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A NOURISHING DIALOGUE WITH THE MATERIAL ENVIRONMENT

ENCOUNTERING CREATIVE MATERIALITY

Social Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2004, 330) reminds us that we do not perceive with the eyes, the ears or the surface of the skin, but with the whole body. It is specifically through our feet, in contact with the ground, that we are most fundamentally and continually ‘in touch’ with our surroundings. His argument is that it is both the hands and feet – augmented by tools – that mediate a historical engagement of the human organism with the world around it (ibid. 332). In Waiheke Island, the place where I lived during my nine-month stay in New Zealand, walking emerged as an embodied practice that underpinned the creative process that took place during the year.

Walking was a multisensory experience during which my body perceived its surroundings through a diversity of senses – seeing, hearing and smelling – in combination with a moving body (Mäkelä 2016, 5). At the beginning, the purpose of the walks was to familiarise myself with the new environment. I was impressed with the mineral variety of the land that I encountered in the form of rocks, stones, sand and soil – next to roads, walking tracks and beaches, and under the sea when the tide moved the water further from the beach. When I found captivating materials, I handled them to discover more about their qualities. Whenever I would be able to grind these materials with my tools, I gathered up a small amount of them and took them with me.

The first such gathering was the black sand that I found during my walk at Te Henga beach. This was a unique experience as I had never before seen a black beach that was entirely formed of black sand and black stones of varying sizes. The soil was volcanic and contained a lot of manganese that lent its colour to the entire environment. The

heavy waves washed the beach, transforming the stones into sand. The rhythmic sound of the waves followed my visit in the beach, accompanied by the smell of the salted sea. During my walks in different locations, I ended up also gathering stones and clay. As a ceramicist, I was eager to discover how I might be able to use these materials as a part of my evolving creative practice.

The political theorist Jane Bennett has considered the relationship between nature, ethics, and affect. Recently, she has shifted her focus from the human experience of things to the things themselves and considered what it might mean if we were to recognise the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. Her thinking starts from the conceit that humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other (Bennett 2010, 31). Despite acknowledging the complexity of the dance, the most important agential factor has been positioned as human intentionality. That is, humans have been conceived as being the bearer of an exceptional kind of power (ibid. 34).

In *Vibrant Matter* (2010, 56), Bennett proposes that, instead of a formative power detachable from matter, a craftsperson – or anyone who has an intimate connection with things – encounters a creative materiality with initial tendencies and propensities, which have a capacity to be combined in varied ways. The direction in which this power takes the creator depends on what other types of forces, affects, or matters are present in the process, or bodies with which they come into close contact. What is intrinsic for the craftsperson is the desire to see what the material can *do* (ibid. 60). Via this position, she is also able to discern a life in the material and thus, eventually, collaborate productively with it.

My approach and thoughts as a craftsperson parallels what Bennett proposes above. Walking in a natural environment invites me to take part in an interplay with it: it gives me both inspiration for the creative work and the concrete materials with which to start the process. In New Zealand, the carefully selected material gatherings formed the material base of the evolving creative process. As I gathered all the materials from different locations, they were all unique – differing from the nature of the materials I was used to working with.

IN DIALOGUE WITH THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

Ingold (2000, 88) suggests that artefacts emerge – like the forms of living beings – within the relational contexts of the mutual involvement of people and their environment. He believes that the form of the artefact does not issue from the idea but instead comes into being through the gradual unfolding of the field of forces set up

through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material (ibid. 342). According to his thinking, a skilled craftsperson operates within a field of forces set up through her engagement with the material (ibid. 347). The work does not merely involve the mechanical application of external force, but calls for care, judgement and dexterity. The action has a narrative quality in the sense that every movement grows rhythmically out of the one before and lays the groundwork for the next.

As a professional craftsperson I endorse Ingold's thoughts and conceive that I truly work in a dialogue with the material forces. To be able to conduct this kind of subtle dialogue with the material, I have to be sensitive to the non-human material world that surrounds me, and that I am part of. As cognitive archaeologist Lambros Malafouris (2008, 22-24) has proposed, in this kind of dialogue the question is not about a property or possession of humans or nonhumans but the relational and emergent product of material engagement that has to be realised. What I am able to do is dependent upon the physical affordance of an environment – in my case the qualities of the soil that New Zealand provided to me.

To understand more about the material quality of the soil gatherings, I established a plain studio at my home. The tools consisted of local sticks, shells and stones, but also included some kitchen items, such as towels, spoons, knives and a pestle and mortar. In the studio, I processed the collected materials further with my hands. I refined the materials by separating the small sticks and bigger stones from the gatherings, and sorted them out based on their colour, and the location from which they were collected. After that, with the help of a pestle and mortar, and with some added water, I transformed some of the clay, as well as sand and stone samples, into a liquid form.

