unfold a more complex idea of an experience that is layered with several connections with time, location, personal aspects, and timely issues.

This method is rooted in the work done by Falin in the Egersund brick factories in Denmark. Falin began exploring and developing these 3-minute videos to capture the aesthetic qualities of factory processes. While working with the videos, they also became recordings of her own experiences and a method where one can explore the process of 'being with'. Thus, the Being With -exercise offers a way of capturing an experience and unfolding its connectedness of it when looking at it as a documentation of aesthetics within an experience.

Video as a medium is immersive by nature. In the Being With video examples, also shown during the workshop, the stillness of the different views coupled with the rhythm of the factory processes gives access to exploring the moment — the captured experience — while our attention can move around inside the frame, noticing subtle movements and happenings inside the land space (landscape).

Directions to Being With: Exercise

Seek out a location that you find you have connections with. It can be a location that you have come to cross during your walks, or you might look for a new place. It's important that you enjoy spending time in this place and feel that there is some kind of connection to it, perhaps just a feeling. Once you have found your location, set up your camera next to you and take a video from that view or landscape where you wish to be looking. The time to sit and be with the recording is 3 minutes. This recording will be capturing the 3-minute experience that you will be having while sitting in that location. Don't talk or do anything; just try to experience that time just by being there.

Afterwards coming back to your home or studio, spend a little time looking into the video and reflect on that experience, what made you choose that particular location, how did you connect to it? It would be lovely to see that video, but instead of downloading the whole video to the shared slides document, you can add a link to it and share screenshots or images together with your reflections on it.



Videos: Being With the factory processes. All videos: Priska Falin, Egersund, Denmark, 2013.

More videos in the original exposition: <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/812090/812100>

Video on top: <https://vimeo.com/698521025>



Video on the left: <https://vimeo.com/78141775>

Video on the right: <https://vimeo.com/703128801>



<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/812090/1122075>

In the following, we put forward what we define as core elements drawn from the experience of the Sensorial Ground workshop exercises, which form the Subtle Ground. The dwelling is not understood as a core element, rather an approach to making.

5 Subtle Ground and the idea of dwelling



An image which speaks of becoming familiar. Mexico. Image: Helen Felcey.

In the 'Sensorial Ground' workshop part, we have unfolded the structure and the exercises that were introduced for the workshop participants, and here we have drawn out the main elements that are situated in the core of the method Subtle Ground.

Subtle Ground as a method is not fixed on any specific exercises, even the ones that we have shown in this research. The method is tightly connected to the personal qualities in practitioners' experiences and thus can use different paths to reach its goal. In this exposition, we are formulating the understanding of the Subtle Ground with examples of exercises that have been seen to support practitioners' in their creative practices. The exercises should support practitioners to understand the aesthetics that are tightly connected to the personal.

The method Subtle Ground described here emphasizes the idea of dwelling. The way we wish to refer to dwelling in this work is not drawn from the common understanding of the word that would point first to the location or place where we dwell. Here, we are more concerned with the action: to dwell in. Our perspective also takes in the world we live in, the environment we co-exist with, within which we turn our attention towards within, indwelling. To dwell in also points to time, the time that we

spend in that particular location or feeling. Within Subtle Ground, dwelling is understood as an approach to making. To dwell with the material in making is to allow the attention to move back and forwards from material qualities to our bodies' ability to sense.

Designer, filmmaker and playwright Welby Ings discusses dwelling and indwelling through an example of embodied drawing (2014). In his article, Ings describes how he used drawing as an embodied method to "dwell inside a world and through this indwelling that world gravitates towards the tangible" (ibid.: 2.8). His approach to the idea of dwelling is similar to what is discussed here, to generate thinking through processing elements of design that cannot be verbalized (ibid.: 2.1). Although the aim of his tool is to be creative and come to a conclusion for his narrative design practice, there is a similar investigation of reaching towards the nuanced shades that evade grasping. In addition to discussing dwelling, Ings also connects the idea of indwelling in his approach to drawing, saying that "using a process of indwelling I slowly drew into existence the nature and story of another being". For him, the dwelling within the embodied self was a means to draw a character into being. This was done by tapping into the sensory elements that define "the interior mind of a man" (ibid.: 2.5). From the perspective of this current discussion, this example of using embodied drawing as a tool can be done only through a highly sensitized practitioner that is able to dwell within a broad spectrum of shades and hues of material experiences that can direct the thinking in an almost unrecognisable way. This kind of understanding of the subtle nuances in creative practice is the focus of our work in the Subtle Ground.

