

The Poetics of Glaze
Ceramic Surface and the Perception of Depth

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ABSTRACT

This research by practice into the visual and aesthetic qualities of ceramic glaze investigates its ability to create an impression of depth. Because perspectival depth alone can not fully account for my artistic concerns, and the requirements of perspectival illusion are at odds with some of my major artistic preoccupations, such as an interest in accidents and imprecision in material rendering, I raised the hypothesis of a poetic dimension of depth, posing the research question for this project:

“What is poetic depth in a ceramic glaze?”

Traditionally, research into glazes focuses on aspects of material science, craftsmanship, archaeology or art history, and optical depth has been the subject of investigations into the microstructure of glaze. By seeking to address the aesthetic dimension of glaze I am moving away from such concerns. While the aesthetics of ceramic glaze is a new field of research, with little existing material, I am seeking to find parallels with practice, theories and research from the field of literary poetry, even though by ‘poetic’ I am referring to a quality that is not only mediated by language and goes beyond the field of literature. Further, I am also referring to Gaston Bachelard’s approach to material imagination through his poetics of the natural elements and to the concept of transitional space developed by psychoanalysts of the British Independent Group, Donald Winnicott and Marion Milner.

My thesis consists of a threefold dialogue between my artistic practice of glaze, theories and practices of literary poetry and the concept of the transitional phenomenon.

My findings are at the intersection of those three elements, and they are the results of my investigations through both making and writing:

- ‘Poetic tension’ is a paradoxical and conflicting process between authority – the ability to control – and subjectivity on the one hand and factors of dissent, questioning the very possibility of authorship, on the other: among these are the unconscious and the materiality of the glaze.
- The concern for interiority is a central element of poetry, the transitional phenomenon and my works.
- My practice of glaze is an attempt to re-enact and objectify the fusion between the self and the world, addressing the issues of the illusion of all-encompassing subjectivity and the disillusion of objectivity, both key elements of the transitional phenomenon.
- Play has been a natural development of my practice of glaze and I further established parallels with the literary poetic in a shared aspiration for subversion, dissent and laughter.
- The concept of the formless permeates Bachelard’s material imagination and my practice of glaze. Moreover it is often a prerequisite for Winnicott’s and Milner’s approach to creativity and play.
- Failure is the essence of a certain form of poetry, which Georges Bataille summed up as the ‘Impossible’. It is also a key aspect of my practice of glaze: an essence of flux or a further element of play whose irresolution or unlikely balance can create yet another dimension of the poetic.
- Flux is a necessary element of glazes but it also summarizes the dynamics and dialectics of the transitional phenomenon and of the Bataillean ‘Impossible’ and the playful poetic.

All three strands: my practice of glaze, the literary poetic and the transitional phenomenon intertwine, cross-fertilize and develop in parallel. Together, they have helped articulate the concepts and the artistic vocabulary through which the poetic and the transitional phenomenon have become operative categories of aesthetics, artistic practice, and of research processes.

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LIST OF ACCOMPANYING MATERIAL

CD-ROM – Thesis & Pictures of works (in plastic sleeve in front cover of this volume)

Abstract (loose insert in back cover of this volume)

Appendix 0 – PhD Timeline (loose insert in back cover of this volume)

Appendix I – Pictures of works

Appendix II – Cobblestones, technical notes and recipes

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

1. During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification.
2. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

E. Boos

September 2011

GLOSSARY

- Art Nouveau: late nineteenth-century European artistic movement which put an emphasis on organic and natural motifs and lines. Glazes were rich, as if a reproduction of the natural vegetal (rather than mineral) variety.
- Ash glaze: glaze composed of a high content of wood ash (the first ash glazes were accidental, discovered when wood ash came into contact with pots during firing).
- Ball mill: a process used to grind materials in glazes. The glaze is put with pebbles, water and air in a jar, and rotated at a critical speed.
- Biscuit, bisque, bisc: unglazed ceramic that has been fired raw once to allow for an easier handling of the ware while glazing.
- Celadon: High temperature glaze with a small content of red iron fired in reduction. Colour can range from a very pale blue to a very dark olive green. It was first used by the makers of Yue ware (2nd century AD), but reached its apogee under the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD). The name derives from the character Celadon who wore grey-green ribbons and a cloak, in the play *L'Astrée* by Honoré d'Urfée.
- Ceramics: Clay made permanent by heat. There is a distinction between ceramics such as earthenware, heated at lower temperature (usually below 1100°C), and those heated at a higher temperature (usually above 1200°C), such as stoneware and porcelain.
- Colouring oxides: metal oxides used as colorants in glazes.
- Cornish stone: a complex and variable crushed igneous rock and feldspathoid. I often use it for its quality of opaque rendering in some of my glazes.
- Crack: an accidental break through glaze and body. A crack occurring during firing and cooling is a dunt.
- Crazing: fine cracks occurring in a glaze. This is considered primarily to be a defect, but it can also be used for decoration, when it is, known as crackle.
- Dolomite: a mineral and flux in glazes producing matt-surfaced glazes through the creation of crystals.
- Double-firing: the glazed ceramic pieces are fired twice at high temperature to enhance some of the glaze effects.