I also shaped the rest of the clay and from this clay body made tiny test pieces that were dipped into the liquids I had made. In this way, the same clay served both as a body of the work and as a colour that was applied to other clay bodies' surface. The first test pieces were made from the yellow clay I found on the slope of my own street (fig.). This clay also contained tiny pieces of okra from which I could prepare a slip that had an orange tone. When the test pieces were dry, they were fired in a kiln at 1060 degree Celsius. During the firing, the material composition of clay morphed into ceramic, entailing changes in material surfaces and colours. The result of the firings was a tangible palette, a study of the colours the local environment offered to my creative practice. The unfired liquids were used when I proceeded to the next stage of the process and started to paint.

The first paintings were made on paper as I wanted to experiment and see the kind of marking that would be possible with the earthen liquids. When painting, I let the

powered sand, stone and clay run on the paper by using large amounts of water. In this way, I was in a dialogue with the material that ‘responded’ to my actions unexpectedly. Due to the impure qualities of the materials, some of them rejected each other, and before becoming part of the evolving image, they found their own way to ‘dwell’ on the surface of the evolving painting. Starting from the abstract forms, the painting process proceeded towards becoming figurative images. After realizing that earthen materials were suitable for diverse kinds of paintings, I started to paint directly on top of some wet clay that I had carefully moulded with my hands beforehand.

The change from paper to clay also enabled me to manipulate the painting surface while making the image. Thus, instead of sketching the evolving image with a brush, I used a wooden stick with which I carved the image roughly on top of the wet clay slab. Onto these lines, I added earthen liquids. I worked in layers and the image evolved on the top of the slab in a dialogue with my embodied actions and the earthen materials.

During the painting process, the nature of the lines changed, as I also inserted earthen liquids inside the carved lines and then ran the colours along the lines. When doing this, I took the clay slab together with its wooden board support onto my lap and cradled the emerging painting. Via this action, I was able to lead the running earthen liquids discretely in the desired direction. I consider this part of the process to be very intimate, a kind of caring act that was directed not only towards the evolving image, but also towards the material per se. The clay images were transformed into ceramic via a firing process that eventually brought forth the colours suggested by the test pieces (fig.).

CRAFT MAKING AS PHILOSOPHICAL ACT OF CARE

Geographers Owain Jones and Paul Cloke (2008, 86-87) have brought up the need to move away from treating the human realm as separate, privileged and ontologically unique in terms of agency. To be able to appreciate the agencies of nature and materiality, we need to appreciate the very differing forms of beings and processes in which they are articulated, and, in addition, the very differing velocities and rhythms they might be operating in. Bennett (2010, 108) proposes that we also need to devise “new procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or listen and respond more carefully to [non-humans’] outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions”. This is because these offerings are profoundly important to the health of the political ecologies to which we belong.

In New Zealand, I immersed myself in the local nature and began a dialogue with the new environment. The creative process was set forth via walking, which, according to Ingold (2010, 18), is a deeply meditative practice. He conceives of walking as a journey in the mind as much as on the land. This is enabled through our senses, which maintain a constant traffic between the terrains of the mental and material. During the walks, I immersed myself as part of the local environment and in this way tuned my thinking towards the patterns and rhythms the nature offered. In my case, the surrounding nature not only inspired me and set my mind into a certain mode, but also provided me with materials for the evolving making process.

The evolving creative process was based on my earlier experiences and skills from the field of contemporary ceramics. The process resulted in accidental discoveries and unexpected results that were gathered in an exhibition embodying different agencies and material configurations: small earth gatherings, images from the place where these materials were gathered, tools and test pieces, as well as paintings on paper and clay. Experiencing the interplay of these components in the form of an art exhibition was for me an aesthetic experience.



Image: Collecting earth from Waiheke Island (left and middle) and the final clay painting *Portrait of a woman* (2015, 26 x 26 x 2 cm) made with local earthen materials: Te Henga black sand, Tasman red stone, Long Bay white and yellow clay, Te Matuku clay and Cory Road clay on Matakana clay (right). Photos: Maarit Mäkelä (left), Pertti Mäkelä (middle) and Samuel Hartnett (right).

In this essay, I have conceived of craft making as a philosophical space that enables us to think through the ethical and ecological concerns related to the stage of our environment. Furthermore, craft making provides an embodied way to practise and nourish a dialogical relationship with the local environment. I see this endeavour as a valuable practice through which to (re)consider the relationship between human and nature profoundly – not only from an individual perspective, but also from a cultural and non-anthropocentric one.

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