In his book *The Perception of the Environment*, Ingold (2011) offers a perspective on the dwelling that describes the human relationship to the world to be that of 'in the world' rather than a view of the self-contained individual confronting a world 'out there' (ibid.: 173). While it is clear that Ingold discusses the human relationship to building or to the built environment as dwellings, it is interesting that the use of the word dwelling points out that we humans are dwellers and that is the reason why we make dwellings. It is to understand that we humans live and dwell in this world and that is the reason for making the things we do and not the other way around.

Our understanding of the dwelling as an approach to making is a similar notion of getting to the bottom of things, unpicking our sense of being in the world, seeing the foundations upon which we act and do what we do. In this research, dwelling can be read as a metaphorical concept, connecting to the idea of being at home, habituating our bodies, familiarizing ourselves with the sense perception, and discovering the ground that we stand upon. As an approach to making, as the dwelling is referred to in this research, the metaphor of being at home points to taking different perspectives on making, becoming familiar with the material, exploring, feeling and connecting to it.

In the context of mental health care, dwelling has been used as a method. Researcher Julia Zielke (2019) explored how dwelling can be used as a mindful unfolding of thinking and being as a research method for mental health and wellbeing (ibid.: 1). In Zielke's research, dwelling takes into consideration how complex and layered our lived experiences are, and she describes it as a whole mode of being (ibid.: 2). In Zielke's research, as with this research, the dwelling is tightly connected to the lived experiences. In our case, however, we are not trying to understand the workshop participants' experiences, but rather offering a method for supporting individuals in their creative practices. In Zielke's research, the dwelling was a multi-modal research method that also consisted of different exercises in a workshop environment. Zielke combined poem writing, working with materials, and interviews, emphasizing the idea of dwelling at the moment, abstracting time and space, unfolding memories, and thinking through metaphors (ibid.: 1).

To dwell can have a negative connotation, suggesting that we might linger too long in one place, or in a particular feeling. Here, the time spent has a positive understanding, acknowledging that it takes time to tune in, to be open and active in our perception. While concentrating on our individual experiences it is also an understanding of connectedness — what it means to be in the world. The method Subtle Ground focuses on our personal experiences and understanding how our bodies, our sense perception, performs during our practice.

Amacker (2019) writes about surrendering to the now, pointing to a state of being where one can dissolve her boundaries and objective conditions in experiencing and begin understanding how we are connected in our actions. Amacker also directs the attention towards a sense of being instead of pursuing towards a conclusion: “At some point all experience passes into a cognitive process of distinguishing and analysis, but the qualitative begins with connection. When we allow ourselves to be taken up with the materials and energies of our environment we stop becoming an object of our awareness. Our experience can stop satisfying objective conditions and we can be taken up directly in sense-perception” (Amacker 2019: 1846).

Giving attention to our bodies during practice and exploring our sense perception is truly directing the attention towards within. In the Subtle Ground method, the purpose is to be open to connectedness, how we are part of the world instead of shutting down and closing the world around. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa writes: “...visual perceptions are fused and integrated into the haptic continuum of the self; my body is truly the navel of my world, not in the sense of the viewing point of the central perspective, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination, and integration” (2007: 11).



Visualization of the Subtle Ground method. The core elements and the main aspects of the method are visualized here to form a breathing process between inhaling and exhaling, from dwelling to indwelling.

The method Subtle Ground can be seen as unfolding a process from dwelling towards indwelling. As discussed in the section 'Sensorial Ground', the weekly process described as inhaling and exhaling draws upon a wider context, turning the attention gradually within, where aesthetic experiences can be understood. The term 'indwelling', we feel aptly points to the area of understanding, of capacity, where our interest lies. Indwelling is described as "being an inner activating or guiding force" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In here, the indwelling further defines dwelling, giving direction to let the attention move within making and in connection with the material qualities.

What is also evident in the idea of dwelling as an approach to making is that there is no need to express oneself through an outcome. It is about staying with the experience of being with the material in making and directing the attention to haptic experiences. The making as such can be anything that supports practitioners to indwell. The given example of ceramic pebble making is a good exemplary exercise that supports the dwelling approach because of its mute nature. Muteness in making implies a process that is about feeling the clay in palms and turning the focus on the embodied dimension (Falin and Oksanen 2021).