- Drip: The process of forming and falling in drops.
- Dunt: Crack occurring during firing or cooling.
- Engobe: see Iron slip.
- Feldspar: a mineral used as a flux in ceramic glazes. Of all 12 varieties of feldspars those I used most commonly for glazes are:
 - Orthoclase or potassium feldspar.
 - Albite or sodium feldspar.
- Feldspathic glaze: a glaze with a high content of feldspar (50-100%).
- Firing cycle: time-based plan of activity to control the atmosphere and temperature of the kiln during firing and cooling.
- Fish-scale: A type of cracking in a glaze occurring at an angle to the body, thus provoking a striking impression of overlaying flakes and depth.
- Flambés: red glaze with green and blue streaks, resulting from the transmutation of copper oxide.
- Flammés: glazed ceramics fired under direct contact with the flame, resulting in a variety of tones and effects.
- Fluidity: The ability of a liquid to flow freely. It is used to qualify the runny character of glazes, the opposite being viscosity.
- Fusion:
 - Ceramic fusion: the melting of the glaze elements into a liquid.
 - According to Marion Milner, a psychological state of merging and/or confusion between the self and the world, also called the oceanic state.
- Gestalt: shape or form.
- Glaze: The vitreous covering of a ceramic body. It is made of glass-forming materials (silica), fluxes (sodium, potassium and calcium), stabilizers (alumina) and colouring oxides (iron, cobalt, copper...).
- Iron slip: an homogeneous mixture of red iron oxide and water used over the bisque and below the glaze to produce changes in the glaze.
- Molochite: a commercial name for calcined china clay (kaolin) and an element of glaze recipes.
- Nepheline Syenite: a feldspathoid mineral and flux in glazes. The principal element of the fish-scale glaze.

- Neutral: used to describe the atmosphere of an electric kiln neither saturated (oxidation) nor depleted (reduction) of oxygen.
- Paper porcelain: a mixture of cellulose and porcelain slip (in a 1 to 5 ratio). The cellulose fibres allows for better overall drying and for the dry or wet joining of elements without the occurrence of cracks at the drying stage. It endows porcelain with a surprisingly versatile usability.
- Pooling: The creation of large pools of glaze.
- Porcelain: according to a traditional definition, porcelain describes white and translucent ceramics. This definition excludes stained porcelains. I therefore favour another definition: ceramic produced from kaolin and fired at a high temperature.
- Reduction: gas-firing of ceramics in an atmosphere depleted of oxygen leading to oxygen being removed from metal oxides, such as the transformation of red iron oxide into black iron oxide (celadon glazes) or black copper oxide (green) to red state (copper red glazes).
- Reverie, or rêverie: a term used by Bachelard to describe musing or day-dreaming, and an important source of material imagination.
- Run: “Glaze run. The amount by which a glaze moves under gravity during its fluid state in the firing” (Hamer, 1975, p.289).
- Seger analysis, Seger formula, unity formula: A method of describing and comparing glazes by the proportions of their molecular content. This is sometimes referred to as molecular formula, although this is incorrect, as the unity formula describes proportions of molecules rather than a single molecule.
- Slab: a thin sheet of clay which I make by pouring a liquid slip over a plaster bat and allowing it to partially dry.
- Slip cast: a method of making consisting of pouring a slip into a porous plaster mould and allowing for the creation of a thin layer of clay on the wall of the moulds, known as cast.
- Temmoku, Tenmoku, Temoku: a glaze stained with a high content of iron oxide, resulting generally in a dark brown or black with rusty edges and patches.

- Thermal shock: the stress created by temperature change, often resulting in cracks in the ceramic object.
- Transitional: Donald Winnicott developed the concepts of transitional phenomenon, transitional space and transitional object to describe an “intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, which constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts” (Winnicott, 1971, p.14).
- Transmutation: change in the glaze colour.
- Viscosity: The relative stiffness of a liquid. This is used to qualify the relative immobility of glaze, the opposite being fluidity.

To my grandfather Charles Boos, 'Jean Christian', poet

INTRODUCTION

Every morning, one of my neighbours leaves for work in his car. He turns the music on, opens the car windows (regardless of the outside temperature) and drives away. Although he is gone, I can still hear from far away the loud sound of music pouring out of his car. I find this both strange and amusing, and I have wondered occasionally about the motivation for this behaviour, but I couldn't seem to find a satisfactory explanation.

