

## **Performative Raw Clay Practices and Ceramic Firing Techniques**

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From a performative perspective, this paper explores artistic methods of making with clay, ceramics, and the use of different firing techniques. The argument relies on techniques of socialization within making, considering aesthetics beyond traditional use and pragmatism. Through the works of Phoebe Cummings, Alexandra Engelfriet, Nina Hole, and Keith Harrison, participatory practices are analyzed to expand the concept of raw and cooked materials. The processual engagements with the materials on the part of the artists are supported by Gaston Bachelard's writings about fire, water, and soil, as well as by contemporary feminist materialism theory, especially the work of Karen Barad. By bringing together such a theoretical framework with artistic methodologies, models for co-creation arise.

The findings in this paper are not aimed to suggest the necessity of a pure state in which clay preferentially ceramic must exist. Instead, they indicate the possibility of multiplying the use of materials beyond their functionality to transition toward ambivalence and hybridity. The artistic projects described in this paper demonstrate the potential of collaborative practices to modify symbolic images and the historicity of the materials through reconfigurations of their social interactions. The article highlights some of the dangers and opportunities that accompany the efforts to make the process of firing clay open. This juncture moment does not only apply to the damage of the objects during the making, but it influences the documentation and archiving of sensorial performances, and recognizes the audience as fundamental for the creation of the works.

### **Introduction**

Clay is a time-based medium: performative, relational and responsive. Composed of the oldest volcanic rocks that have been broken down to a very fine composite, clay is the result of millions of years of amalgamation. Although it offers itself to

the possibility of being worked, modeled, put into form, clay is not passive matter relying on external agents to set it in motion. Instead, clay is a matter that carries its own power and energy of transformation. Yet clay bears the sign of touching; it documents the engagement between a responsive material and the hand (or other non-human being or thing). The material and the human body exist by themselves; however, they are at the same time experienced and used by the other. The unfolding of relations, meanings, and transformations through the physicality of touch create a space for differentiation.

The openness to malleability that clay offers requires a physical difference to be experienced, a tactile experience of continual change. The first step in working with wild, store-bought or recovered clay is to wedge it. This process involves kneading, slapping and squeezing. If the material is too flexible, too new, too wet, a form will not set. Neither will a form set, for the opposite reasons, in clay that is too hard, too old or too dry. Dry clay brittles quickly because it has lost its plasticity, but this plasticity can be regenerated through hydration and touch. Touching the material returns and enhances its flexibility and eliminates any air bubbles that might lead to explosions later in the kiln. When two surfaces get into contact, there is an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, proximity of otherness. This otherness exists only as a result of the encounter between the self and the other. The ability to trace the maker's finger marks on clay's surface provides a sense of intimacy and immediacy that is not, however, an innocent form of engagement. The discursive and material articulations where the othering is embedded are not pre-given nor objective, but local to specific conditions (Barad, 2015). Hence, clay practices are not free from culture, history, and politics (see figure 1).

Clay as a medium is one of the best things to connect life with the unstable record of life. Once allowed to dry out, clay does not remain stable. Instead, as it becomes increasingly unstable, it exhibits a range of relatively subtle qualities of tone and surface. In a wet state, clay is even more dramatic: it sweats when it is enclosed, as drops of condensation form on the inside of its container. If left for long enough, molds grow on its surface.

Clay is the earth where we live on and an archeological material, intertwined with the progressive development of humankind since the beginning of recorded time. Firing turns clay into ceramics. Capable of preserving the immediacy of a piece of work, cooked ceramics are especially suitable to achieve a sense of bodily presence. Once the particles are

fused, clay is irreversibly modified and is permanently fixed. Fired clay never loses the reverberation of its making; it is a frozen moment that embodies the act of its production, a powerful connection between the maker and the one holding the work. When we handle ancient ceramics, as when we excite at the performance of firing, the experience connects us to past makers and users. On a fundamental level, when we touch what others have touched over the centuries, we feel a particular sense of continuity as if the artifact itself embodies and conveys a haptic memory.