In this context, dwelling means giving time to a process and spending time with the feelings and sensations that belong to that particular process. To dwell in is to be able to focus, to stay with the practice or the process in an open active way, to continue, and to return with growing familiarity. The Subtle Ground emphasizes the idea of dwelling and the process towards indwelling. It is about connectedness, it is an organism–environment interaction, it is about the aesthetics in making.

Core elements of Subtle Ground method

Being With

Embedded within the character of clay are qualities that encourage the idea of being with. As with everything around us, on a particle level, clay physically changes moment by moment. With clay, however, this process becomes visible to us. A clay pebble in the palm of your hand will begin to dry and stick to your skin and within moments we feel the change in our hands. Before firing the clay, we must allow the material to dry slowly, so it doesn't crack as the once fluid particles become rigid. To work with clay requires a certain level of being with the material.

In this sense, Being With can also refer to a level of focused attention on something that you wish to familiarize yourself with, or perhaps that you already have familiarity with. Being with the material is to notice the smallest of qualities — the wetness or coolness of a surface — to be in touch and stay with the nuanced movements of the material world.

Being With can also bring enjoyment. There can be a feeling of wanting to stay with a process, a rhythm or texture, which we have a feeling that we could settle into. At first, it is only a small 'pull' from the body, a small doorway, but if we can go with the pull, we find there is, in fact, a lot of room to settle — in a positive way — and to appreciate the company that we are in. To genuinely be with another, we must give our full attention to the other.

Giving time

Through time, it is possible to discover connections, to reconnect, and understand the underpinnings that work within. From the early stages of 'Embodied Clay', we recognize that dedicating time to the

processes we were outlining was necessary and we have been equally concerned with the quality of that time.

We have had to consider how we approach time. Our ordinary appreciation of time is generally tied up with goals and outcomes — the need to be somewhere for a certain time, the need to complete a project by a date, and so on. In the case of this work, we have needed to extrapolate our processes from these usual ‘time frames’ and encourage the long view. Because this is work that sits behind all of those things.

To dwell is to linger, it is to work with a slow rhythm and not to rush. When we dwell, we might feel ourselves to be in the ‘meantime’ — the time before something happens or before a specified time period ends.

In this work, we are giving time to the inner practitioner. In one sense the work could be seen as a kind of ‘maintenance’, which goes beneath the surface bodywork into the workings of the practitioner, reigniting connections, checking pace, and flow. The work is slow and careful because it is dealing with subtler qualities that we don’t often give time to.

Repetition

Repetition was present in this workshop on a number of levels. It was present in the structure — a repetition of exercises and methods week by week; it was present within the exercises too — the repetitive actions of the body, in making or walking. Repetition makes it easier for us to continue a process, we know what’s coming next so there is less to work out in the ordinary sense of mind.

The repetition of exercises created a rhythm, a pattern, which participants could follow and get to know. The activities and insights were intended to weave their way through participants' existing patterns of life.

In an exercise such as pebble making, the body itself becomes a part of the rhythm. Like walking, pebble making is an exercise that doesn’t require our usual thought activity, yet provides a movement, a tactile rhythm to rest our attention within. We begin to settle within the rhythm of the process, moving inwards with each rotation. The simplicity of the action we are repeating enables a sense of observing the experience, noticing the sensations. In the case of the pebble, we can see the evidence of this in the marks, the movement of the material following the rhythm of our palms, and vice versa.

In a repetitive action, each movement will gently reinforce the last; we are training ourselves, creating a habit. Embedded within repetition is a notion of ‘coming back’, to something we know, moments of remembering, reconnecting to something that holds a meaning, which sits within the subtle qualities of our experience.

To stay with repetition, to dwell in repetition is to reach towards continuity — an uninterrupted connection — which is perhaps where we begin to catch sight of indwelling. We might think of repetition as a series of notes, and as we begin to move towards continuity, those notes become a single tone, faint at first, but gradually finding strength and resonance.

Becoming Familiar

Dwelling is about movement, turning around, shifting the focus. The space in this case is the practice or making. Becoming familiar with something through making, one needs to move, shift your approaches, take another perspective, try different approaches, move within the area of exploration.

Through time and movement, you reach a point in which you feel that you have become acquainted with the subject. A sense of familiarity.