Then one day, I suddenly recall an evening during my research. It was a difficult time, early in 2010 – I seemed stuck and a bit lost, not being able to make. The last body of work had been a tabula rasa – but had I gone too far? My last work was *Edge*, an installation piece consisting of casts of domestic objects. I had concealed and buried these domestic objects in clay, then cast multiples of them in porcelain and eventually covered them with runny glazes. Could anything develop from such a radical move? Where should I start? Should I resume work where I had left it, and push further still the concept of the concealment of objects? I was drawn into a sort of reverie, thinking, dreaming about new work. I am on my way home and I see the cars passing by and they too become part of the reverie. I imagined the model of a car, covered with clay and then with glaze. At this moment I feel the reverie has stopped. Covering up objects to then glaze their imprint has suddenly become a dead end in my quest for depth in a ceramic glaze. It is an intuition. I do not exactly know why, then. Not yet.

It is many months later, upon the completion of my research, when I observe my neighbour once again in his car, windows open and music loud, that I connect the two episodes. And both seem to make sense, casting light on the whole of the research.

Cars are a very clear expression of ego.

On the one hand, my neighbour with the loud music seems to confuse and mix ego and environment: what's inside and what's outside. The music is the material, the tool of this confusion; it is an attempt to fill in the world with music and turn it into

some huge video-clip or some extension of the self. It seems an attempt at inter-relatedness and communication, yet it is isolation within an envelope, a womb-like space of sound poured unilaterally over the world. In its violence, the loudness of its assertion, in its intrusive character, there is probably some madness in this attempt. More generally, there is an ambiguity between interior and exterior in the experience of driving. Inside the car, and with the car, the driver experiences the illusion of power and domination, yet it is difficult (and dangerous) to deny the fact of contact.

In an attempt to explain road rage, a psychologist writes:

Cars are an extension of the self, they are ego-laden objects that can be used both positively and negatively to get our own way on the road. The automobile offers us a means to exercise direct control over our environment. When we enter the car we use it as an outlet for regaining a sense of control. Automobiles are powerful, and obedient. They respond instantly and gratifyingly to our command, giving us a sense of wellbeing that comes with achieving control over one's environment (James, 1997).

My reverie about the car on my way home was not merely incidental. It was this desire for a matrix, an envelope, an illusory space of power and control in which the world seems to be held at bay: a space of autocracy, on the verge of madness, a space of confusion. Yet it was also a space of encounter and contact with the outside world,

an intermediate space,
an area of transition,
a transitional space.

The reverie of a model car covered with glaze probably acknowledged, albeit unconsciously, this ambiguity and paradoxical character that the experience of a car (driving a car) can offer as a transitional space. But the idea of a glaze merely poured over it mistook the support for its effect, the car for the confusion sought after.

I am after a similar confusion between inside and outside in my practice of glaze, but the glaze over the model car would only cover and seal an envelope. By objectifying the car, by remaining on the surface, by not linking inside and outside, the possibility

of interiority and that of an ambiguous or intermediate space of experience between inside and outside, the self and the world, were negated. The glaze would destroy the nature of both the car and the glaze itself as a vehicle of confusion between inside and outside. And it is precisely to “experience life in the area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals” (Winnicott, 1971, p.64) which I am aiming to experience and recreate with my practice of glaze.

The poet is similarly confronted with issues of self and language, inside and outside, interiority and objectivity – or as Wordsworth put it, the whole of the poet’s business amounts to finding the familiar in the unfamiliar: what Marion Milner saw as the illusion of fusion between the self and outer reality (Milner, 1987, p.87).

THE POETIC GLAZE

“The poet is the part of man averse to calculated projects. He may have to pay whatever price for this privilege or this burden. He must know that evil always comes from further away than we think and doesn’t necessarily die on the barricade that we choose for it” (Char, 1974, p.27 [my translation]).

My research into the visual and aesthetic qualities of ceramic glaze has been concerned, among other topics, with investigating its ability to create an impression of depth. In the first part of my research, in the Autumn term of 2006, I gained a technical understanding of the ‘fish-scale’ glaze and the way it can create a sense of perspectival depth through overlapping flakes or cracks in the glaze superimposed on one another. Much of this research was carried out on conventional container forms, which tended to add to the impression of depth.



Plate, stained porcelain and fish-scale glaze, 2006, 32 x 5 cm

In order to widen the research and to explore the ability of the glaze to provoke the illusion of spatial depth on non-container forms, I developed a body of work consisting of enclosed ceramic objects: I called these Illusory Objects.