Firing is the climax of the traditional ceramics-making process, which can also be regarded as a process of socialization (Brown et al., 2016). Without fire, there are no traces of old clay material cultures, because those inscriptions were left to degrade. The functionality of ceramic and its longevity correspond to its usability and the opportunity to portray a moment in time, as in the case of archeological findings. Yet to describe clay artifacts as ‘unfired’ would suggest that they have yet to be fired because that is their proper and valid state. Such a line of thought has folded within itself essentialist notions of raw clay as pre-industrial and unsocialized; a primordial element whose transformation into permanent form denotes the roots of civilization. Yet if fire does not preserve a representation of knowledge, it does not mean that the knowledge did not exist or did not have materiality. Moreover, withholding the closure that firing engenders and denying permanence to an artifact would suggest instead that a work is overtly transgressive of traditional core ceramic values.

Ceramics have always incorporated performance. The transition from clay to ceramic at the moment of firing allows freedom from any certainty about how the work would emerge. This process of change has the potential to be opened and shared. Rituals that address the uncertain alchemy of firing have been enacted since ancient times, and the transformation from raw clay to cooked ceramic still excites a sense of wonder, in practitioners and audiences alike. In the kiln, clay is subject to chance beyond the will of the maker. The risk taken offers the possibility of witnessing the transformation. If clay remains wet when fired or the temperature increases quickly, the heat provokes the body to break and fissure in a manner reminiscent of the earth’s crust. If it does not reach the vitrification temperature, clay has a propensity to split open and reveal an inner rugosity that contrasts with the smoothness of its finished surfaces. To open up the kiln involves a threat to the object. Much damage can occur if the ceramic is allowed to experience a rapid change in temperature. The excitement of

firing and the emotional response that it is capable of bringing out indicate that clay is more than a means to a material end. The visual display of glowing fire or wire comes alongside a range of sensory experiences: the heat, the distinctive smell of the smoke, the hiss and crackle as the suddenly exposed ceramic surface cools. Clay's splits and cracks are commonly understood by all with any familiarity with the material but are not something frequently exploited as an inherently positive attribute. Yet the event is as relevant as the resultant object, or even more.

This essay interrogates clay from a performative perspective, which allows me to reflect on artistic methods of making with clay, ceramics and firing techniques. I begin with Phoebe Cummings' practice and her refusal to fire clay. The storyline develops further with Alexandra Engelfriet, an artist who kept her big scale studio-made clay installations raw, but as a result of working outdoors, started to create custom-made kilns enveloping the works. To move this idea further, I introduce Nina Hole and her communal constructions, where the furnace becomes the sculpture itself. And to conclude, I look at the work of Keith Harrison, who expands the concept of firing in open setups using electricity instead of fire. My argument relies on the idea of socialization within (non)firing techniques, as the four artists open up their knowledge about transformations, and make the observer part of the metamorphosis. How do artists manage the influence of the clay's power and explore its aesthetics beyond common use and pragmatism? What are the promises of rethinking normalized techniques? A non-instrumental performative engagement with clay and ceramics on the part of the aforementioned artists invites me to engage with Gaston Bachelard's work regarding fire, water, and soil, as well as on contemporary feminist materialisms, especially the work of Karen Barad. In turn, by bringing together such a theoretical framework with artistic methodologies, I look for models of co-creation.

### **Phoebe Cummings**

The thrill associated with raw clay's instability has become central to Phoebe Cummings' art. Through her series of temporary, site-specific works, Cummings has established two signature modes of working. The first involves wet clay which is given form and is subsequently placed within a sealed glass or plastic container that keeps the moisture. A second approach engages with small, air-dried, often very detailed clay fragments, which are left to be transformed by the environment.

In both setups, the sculptures and installations undergo pronounced material changes. Her methods of production and exhibition do not provide permanent objects to be transported and sold through conventional channels. In this way, her practice and the installations themselves could only be presented as performative ephemeral acts. Hence the investment of time and energy in ephemeral works is a central interest of the artist as much as the potential for endless remaking is an indispensable part of the process (Cummings, 2013). All the material is recycled after each exhibition and becomes a part of future projects.