To dwell refers to different practices within one area of work if understood through another metaphor, describing how we can dwell in our homes by sitting on the sofa, relaxing on the balcony, reading a book in bed, etc. We can dwell in all the corners of our living spaces, and this is also what the dwelling implies in making: the making can take many aspects, trying different approaches to better understand the material and the experience of it.

In the Tibetan language, the word for meditation is 'gom' and this means 'becoming familiar with' or 'getting used to' (Phakchok, Solomon), a process of becoming familiar with the mind. Becoming familiar requires a state of mind of being at home. In dwelling, the location doesn't need to be home, but the process that it seeks through dwelling is to be at home, to be comfortable with something, and to feel at rest. Becoming familiar is also a way of knowing someone, like the way you would know family members. You might not always agree on things, but you know how it is.

Notes and participant reflections on the experience of dwelling during the workshop

Sarah Christie points to the value in returning to a familiar process or place, with the purpose of finding new depth.

Sarah Christie

"Sometimes I get caught up looking for new ways to work, when it can be more productive and rewarding to return to previous research and methods with new depth. I allowed myself to repeat through making in ways I have made before, or walking in a usual spot, or using what I know of the light in my existing space, for example. Rather than looking for something new, I found ways back to older work, but with a refreshed mindset and a realisation of more depth by having spent more time thinking over those ideas."

Images and words, Sarah Christie 2020

To dwell, dwelling:

Starting, staying, continuing

Aligning, listening, responding

Opening, receiving, accepting

Creating the conditions

for interesting things to emerge



To dwell / dwelling:

To sit in non-judgment

To create space for movements

To remain in the process

To do without preempting

*To work with uncertainty,
repetition and constraints*

To mark time

To wait before evaluating

To decide later

To not decide at all



To dwell / dwelling:

To return

To allow repeated investigation

*To recognise and accept
common and persistent
threads in the work*

To trust

To dwell / dwelling

To become familiar with the hidden, the internal

To see what is hiding in plain sight

To arrange and rearrange

To coexist



Rebecca Harvey

We had a one-on-one conversation with Rebecca as we approached the final week of the workshop focused on Dwelling. In this conversation, she described how the workshop has been connected to her daily activities/life — directly affecting her practice. She talked about the mugs (a batch production item in her studio) and the feeling of having lost the joy with the mugs, but now finding new ways to appreciate the process through the workshop. She spoke about the discoveries she has made — the close and nuanced experiences of the material, the senses — the need for the pebbles to become certain forms, and how these are reminiscent of some clay/rock forms she has kept on her shelf for some time. She spoke about the flow of the weeks — how this has really worked for her — and now feeling ready for ‘dwelling’. For this, she instinctively returned to the willow tree from the first walk; to spend time with it. When Rebecca returns to the willow tree in the garden, it is as if she is returning to an old friend. The rocks too, on the shelf, have been there for some time. Whilst they have been present in her environment for some time, this is a moment where she returns to them, ‘gives time’, brings attention to the rocks and the willow tree.

Images and words, Rebecca Harvey 2020

Notes from being with the tree:

Scale macro-micro

Sounds macro-micro

Returned to the breath from my body

Opposites

Vulnerability - height off the ground

Safety of hugging trunk

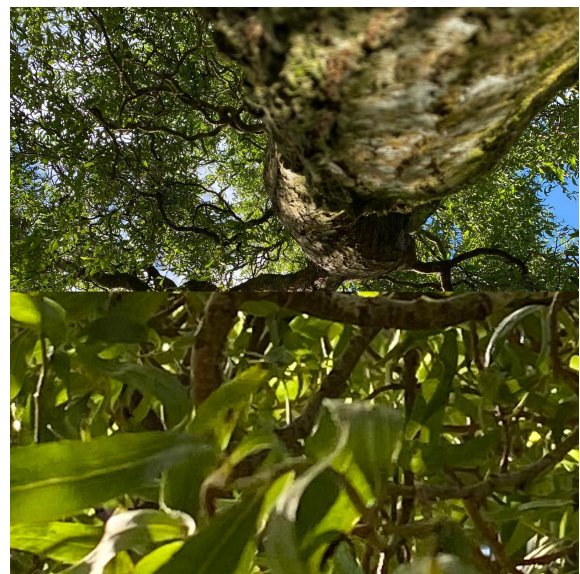
Interesting perspective

Feeling of a deeper connection

Emotional connection and relationship with a tree

Warmth and energy

Reminded of Baron in the Trees by Calvino



Notes from the material process:

Upscale – more physical

Movement, spontaneous

Curves, twisting, swaying

Hollows from fingers

Energy

Thinking of a willow tree

Density, edges, surface tearing

Combination of material process and experience of dwelling with the tree

Essence



<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/812090/1120381>

6 Conclusion

This exposition introduces our research and the concepts that we have found to be relevant when tuning into the supportive qualities of clay within creative practice. Our aims have been to open the discussion around these concepts and inherent practice in such a way that there is a place for subjective considerations and development. The discussed outcomes of our research are at a point of emerging, as opposed to being fully defined.

In this exposition, we have gathered our work and experiences together to formulate a method, Subtle Ground, that emphasizes the idea of dwelling as an approach to making. The method uses exercises such as sensory walks, pebble making, and Being With (a 3-minute video exercise), but is not limited to these. The core elements that define the Subtle Ground are named here as being with, giving time, repetition, and becoming familiar.

When understanding making from the traditional perspective, the emphasis is on what is being produced. Subtle Ground shifts the focus towards a direction that often goes unnoticed. Subtle Ground encourages the practitioner to stay with a material process and delve into the material experience, looking into the individual connections and sense perception during practice. What is at the heart of the method, is the practitioner's experiences. The locus of experience is understood as an organism-like event where the environment and the material world, that we are part of, are all naturally connected. Subtle Ground



Springtime experiences: the empathy in my body.
Image: Priska Falin, 2020.

aims to reveal the personal connections and qualities that define the making.

In this research, our attention has been on the physical nature of ceramics practice and we have structured a method that supports practitioners' engagement towards practice. The method has been informed by an understanding of the therapeutic qualities of clay in its raw and natural state. Also, we have drawn upon the connection between the material qualities and how we handle the clay, focusing on the aspects that can be viewed as relating to the practice of meditation. In both these examples, the emphasis is how the body reacts to the felt qualities of clay. These kinds of qualities provide support and insight into how we might work with the clay and our bodies. What this research opens is that by focusing on the experiential qualities in creative practice, a practitioner begins to discover new ground that supports her practice.

Subtle Ground is discovered through different exercises that each enhance the experiential aspects of making. For ourselves as practitioners, these words — Subtle and Ground — have created a new space, which is open, creative, and nourishing for practitioners. The poetic and imaginative nature of Subtle Ground is both reassuring and encouraging. It can be as limitless or as grounded as we might wish.

We have found the body to be at the heart of the Subtle Ground method. In truth, it is through the body that we have reached towards the Subtle Ground. Each exercise has encouraged the practitioner to 'stay within' the body and to bring attention to their personal felt experience. As a creative medium, we have found that working with the specific qualities of clay can be particularly supportive in terms of bringing focus to the body and the senses.

In order to access the Subtle Ground as a personal area of creative practice, we have focused on the subtler aspects of the experience felt within the body. We have come to talk about the subtle body, to place emphasis on this subtlety — to support the practitioner to feel, be with and notice these deeply subtle aspects of experience. It is through working with the subtle body that we find personal Subtle Ground.

In order to focus on the body, we have used the concepts of 'dwelling' and 'indwelling' here to emphasize the being aspect in making that allows one to explore senses, material qualities and the subtler realm of making with clay. In this context, the discussion connects to creative practice and defines the Subtle Ground as a method that is open for individual discovery. For us, dwelling has evoked deeper discussion around the directions towards making. We began to form our discussions along with the idea of dwelling already during the 'Embodied Clay' workshop and as we find more clarity into the essence we pursue through dwelling in this exposition, the concept remains open and inspire further research.

The practice and exercises discussed here were influenced and inspired by Goethe's Poet–Scientist approach to understanding plant life. Goethe combined poetry and scientific sensibilities, building an understanding of how these practices complement one another in ways that one alone cannot achieve. One of our main directions towards discovering our near surroundings in a new and revealing manner was influenced by this idea that we discuss here as the Poet–Scientist approach. The attention to detail was emphasized again within a new edition of the book (2009) where Gordon L. Miller carefully with the respect for the original work, recreated some of the visuals supporting Goethe's work by adding a current practice that speaks to the reader. Through this edition, we found inspiration and value in looking into the details and finding the perfect nuances that complete the whole. In practice, this encourages a heightened sensory perception and deeper

engagement with the world around us. We spoke about inhaling and exhaling — breathing with this world — as we take time to attune to the subtleties of tactility, light, and sound.