Cylinders with altered base, stained porcelain and glaze, 2006



Cylinders with altered base, stained porcelain and glaze, 2006



Cylinders with altered base, stained porcelain and glaze, 2006

In the course of this investigation it became apparent that perspectival depth alone could not fully account for my artistic interest. The requirements of the illusory – in terms of control of process, materials and results – posed a dilemma, as they were often at odds with some of my major artistic preoccupations, such as a concern with the accidents and the imprecision in handling ceramic materials. Perspectival ambiguity is an act of perfection, the result of mastery, the performance of a conjurer. It is something like a forgery. There is certainly no ambiguity in the making. It is the opposite. It is skilful craftsmanship at its best. Perspectival ambiguity is an alternative between two forms of order and control. On the other hand, my work often seems at odds with such concerns, and the ambiguity I am attracted to stems from openness rather than control, both in the making and in the meaning: from a sense of fragility, and from a condition of imprecision rather than precision.

I am raising the hypothesis that depth in a ceramic glaze is of another nature than the illusory and that this nature is linked to the poetic. I will discuss my artworks and the two concepts of space and depth from the perspective of their poetic dimension.

By 'poetic' I do not mean qualities either specific to the art of writing or, very literally, linked to poetry in the form of writing on ceramics. Nor do I mean poems leading to, or proceeding from, a ceramic piece. Neither do I mean ceramic poems in the form of the rediscovery of an idiom (the idiom of ceramics or pottery). By poetic I mean qualities possibly shared with poetry but going beyond the field of literature.

The word poetry imports something quite peculiar in its nature; something which may exist in what is called prose as well as in verse; something which does not even require the instrument of words, but can speak through the other audible symbols called musical sounds, and even through the visible ones which are the language of sculpture, painting, and architecture (Mill, 1833).

To start with I will look at the theory and history of poetry in order to draw parallels with my own ceramic practice.

Throughout this research, however, I bear in mind the warning by the poet-potter Mary Caroline Richards: "Poetry is immense, no matter how simple it may appear. There is no need for anyone to clomp around in big shoes and say what poetry is or isn't." (Richards, 1964, p.80).

The poetic tension

One of the most enduring issues in the theory of poetry in the West – and a central one for the understanding of the poetic dimension of ceramic glaze – is the debate about the making of poetry: is it, or is it not, an art? Here I use 'art' in the sense of a craft with a set of rules and techniques that can be taught and learned. In this latter sense, is poetry primarily a craft, as writers such as Horace, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Alexander Pope and Roger Caillois argue, or is it primarily the result of inspiration, the view taken by observers in the wake of Plato, such as Longinus, Plotinus, Friedrich von Schiller, William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Surrealists and others? (Leitch, 2001, p.35).

Whereas the etymology of the word 'poetic' (from the Greek *poiesis*, "the act of making") seems to suggest that poetry is a fabricated thing, the product of skills and craft, Plato's Socrates says in *Ion*:

None of the poets are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. [...] For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry [...] these beautiful poems are not human, not even from human beings, but are divine and from gods; poets are nothing but representatives of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them (Plato, c.390 B.C., p.41-42).

According to this view, poetry is not an art (craft), it is a possession, an alienation or at best a form of madness. Plato eventually banished the poets from his ideal republic as he considered poets' knowledge, no matter how divinely inspired, to be inferior to that of charioteers, fishermen and philosophers, and also to that of artists such as painters, sculptors or musicians, who could demonstrate their mastering of a craft. In Plato's view, the poet is an outcast.

Some 2,500 years later, when the Surrealist poets sought to devise methods to circumnavigate reason to reach the unconscious, they seem to have wanted to reproduce some of the madness and inspiration that Plato saw in poetry, replacing gods and divine inspiration with the power of the unconscious mind. André Breton's method of "psychic automatism," automatic writing and the use of chance all pertained to the desire to suppress and annihilate the will, reason and conscious activity altogether and reach a state of utmost passivity and receptivity. The Surrealists could be seen to embody Plato's view of poetic madness.

With an opposite set of values, the harshest critics of the Surrealists' approach to poetry drew precisely on Plato's analysis of a lack of craft and techniques to criticize their work. Following Plato's legacy of distrust towards poetry, Roger Caillois, once a prominent member of the Surrealist movement and later one of its vehement

opponents, acknowledges: "I do not understand much about poetry and always felt more disposed to fight it rather than giving myself over it" (Caillois, 2003, p.264). Caillois opposes Surrealist laissez-faire:

Here more than elsewhere people seem convinced that sincerity replaces all effort and merit. Yet nothing comes of this but wind and foam. An art that seems inclined to favour only the most facile and futile qualities over strict, severe measures leading to excellence can hardly provoke much respect (Caillois, 2003, p.264).

