

Protocol: Pottery then, Pottery now

"A hearth, a home, a fire in the hearth/a house for the fire, the fire's home"

Presented by artist and interdisciplinary scholar, Beth Collar

- Studied at art school
- Did her first pottery class, when she was 7 years old. She was taught by an old lady, who was teaching in the shed of her garden
- She connects clay to childhood experience, but also to trauma in her life

Clay can be considered a heavier material than it might seem

Pottery in contemporary art

Beth presented us to the work of some contemporary artists, who work with ceramics and kiln building:

Daniel Seko

- Works with woodfired ceramics in Czech republic
- Inspired by Anagama firing technique, he creates pottery with a natural ash glaze
- This ash glaze is created from the material of the wood that is left after combustion, which covers the vessel like liquid ash
- Fired at 4000 degrees continuously for 4-5 days -> it's a communal project to keep the fire going
- Also organised the project: "Warmth gather us"
 - o Community project that aimed to build a small kiln on an organic farm outside Vienna
 - o Used only building material that could be found around the site, such as river clay to stick everything together
 - o Construction used as a kiln and a breadoven
 - 2 chambered structure with fire in the ground floor, and the ceramics kept on second floor
 - Handles for attaching brick roof
 - Reusing material and whatever is available

Marie Jansen (mariefilippajanssen.com)

- Background in fine art
- Working with standing structures
- Created a shrouded furnace and tiled stoves that are normally used for heating homes
- She builds the kiln around the objects, as one massive construction
- Used as temporary kiln for a particular object

A book Beth also found a good introduction to kiln building and use is Bernard Leach "A Potter's Work"¹

Beth also gave us an insight into kiln usage in Berlin

- She usually fires her ceramics at The Berlin Kiln Landscape
- A place that supports artists, but which is at its full capacity
- The kilns are fully booked over extended periods
- In general, there are too few places for firing and the prices are often quite high

She is currently trying to find a solution for a community-based way of firing

- Most ceramicists find themselves in an awkward position of making things from ready clay, they did not make themselves
- Wants to figure out how to properly interact with the kiln
- Unlike other kind of materials she uses in her art, she is not part of the full process
- Also wants to add a community network in her own work

Afterwards Beth showed examples of how she incorporated ceramic artwork in her own shows "Seriously" (2017 [Beth Collar: Seriously | Solo Show | Artfacts](#)) and "Daddy issues" (2019 - [Southwark Park Galleries | Daddy Issues](#))

Inspiration from Antiquity

Since 2020 Beth has also looked into historical cases of pottery making and kiln building, particularly in Etruscan Antiquity

- Inspired after staying at residency in Rome
- impressed by the massive antique funerary sculptures and wondered how they had been fired in kilns
- A votive terracotta depicting a liver, also became the focus of an artwork she produced
 - o Sculpted the ceramic liver in reverse and casted the empty space
 - o Part of exhibition "The Unforgiven" in 2022 at Sundry gallery, London ([Beth Collar at Sundry – Art Viewer](#))
 - o The artwork was hung in liver height and in a museum-like display

Structure K at Cetamura del Chianti

- A kiln found at an Etruscan site, considered an artisan quarter
- Excavated in the 1990's
- Evidence for ritual deposition – purportedly broken pots
- No roof found
 - o Was constantly taken apart and rebuilt probably
 - o Opening at waist height

¹See Userwiki

Don Davis and Richard Kortum – Nuovo Forno Etrusco 2009-2014

- [The Nuovo Forno Etrusco: An Etruscan Kiln Project, 2009–2014 \(degruyter.com\)](https://degruyter.com)
- Experimental archaeology project to built an Etruscan kiln with students
- Built the kiln on budget in a short amount of time, which eventually meant that they also mixed in modern material
- Planned that the back entrance would have a dome, but simplified while building the kiln
- Installed openings at ground levels
- Chamber system that separates the pots from the fire and more evenly distributes the fire
-> considered to be typical Etruscan

Beth recently went to visit the abandoned site of the kiln built by the NFE Project

- The kiln makers had left the roof opened – “did not put it to bed”
- Used cones and broken sherds lying around
 - o A “hard core” abandonment
- Instruction manual left by the professors from Tennessee
- Lessons from visiting this kiln:
 - o The kiln felt ghostly and wrong seeing it after abandonment
 - o Beth wants to create a kiln that does not get abandoned, but remains to have a life
 - o Should be a communal work

Another ceramic artwork that inspired her is the terracotta work of the Renaissance sculptor, Niccolò dell’Arca

- Famous female terracotta sculptures in Church of Santa Maria della vita, Bologna
- The women’s mouths are wide open, the sculptures are dynamic
- Expression of emotion, very unlike other depictions of women from that time
- These kind of terracotta figures not included in art history books or lectures
 - o Shows clay not considered a “serious” material in art history