Operating between being and collapse, Cummings' art evokes notions of life and death. Loss and absence, for instance, are part of the theme in *After the Death of the Bear* (2013), a work commissioned by the British Ceramics Biennial. The work is a reconstruction of the landscape of a nineteenth-century blue and white plate from the Spode factory, titled *The Death of the Bear* [Fig 2]. *The Death of the Bear* was a famous 19th-century tableware pattern depicting a bear surrounded by British hunters in India. Cummings had been intrigued by the image when she came upon the plate in the Victoria & Albert Museum Collection. Her own reconstruction was a raw clay, uncanny landscape of palm trees and vegetation in which the bear is absent. The plate itself was displayed in juxtaposition, drawing a comparison between the glossy finish of the glazed ceramic and the porous surfaces of the raw clay installation. It was as if the comparison in itself captured and illustrated change. In a space surrounded with plastic coverings, the full-size scenario had eerie connotations revealing the silhouette of a distant forensic scene (see figure 2).

The dominant narrative in ceramic art has deprived clay of its intrinsic dynamism. Under new materialist perspectives, clay is not a passive entity nor a blank surface awaiting signification. It does not need the inscription of external drives like culture or history to complete it. Nevertheless, it cannot be isolated from those factors either. Like any other material medium, clay embodies an ongoing historicity in the process of becoming (Barad, 2003). Although not engaging such perspectives directly, Cummings offers a performative openness to the agential materiality of clay. In her refusal to make clay permanent through firing, we recognize more than a provocative gesture. Instead, such a refusal is an integral part of the artist's strategy for presenting to the audience the power of the material. Cummings makes us appreciate that the clay installations are no inert agglomerations, no finished artworks. They are the vital nucleus of a physical system involving light,

heat, vapor and condensed water in flow, responding to the changing thermal conditions of their particular location at a given moment. At the same time, the earlier uses of clay, the importance of firing, and the archeological ceramic artifacts which give information about a culture, are not ignored when Cummings decides to keep her installations raw. By leaving those environments to change themselves, Cummings has consistently given rise to the initiation of experimental open-ended processes.

### **Alexandra Engelfriet**

Karen Barad asserts that matter is not a thing or an object, but an active productive process. She claims that ‘matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity’ (Barad, 2003). The more we understand about the physical characteristics of materials like clay and ceramics, the more we see potential interplays and the more we appreciate their productive and resistant capacities (Coole, 2015). Alexandra Engelfriet’s installations and sculptures emerge from the whole body’s involvement with soft clay. They can be better described as performances since they happen as temporary situations and are then allowed to disintegrate. Thus, the audience can only experience the works afterwards, via film and photography. Seen on film, Engelfriet’s interactions with soft clay are engrossing; she pushes into clay, kneeling it, kicking, elbowing, kneading, forming inroads that register the movement of the body and ultimately provide a narrative of the process (Engelfriet, 2011). Sliding on her knees, she uses gravity in a semi-controlled falling, almost flowing with the clay. Butoh, a form of trance-like improvised movements that originated in Japan, informs her actions.

The focus on the materiality of a medium does not always bring with it attention to processes, stories of transformation, tools, spaces of production, and the agents involved in that expansion. The question is then how to grasp the transformative effects of materials without relying upon animistic and romantic mysticisms (Coole, 2010) or on a logocentric tradition, where language is the primary instrument to transmit meaning. Explaining her process, Engelfriet acknowledges that it is capable of triggering emotional aspects, but ‘it is the engaging with clay that comes first, that brings out the experience, not the other way round. But of course it is me doing it at a

particular moment, and what is in me at that particular moment is engaged with the clay, or is activated by engaging with clay' (2013). In other words, Engelfriet argues for a material experience, as opposed to an approach dominated by language. Engaging with materials also involves a critique of the predominance of discourse (Barad, 2003).