In an approach not unlike Plato's rejection of the value of divine inspiration, he questions the nature of poetic inspiration developed by the Surrealists. In his essay 'Impostures of poetry' Caillois opposes the cult of mystery and inspiration associated with those claiming that a "supernatural breath inspires them and that they have learned everything directly from nature or from their heart" (Caillois, 2003, p.268).

The concept of nature, or of the state of nature, embodies a primitive state of rawness that Caillois thinks art should oppose:

In art as in ethics, the crucial point is to flee nature, to replace its laws with principles reflecting a different kind of rigour. Nature is equally hostile to justice and to style. [...] An artist has other ambitions. He may be seduced by the beauties flattering his gaze, yet he knows that he himself must produce something of a different kind, requiring him to take an opposite path (Caillois, 2003, p.272).

Unlike Plato, however, Caillois does not go so far as to ban poets and poetry altogether, and he seeks eventually to articulate an aesthetics of poetry as a craft incorporating effort, work, the achievements of intellect and will on the one hand and imagination and mystery on the other. Caillois warns the poet-craftsman: "he should relax his desire for total control. At times he should interrupt his calculations" and reach "a state of repose and self-abandonment" (Caillois, 2003, p.272).

Leading to a similar paradox is the extent to which the completely passive state the Surrealists were aiming for was ever accomplished. “There was always an editing of sorts that took place even if it was merely the rejection of the results as unsuitable or trivial” (Pendleton-Julian, 1996, p.48). Among Surrealists, too, several poets, including Paul Eluard, advocated the craft dimension of poetry (Bancquart, 1996, p.21).

Plato’s position, and to a certain extent that of the Surrealists, is unequivocal in ascribing the creation of poetry to something outside the poet’s control. Yet it is difficult to rule out any involvement of the poet and Caillois – and the Surrealists, though unwillingly – embody a contradiction and/or a tension within their conception and writing of poetry. This is a tension between the requirements of an art/craft and poetic inspiration.

Poetry created outside the control of the poet challenges the notions of both art and authorship. According to this view, the poetic is for a large part ‘found’, rather than built or constructed. The concepts of author and achievement imply unity, meaning, will and consciousness, but the concept of the ‘found’ challenges these requirements and the very possibility of authorship. Whether because these requirements and authorship are deemed secondary or unnecessary or because they are believed simply not to exist is a further question and opposing/limiting factors are manifold: prevalence of God, the unconscious or Nature, fragmentation, decentring, scattering of the subject. By contrast poetry has to be an art, the result of a craft. The poetic dilemma is the result of this tension that involves the understanding of control, the role of the author and the location of authorship in the process of creation.

My artistic concern with ceramic glazes shares with poetry many of those dilemmas: an ambivalent position between an interest in limiting my own control to search for the unexpected, or ‘found’, whilst recognizing its embeddedness into a craft, in terms of knowledge and practice. Glaze needs to surprise me. It is difficult to plan or design a glaze, as its final success often lies precisely in the unexpected that occurs.

Yet the glazes I use need be composed and made. Recipes and firing programmes are often complex, and the result of lengthy learning processes. There is a

contradiction in wanting to articulate an aesthetic based on a lack of control in a practice that is so deeply embedded within traditions of craft and skill. I do not, however, think the desire for the accidental and the will for control are mutually exclusive, although there is a tension between them. The issue is rather that of their importance in relation to the artistic character of the work.

Here lies some of the confusion in the use of the word 'art', which probably stems from ancient Greek, where the same word is used to describe craft and poetry. Art is not 'art' in the way it is conceived today, and whereas a certain amount of skill is necessary, it alone does not produce art, which only emerges once skill has been acquired.

Tension does not mean a conflict that eventually eases either by the prevailing of one of the elements or by the striking of the right balance. This tension is a constitutive element of both poetry and of my use of ceramic glazes, and as such it never eases: "In poetry, there is always a war waging" wrote Ossip Mandelstam (Meschonnic, 2001, p.12, [my translation]). René Char, through the aphorism "Espouse and do not espouse your home," (Char, 1946, p.34, [my translation]) points to the necessity of tension. Opposites become, from the point of view of their relationship, complementary rather than exclusive, and tension is a dynamic.

Within my artistic interest in glazes, I, as the author, lose my dominating centrality. In this I share an important concern with a certain conception of poetry, which puts an emphasis on inspiration over author-ity, raising the question of whether this implies the death of the author.