Questions

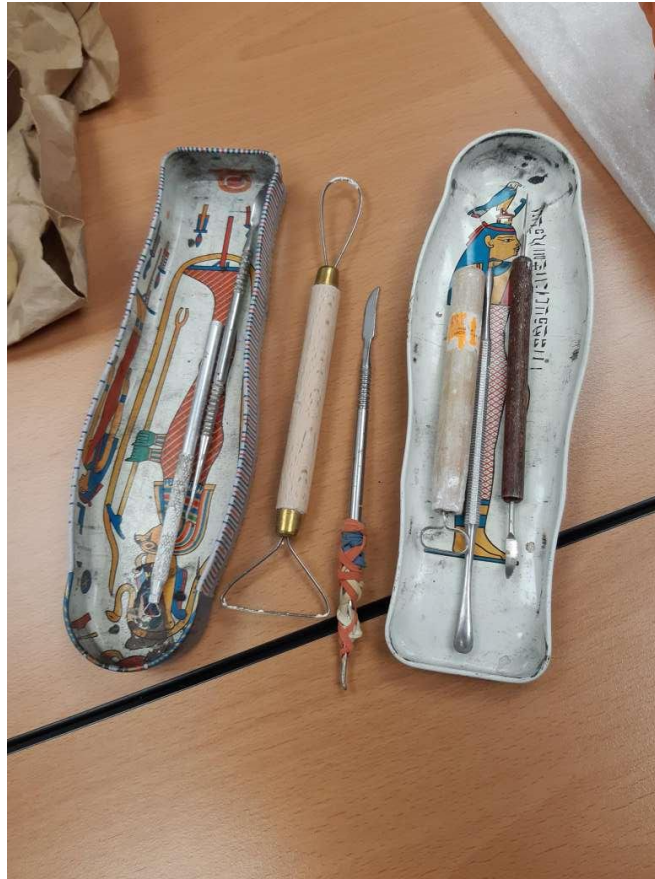
Beth brought examples of her artwork and the tools, she uses for the clay sculpting

About the structure of surfaces of the ceramic artwork - is it cut while it is dry?

- I am modelling from a piece of clay
- First, I slice a chunk of the block, then I place a hole in it, and starts creating a structure
- Better to sculpt clay, when it is a little bit harder
- I carve from a general shape and follow a line when carving
- Every mark, will be repolished (burnishing)
- Labour intensive work!

Do you have problems with the ceramics drying from the inside before outside?

- I wrap it in plastic overnight to keep hydration roughly the same



Beth's tool set

Is it more like a drawing, than sculpting?

- The form is drawn and sculpted at the same time

It's a very pure kind of clay - does it break, when it is fired?

- So far no accidents!
- I make sure there is no very thick points, by excavating holes into the thicker parts to lower chances of breakage
- Mostly winging it – I learned from experience

How long do you let the ceramic pieces dry before firing?

- A long time
- Also depends on the ceramicists who are in charge of firing and when they have time
- Made in a studio, where they are kept until firing

Do the ceramics dry in a stable environment?

- Studio has a cold environment, as it is in a basement
- A bit more moisture than a normal house
- Drying process is a slow climb to make sure it is fully dry

Which type of clay do you use and do you prepare it yourself?

- Normally I buy it at Börkey Keratech, where they have hundreds of clay to choose from
- Choose based on temperatures and no inclusions

You worked only with this kind of “pure” clay? Have you also tried clay with inclusions?

- I have tried with Orbs in it, and didn't really like it
- A few times used mix with grog also
- I am more drawn to very smooth clay
- In that sense I am not doing “Pottery” - I am using clay as plastic material. So I am not a technical potter, I am a “winger”

Do you use a lot of water?

- I am rewetting stuff to keep stuff roughly malleable
- Sometimes burnished to make water-like appearance

Do you plan ahead or do you sculpt according to the moment?

- Just stick things as they will

How did you learn to make this kind of ceramics?

- Never learned anything at university
- I did one course with an old lady, when I was a kid
- When I did A-levels I had two sculpture teachers
- Otherwise self-taught and based on experience
- Just tried things out, never did it methodologically

Are you thinking to create a kiln here in Berlin?

- Working on show at the moment for an exhibition in autumn
- Got some research money to build a kiln
- Most important is to find a place that is right
- Would like to experiment with bucchero ware
- Needs a field with a shed, which can stay and does not get abandoned

Comments:

- Maybe through Domäne Dahlem and the Düppel museum such a kiln could be made?
- There should be great interest for such an interdisciplinary project, particularly with the communal aspect which is also hinted at Cetamura del Chianti with the ritual disposal of broken pots
 - o A kiln requires effort for firing – so perfect place for a feasting
 - o There are several films and ethnographic studies, documenting these kinds of rituals in for examples Spanish villages or Tibet
- Most important thing about the building of this kiln is that it should be generally accessible

As an artist, do you find it easier to express things with clay compared to other materials?

- Certainly
- It is a completely different process and space that requires days/weeks of hard work
- Constantly also mistakes that need to be amended
- Also a dream material that can be sketched superbly

Do you find clay is not considered a serious material within the art world today?

- Not really included in art history
- Pottery not taken seriously as such
- Ceramics and craft -> considered "girls material"
- Based on London experiences there's also an appropriation aspect
 - o When women work with clay is considered cute and insignificant, but when male artists are doing "ironically" they are being celebrated