While Engelfriet's early projects were defined by the rawness of the material and the ephemerality of the work, in 2013 she developed *Tranchée*, a permanent site-specific sculpture achieved through collaborative wood firing. It took place in Le Vent des Forêts, a sculpture park thirty five kilometers south from Verdun, the site of the longest single battle of World War I. The piece began as a fifty-meter long concave trench cut into a clearing in the forest; the middle section was covered with twenty tons of clay from a local quarry and formed over an intensive two-day period. A kiln was built to enclose the trench, and the sculpture was fired over the course of a week. The ambition was to fire the space-installation in two stages; the first was the cooking of the clay, and the second had the goal of melting the different glazes that covered part of the sculpture's surface (Higgin, 2016). There is the record of the making and the record of the firing; to document those processes, she used photographs and video, as she did before, but the fired ceramic space-installation itself is another piece of that chronicle. The fired clay allows the making to be felt, where the change is experienced first handed, in a more sensorial way. The transformation was substantial: a range of colors emerged, registering the freshness of Engelfriet's performance. The wood firing was capable of preserving the immediacy of the piece, especially the sense of bodily presence. In some places, recognizable traces of her actions, even small details of her body and garments were retained.

*Tranchée* constitutes a decisive moment in Engelfriet's development, as she had not previously attempted to fire works of this scale. However skilfully it is conducted, the wood firing method increases danger. An accident can sometimes be a small disaster, but it can also occasionally push the work to a different level. Refulgent flames are unruly, the ash is unpredictable, and the stoker needs to choose the wood carefully and remain in close communion with the kiln. Fly ash produced from the burning wood, carried by the flame, is dusted over the surface of the glaze. The flame tip, which is hotter, plays over the surface giving variety to the melt of the glaze and ceramic, and because it comes mainly in one direction, each part has different textures that give a great variety and a richness to the material. The interaction of glazed

and unglazed surfaces recalls the original state of the clay itself and suggests its eventual dissolution. The long, physically demanding process of firing the kiln had to be attended with alertness and sensitivity, but it also provoked mesmerizing musings.

I would like to understand Engelfriet's work through the lens of Gaston Bachelard's unique approach to the poetics of elemental materials (1983; 1968). Contemporary interest in new materialisms has led to a reinvestigation of Bachelard's theories and has re-situated them in relation to a broader theoretical constellation (Smith, 2012). Bachelard wrote extensively upon imagination, matter, and consciousness in ways sympathetic to clay and ceramic practices. As he put it: 'I shall pay considerable attention to the combination of water and earth that is "realistically" presented under the guise of "paste" (la pate). Paste is thus the basic component of materiality; the very notion of matter is, I think, closely bound up with it' (1983: 13). Bachelard described material imagination – which is complementary to formal imagination – as 'images that stem directly from matter' (1983: 1). Material imagination relies on the connection with the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air; each one being 'profoundly and materially a system of poetic fidelity' (1985: 5). Thus, the working of clay is the artistic process that is closest to the imagination. In contrast with marble sculpting, which produces form by eliminating the formless, before clay the modeler '...finds form by deforming, by a dreamy evolution of the amorphous. The modeler is the one nearest to the inner dream, to the vegetating dream' (Bachelard, 1983: 108). Kneading, modeling, fluidity, and pliability are all important experiences, Bachelard notes, to understanding 'the psychology of the creative unconscious' (1983: 13).

Bachelard's idea of material imagination becomes manifest in Engelfriet's work, and her engagement with the materiality of clay requires, beyond chemistry and physics, a comprehension of the poetics of the elements. In Engelfriet's view, clay itself plays a significant role in the development of imagery and that in return original imagery shapes her material encounters. In this way, the material imagination describes the way her imagination intersects materially with the world and develops intersubjectively. While the compound clay is a mixture of the elements water and earth combined, the artist creates new meanings through encounters with symbolic forms that are at once physical and social. In *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (1968), Bachelard documents numerous myths and poetic references that describe the mastery of fire as the origin of human cultural

development. Regarding fire's multivalent resonances, Bachelard notes: 'It is understandable, then, that a material element such as fire could be linked to a type of reverie that controls the beliefs, the passions, the ideals, the philosophy of an entire life. We can speak of the aesthetics of fire, the psychology of fire, and even of the ethics of fire. A poetics and a philosophy of fire condense all these teachings' (1968: 5). Engelfriet, among other artists to whose work I will refer next, actualize what Bachelard calls 'poetics of fire' (1968: 5) (see figures 3, 4, and 5).