What now replaces the author and my centrality in the artistic process merits investigation. Is it Nature, materials, the unconscious, a making and/or a beholding and contemplating subject? It is likely that I shall not be wholly replaced as an author, but now my importance is shared with a wider range of concerns and influences. All, however, are to some extent subversive, as they ultimately lead to a reconsideration of the notions of subjectivity, author-ity and liberty.

For Julia Kristeva, the poetic act fractures and disrupts established modes of signification [...] and thus creates an opening for new, polyvalent cultural meanings. This rupture, then, is profoundly subversive, not only implying an upheaval of art forms (such as that effected by Mallarmé and Lautréamont on traditional literary discourse) but also calling for a reconfiguration of the notion of subjectivity (Leitch, 2001, p.2166).

“Poetry is always dissident” (Paz, 1976, p.166).

The unconscious

With and after Bergson, French thinkers and especially French artists and writers sought to uncover what Habermas has called ‘the unthought and hidden foundations of performing subjectivity.’ In other words, they tried to locate and retrieve the sources of the self. They looked to the other of the instrumental reason that they believed dominated the world, to the authentic, original self, now conceived as hidden or obscured (Dean, 1992, p.4).

In the groundbreaking book *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva discusses how Lautréamont’s and Mallarmé’s writing practices replicated the logic of the unconscious (Kristeva, 1974), and she eventually “interpreted it as an affirmation of freedom, as an anarchic revolt against a society that extols material goods and profit” (Roudiez, 1984, p.3).

One of the central concerns of the Surrealists was to develop methods to radically alter language and subvert the conscious mind, which is dominated by reason. In the first Surrealist Manifesto the founding father of the movement, André Breton, defines surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express –verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner– the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (Breton, 1924, p.123). In so doing Breton emphasized the force of the unconscious in bringing poetry (and art) into being.

Acknowledging this force, Kristeva came up with the concept of the 'writing subject' rather than the 'author'.

Author emphasizes the conscious intent of a writer who has author-ity over the meaning of his work. [...] This does not mean denying all intentionality or refusing to give a role to the conscious person who writes the work; rather, it means emphasizing that consciousness is far from dominating the process and that the writing subject is a complex heterogeneous force (Roudiez, 1984, p.8).

Following Kristeva, I propose the two operating concepts of 'making subject' and 'beholding subject', and I will apply them to my own practice.

The making subject

At one stage during the project I sought to develop an unpremeditated practice beyond the use of the potter's wheel. The use of the wheel was a central tool in my work before engaging with my research project. Throwing implies that the process and the physics of the wheel dictate a number of outcomes. Can the process of throwing really remain unpremeditated? To what extent can ignorance (innocence? Incompetence?) sustain repeated practice before losing its power? In an attempt to avoid the control of process linked to a repetitive use of the potter's wheel I developed an approach based on the use of slabs of paper porcelain. In this attempt to produce objects that were unpremeditated I used bits and pieces of cut paper-porcelain slabs left over from former premeditated constructions (which I eventually discarded) to construct other pieces at random. In their disorder these pieces suggested various psychological concerns, such as the questioning of authority, sexual anxiety, physical issues and issues of self and identity. Something had happened over which I had little control.



Automatic Object, porcelain and glaze, 2007, 16 x 17 cm



Automatic Object, porcelain and glaze, 2007, 16 x 17 cm



Automatic Object, porcelain and glaze, 2007, 21 x 16 x 10 cm



Automatic Objects, porcelain and glaze, 2007

Significantly, they did not seem to develop around a single centre or focus but had several poles and no obvious sense of border or ending: agglomerates that had their own logic.

Grouping together pieces that were already fragmented enhanced the impression of fragmentation and disorder.

It is debatable whether, following Breton, I annihilated will and conscious activity altogether to reach this series of work, but it was certainly expressive of deep feelings that could not be rationalized. After the automatism and confinement reached by my work on the wheel, this making process carried a powerful sense of liberation.

Developing this approach further and engaging in a second series of 'random pieces' implied an element of premeditation confronting me with a similar dilemma to the one I was facing with the potter's wheel, a sort of dead end. For this reason I had to discard the second series on the grounds of an excess of self-consciousness, feeling that the pieces were quickly becoming mannered and affected.

Eventually I developed a third series using bits and pieces that resulted from building and destroying the second one. However, I realized that I could not keep up with Breton's diktat, even by such methods as retaining only odd-numbered series. Following the Surrealists, there is always an editing of sorts, even if it only consists in making choices about which pieces should be kept and which rejected. This does not mean, however, that although the total absence of volition may be beyond reach there cannot be a difference in degree, with some pieces being a great deal more premeditated than others.

What I further retained from the process of making random objects was the investigation of the unconscious and of a space within.