The research has fully framed itself within the field of ceramics and creative practice; however, the method is not constrained to one material and can clearly be explored within other practices. As artists and practitioners, we have the sensitivity to understand and bring out the wider spectrum of subtle nuances that unfold in our perception. Through this research and formation of the Subtle Ground method, we have initiated a way to understand the embodied dimension as a capacity that can be supported in creative practice.

<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/812090/1113903>

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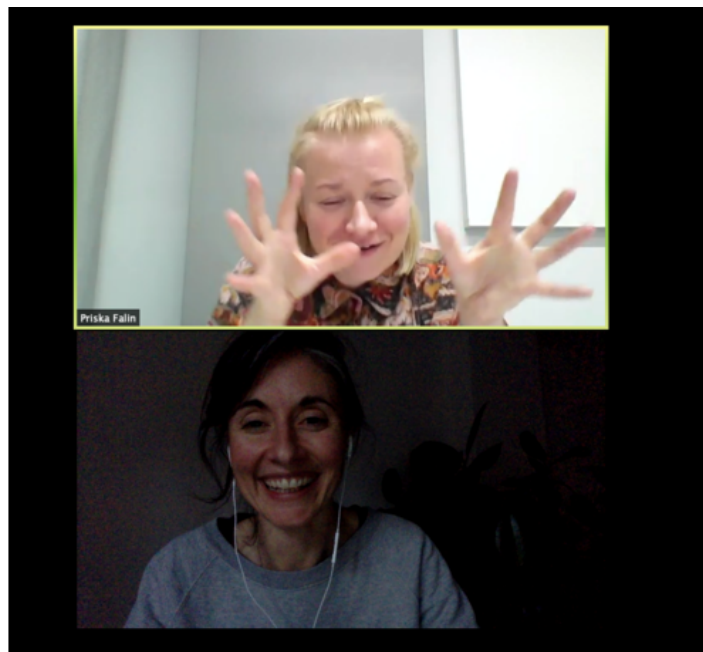
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Falin and Felcey - Collaborative Biography

Our collaboration has formed an ongoing conversation through which we nourish shared ground, and question and extend the parameters of our personal approaches to artistic research and practice.

Artist–researchers Priska Falin and Helen Felcey first worked together when writing a short collaborative piece for 'Cooking with Clay' (Ceramics and Its Dimensions, 2016). Working remotely between Dunham Massey and Helsinki, a real connection was made and the opportunity to work together more closely came in 2018, through 'Embodied Clay' for the British

Ceramics Biennial's National Summer School, 2018 (Bagi, Falin and Felcey). This first collaboration explored embodied dimensions of personal practices, particularly our sensory experiences of making. In 2019, we participated in a Field Station Residency at the Ifö Center (Bromölla, Sweden) coordinated by SLAM. Working together in an abandoned factory amidst the remnants of human labour, we began to ask, what's really important? What are we really creating and nourishing? As we moved into 2020, we stepped into the world pandemic and such reflections felt increasingly relevant. Within this backdrop, we shaped the 'Sensorial Ground' workshop for BCB National Summer school



2020, seeking to support practitioners in their ongoing creative practice. The recent continuation of our collaboration has been for the exhibition 'Särkyvää — Ceramics Facing the New' in Espoo Museum of Modern Art in Finland (2021–2022). For this, we developed a series of workshops, an installation and an online workshop that as a whole builds around the notion of dwelling, discussed also in this exposition.

At the moment of writing this exposition, Priska Falin is finishing her doctoral thesis at Aalto University, Finland. In her artistic research, she focuses on the experiential and performative dimensions of ceramic practice. The core of her work engages with the ways we connect ourselves to world through material encounters. She draws from an abstract space where words fail to describe the embodied experiences that create the grounds for constructing ourselves.

Helen Felcey is a ceramics-based artist and educator. Her professional experience traces a story of material practice intertwined with educational practice, with research interests across craft, design and social well-being. She tutors at Liverpool Hope University, UK. Alongside her work in arts and education, Felcey is a trustee of the Gomde UK Tibetan Buddhist Centre.