### **Nina Hole**

Nina Hole is one of the earliest and best-known practitioners of firing as performance. Since the mid-90s, Hole has staged her *Fire Sculptures* all over the world. Having sprung from Hole's frustration over the limitations of kiln size as well as building and drying time, the *Fire Sculptures* entail the building of a large architectural structure and involve substantial collaboration. Typically, in the days leading up to the event, the sculpture is assembled by a group of assistants from slab-built modules. The kiln is replaced by the combination of hollow clay structure and ceramic blanket wrapping. The sculpture, which could reach a height of about four meters, is built on a base of firebricks, which are placed so that they also serve as firing channels. The kiln itself comes into existence when the finished sculpture is wrapped up in the ceramic fiber blanket, which is so highly insulating that it can be heated up to 1300°C. A thermal insulation technology developed for the space industry, but now also used for insulating ceramic kilns.

Hole's approach to materialism does not suggest a pure material presence, but instead, it posits materiality as an explicitly social experience. Witnessing the firing sculpture takes on a ritual aspect: a strong sense of group anticipation develops as soon as the radiance of the ceramic becomes apparent beneath its cover. When it is assumed to have reached a suitable temperature, and after darkness has fallen, the blanket is snatched away to dramatic effect. The fall of the blanket is an integral part of the process of cooling the sculpture down to its final stage. The audience sees the whole cooling process, the change of light and color with their own eyes. If Hole was only concerned with the object she was creating, she would leave the piece to cool slowly, since there is a high risk of breakage if cooling happens too quickly. Instead, Hole is interested in creating a peak moment, an experience of awe. Just before the sun rises, Hole pulls off the refractory fabric covering and packets full of

sawdust, copper and some salt are given to the audience. As each package approaches the glowing sculpture, it bursts into flames. Sawdust is flung onto the bright structure sending sparks into the night sky. The piece will perhaps not last as long, but the artist regards the process, including the stimulating communal experience of working with a group of people, more relevant than any resulting object. The *Fire Sculptures* foreground the joint event of creation as a way of making a new and more egalitarian history, while at the same time reconceiving historical motifs and methods in order to recontextualize them.

The *Fire Sculptures*, being at the same time ceramic piece and oven, suggest a sort of Derridean fold. An element that is neither inside nor outside, less a metaphor than a syntactical positioning between signification and material presence. The fold functions at the same time as both a connector and a divider that breaks down the dichotomy, a halfway space where one cannot define if it is one or the other. Hole's approach is more focused on both than on neither, and the work suggests a transition toward an ambivalence symbolism rather than its complete negation. Hole's work could be read as a deconstruction of the kiln's symbolic function. The material imagination brings images into being, while the communal firing experience suggests a continuing transformation. In this sense, according to Bachelard, fire '... is a pleasure for the good child sitting prudently by the hearth, yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. It is well-being, and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad' (1968: 7).

Hole's approach responds to the need of site-specific and community-related artworks. Her constructions explicitly revive the reappropriation of public spaces and communal work as a critique of modern life. The significant scale of the sculpture, with its inherent structure and effects, foregrounds its dialogic origins. The awkwardness and anonymity of the many hands forming the clay register the presence of multiple makers as opposed to the individual expressive gestures of a single artist; however, it does not allow personal expressive engagement. The collaborative art-making replaces the notion of the individual as something whole and indivisible with the idea of a singular voice appearing in a collective social context. This framework is crucial for understanding the particular combination and mutual inseparability of collectivism and individual expression in Hole's art. The various contributors are essential in the physical production of each piece, but the development also includes the planning and advice given by

Hole about construction and firing. The work of each maker – artist or artisan, amateur or professional – offers diverse contributions to each stage of the complex undertaking of forming, building, folding, covering, and firing. As a collective experiment, the *Fire Sculptures* foreground openness, imagination, and materiality not just as aesthetic properties but also as social values.