This concern for a space within eventually triggered a series around the idea of inner cells, boxes and psychological spaces, which involved constructing enclosed forms with an inner structure that, in spite of being invisible, was intended to indicate its

presence through the sagging of the outer skin. This work stemmed from an earlier piece made as part of the *Envelope* series, where this distortion had occurred.

The inner structures are intended not only to serve as functional supports but also to acknowledge a metaphorical dimension of space that is indicated, but not seen. To my former artistic concerns I am now adding an investigation of the maker's unconscious, which, too, leads to a limitation of the domination of the conscious will of the author.

The beholding subject

From the perspective of the beholding subject, Jacques Lacan's concept of 'the gaze' provides useful insights on why and how the glazes that interest me can contribute to undermining further the centrality of the subject – both the maker and beholder. In this research, and from the point of view of the beholder, I am concerned with blurry, unclear glazes with a cloudy translucence, like that of jade (Tanizaki, 1933).

This is not unlike what Lacan describes as the gaze, which he says "always participates in the ambiguity of the jewel" (Lacan, 1964, p.96).

These types of glaze occur repeatedly in the history of ceramics:

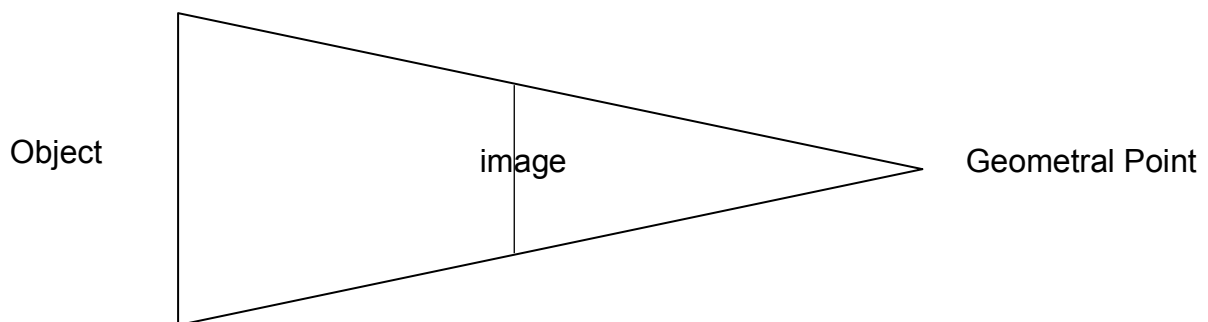
- Mutton-fat celadons produced during the Chinese Song dynasty have been described as captive light sources. This phenomenon results from the interactions of light with the material: increasing the path-length of light through the glaze creates the illusion of translucence, opalescence and depth (Vandiver and Kingery, 1985).
- Matt and waxy glazes developed by French and Danish artist potters of the late 19th and early 20th century can also show similar qualities.

Following Rosalind Krauss's analysis of 'wild light' or 'gleams' (Krauss, 1997, p.242-243), some glazes can provoke a floating or roaming of perception, blurring inner and outer limits of the shell.

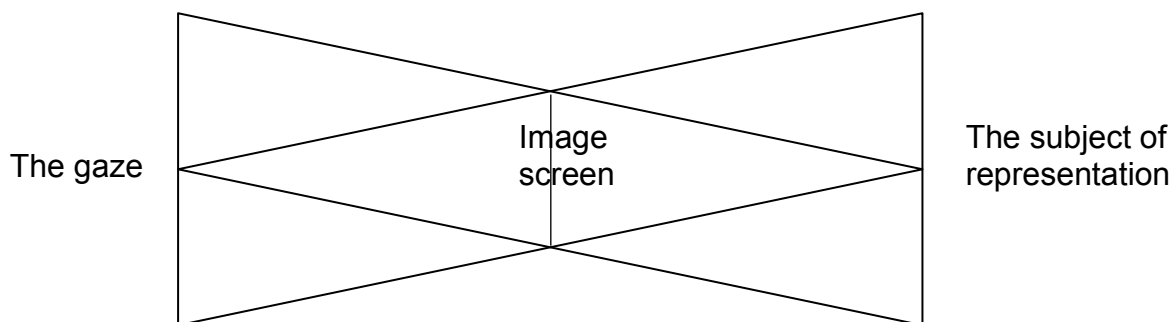
They act to prevent the coalescence of the Gestalt. In so doing, they also disrupt the operation of the model by which subject and object are put into reciprocity as two poles of unification: the unified ego at one end and its object

at the other. Lacan has called this model 'geometral' and has identified its rule of perspective with the assumptions grounding the Cartesian subject (Krauss, 1997, p.242).

The geometral model can be best illustrated by the cone of vision used in the formation of perspective during the Renaissance. The subject is the agent of vision, the point of perspective from which objects are being looked at.