### **Keith Harrison**

Keith Harrison sets up direct exchanges between electricity and material. His use of electrical power permits his own firing performances to be realized indoors, in galleries and other closed venues. At their simplest, they involve the appropriation of a domestic appliance, such as an electric heater or a domestic cooker, as a kiln whose parts are covered in Egyptian paste. In individual works such as *Last Supper* (2006), *Grand* (2008) and *Brother* (2009), he creates symbolically charged setups, where electricity is allowed to perform. When the power is switched on, subtle transformations occur: a little smoke, some barely audible crackling and some changes in the surface as the elements warm up. Frequently processual and time-based, Harrison's efforts can be situated within the tradition of an 'art history of the mutable', to use a category coined by Dietmar Rübel (2012). As a response to the increasing use of unstable substances and ephemeral materials in the twentieth century, Rübel originated the term 'plasticity,' which he explains as the mutable and ephemeral in sculpture (2012: 94). Quoting Barthes, Rübel notes that these characteristics are, nevertheless, what can give the sculpture permanence: 'what is mutable about the works, their changing figurations and configurations are what could and still "can attain permanence throughout the ages"' (2012: 96). Harrison believes that art and science are interrelated and complementary. He rejects the simplistic opposition between scientific, rationalist, or artistic understanding and the mystical, emotional, or subjective artistic viewpoint (Harrison, 2009). His incorporation of temporary, mutable and almost imperceptible phenomena such as electricity, heat, steam and sound waves, is not confined to the works mentioned above. In his artistic research practice, he combines different physical phenomena and natural forces in varying degrees of stability. The instability and mutability pertain not only to individual works by Harrison but also to the relationships and interplay arising between the various artists here discussed.

Like Hole in her *Fire Sculptures*, Keith Harrison asks his audience to bear witness, and thereby become participant, to a spectacle of transition while using experimental public methods. Although the physical change is gradual, the viewer cannot help but become conscious of the drying process: gaps open, interconnect and form that distinctive crackle-pattern familiar to potters (and geologists). Yet while wood firing feels organic and promotes a sense of continuity, as seen in the works from Engelfriet and Hole, Harrison's firing techniques are transgressive. Ceramic has had a vexed relationship with electricity. The products of the electric kiln have been considered inauthentic by traditionalists, who see combustion and the generation of flames and smoke as the proper way to fire ceramics. Harrison's frame of reference is thus very different from those of performance firers, but the transformation in the material is also what leads his practice.

Over the course of the performance, the electrical elements heat the material causing chemical changes in the space and the work. Steam gently leaves the piece and enters into the atmosphere of the room, creating a physical sense of alteration and development within the audience's perception and understanding of what they are witnessing. Harrison's motives are embedded in the transformative state of the brief firing process. This impression is also connected with the short duration of the installation-performances he offers to the public – normally between one and eight hours long. No ceramic could be fired in that short period of time; however, his practice is more related to the changes in the surface. The Egyptian paste is the one undergoing transformation and producing sensorial effects; not much about the clay involved in the artworks is molecularly modified. The color in the Egyptian paste is used to achieve heterogeneous qualities of shine and translucent surfaces as three dimensional. The ephemeral nature of the work means that the only remaining outcome is in the memory of the audience.

The imagery is an essential drive in Harrison's work. The installations evoke not so many material forms as signification-charged images. They recall something of the excitement and hazard of the nineteenth-century electrical experiments, as well as building forms and tile-covered structures. Thus, Harrison's experiments embody the role of aesthetics itself in modern society, as that which foregrounds the significance of physical sensation. This does not mean sheer feeling, as if such a thing exists or could be experienced in isolation, but rather the play between sensorial elements and the meanings and possibilities they may suggest. The artist uses the sensorial to continually

modify images which are inherently cultural, in an attempt to reconfigure their social interactions. While acknowledging the singularity of subjective experience, Harrison suggests its emergence through interaction with the installation, gallery and other members of the public.

## **Conclusion**

The arguments in this paper are not aimed to suggest the necessity of a pure state in which clay or ceramic must, even less should, exist. Instead, they indicate the possibility of multiplying the use of materials beyond their functionality to transition toward ambivalence and hybridity. The artistic projects explored in this paper demonstrate the potential of socialization practices to modify symbolic images and the historicity of the materials through reconfigurations of their social interactions. The article highlights some of the dangers that accompany the efforts to make the process of firing clay open. These risks do not only apply to the damage of the objects during the making but influence the documentation and archiving of sensorial performances.

It is relevant, if research on new materialism is to serve the interests of social sciences and the arts alike, to bring to the fore practices sustained by different forms of knowledge. What could be considered failure, error, or damage in studio ceramics, it is an aesthetic impulse for the artists mentioned in this paper. Cummings, Engelfriet, Hole, and Harrison question normalized techniques and connect them to the historical ritual performance of making with clay. Although with different approaches, the four artists propose a process-oriented practice, rather than an object-oriented attitude to making.

The artists include processes of transformation as the axes for the dramaturgy of their works. This kind of performative practice needs to consider not only the points at which different forms of materiality connect with conceptual decisions. It also requires to discuss how the audience becomes fundamental for the creation of the piece. The artworks appear in the form of immersive installations, in the case of Cummings and Engelfriet, or using participatory strategies, in the case of Hole and Harrison. In both cases, the open systems set by the artists let things to develop over time. The agency of the materials, the environment, and the public is acknowledged and necessary for the work to exist.

In the context, the installations from Cummings and Engelfriet could also be call participatory. Claire Bishop's insight is decisive: 'An aesthetic of participation therefore derives legitimacy from a (desired) causal relationship between the experience of a work of art and individual/collective agency' (2010: 12). In the case of a participatory performative artistic production, we need to think how its relationship with creation leads artists, materials, and the public to inscribe a series of practices that make a social experience to unfold. The constructed situations become spaces for the arrangement of new social relationships and thus new social realities.

### Figures



Fig. 1: Alexandra Engelfriet, *Dust to Dust* (2011), mix-media installation post-performance. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2: Death of a Bear. Made at the factory of E. Challinor. Burslem, England, ca. 1819-1822. Plate of lead-glazed earthenware transfer-printed in blue with an Indian hunting scene. Credits: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 3: Alexandra Engelfriet, *Tranchée*, still photograph from performance. Courtesy of the artist.

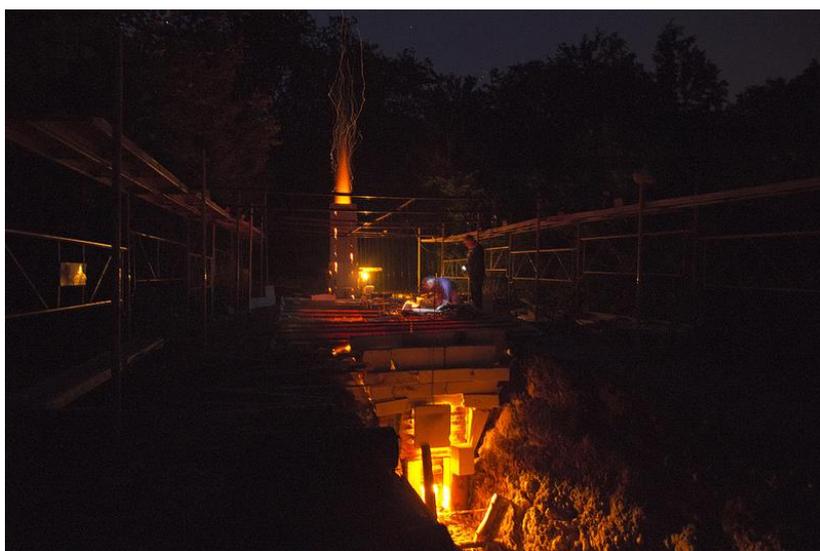


Fig. 4: Alexandra Engelfriet, *Tranchée*, still photograph from firing. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5: Alexandra Engelfriet, *Tranchée* (2013) (wood-fired, earthenware; 10 x 2.3 m). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6: Nina Hole, *Fire Sculpture* still covered at the Cary Arts Center, Cary, North Carolina, 2012. Credits: Selena Beckman-Harned, <https://goo.gl/kCKntJ>.



Fig. 7: Nina Hole, Fire Sculpture reveal at the Cary Arts Center, Cary, North Carolina, 2012. Credits: Selena Beckman-Harned, <https://goo.gl/fjmBGP>.

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