Lacan creates the concept of the gaze by superimposing on this first diagram a reverted cone from the object to the subject, implying that we are beings who are also looked at by objects (Lacan, 1964). In a move which inverts the first diagram, the gaze turns the subject into object.



The gaze, as an irradiant surround, comes at the subject from all sides, producing the subject as a stain rather than a cogito [...] And it is the very fragmentation of that 'point' of view that prevents this invisible, un-locatable Gaze from being a site of coherence, meaning, unity, Gestalt (Krauss, 1997, p.242).

The phenomenon of the gaze outlined by Lacan can be applied to celadons and blurry glazes. Both types of glaze cause light to diffuse through the surface to glow faintly by dispersing in many directions, blurring the limits of the surface. Through the

phenomenon of captive light the glaze retains the light, which then seems to reach the subject from a point behind the surface. So not only does the gaze (of the glaze) produce the subject as a stain (by blurring outlines), but the impression of captive light in the glaze also supposes a 'beyond', or at least a space within, producing – at the other end of the cone – the intangible interiority in the subject, though one possibly more akin to the stain than to a centre, implying the fragmentation and decentring of the subject.

Jacques Maritain proposes a definition of poetry which expresses a similar relationship between two interiorities: "By poetry I mean not the particular art of writing verses, but a process both more general and primary: that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self. Poetry in this sense is the secret life of each and all of the arts" (Maritain, 1953, p.3). Maritain articulates a definition which includes a regard for both things (the subject matter) and the Self (whether the Self is that of the poet or of the audience is ambiguous). In so doing he opens up the possibility of a psychological – or in Maritain's case more likely a spiritual and metaphysical – dimension of poetry, linking it with the way poetry relates to the world of things and matter. The use of 'inner' and 'secret' relates this definition to a dimension of both depth and the poetic: that which is hidden inside, from the double perspective of the Self and of the material. Finally he expands the poetic from the field of literature to embrace all art practices.

The captive light of blurry and opalescent glazes led me through the Lacanian concept of the gaze to posit two interiorities: that of the Self and that of the object, together with the material. Following Maritain's definition, the poetic can be seen as the inter-relationship between those two interiorities.

Material

One aspect of the poetic is the tension between the dominance of the author and that of various factors questioning the very possibility of control. Earlier in this essay I raised the importance of the unconscious as one of these factors. But in addition to the unconscious, a regard for materials is also a significant dimension of the poetic, and one that can be seen as inflicting another blow upon author-ity.

Depth can be perspectival, but the dimension of depth, in a celadon glaze for example, is more akin to the very substance of the glaze and to the material than to perspective. This materiality is about the glaze rather than the use of the glaze to give the illusion of something else. It is the substance of the material that retains the eye, rather than the way it is being used and directed towards the illusory. This regard for materials and substance connects with the definition Maritain gives of poetry in that it implies a concern for the interiority of the glaze.

The 'fish-scale' effect I investigated, which consists of cracks developing at an angle to the body and superimposed on one another, conveying a striking impression of spatial depth, does have a perspectival dimension. However, it is not used to render what it is not: the cracks develop 'naturally' during the firing, and are part of the very substance of the glaze. Perspectival, yet substantial. It is useful to compare the fish-scale effect in glaze with *The Emperor's Terrapin*.



Unknown artist from Allahabad, India, 17th century AD, carved jade terrapin, British Museum, London, 20 x 48 x 32 cm

This work is carved from a single block of Central Asian jade and very surprisingly it is characterized by the occurrence of fish scales in certain areas. This new piece of evidence indicates that fish scales occur in jade, casting a fresh light on the ambivalence of the 'fish-scale' depth: deceptive surface or substance? As it is solid and whole, the *Terrapin's* depth is clearly an element of substance. Could this discovery now affect the nature of the fish-scale depth in a ceramic glaze? Obviously so! Ru and Guan glazes are two celadon glazes with occasional fish-scale occurrences, and originally these celadon glazes were meant to look like jade. The glaze's deception is not in creating a space that isn't (as in a trompe l'oeil effect) but in pretending to be a material or a substance that it is not, jade – as if depth was to be found in the material alone. Yet there is depth, but its nature is not 'geometral' nor perspectival, it is essentially different, and material is a key element to it.

Poetry, too, shows a strong concern for materials. Some poets address words as I do my materials, marvelling at them and their sensuality: "Words, their sound and even their very appearance, are, of course, everything to the poet: the sense of words is the sense of poetry" (Read, 1932, p.45). Read says of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "He had that acute and sharp sensuous awareness essential to all great poets" (Read, 1932, p.57). Read stresses further the importance of sensuality and materiality in poetry, and draws a parallel with painting: "The difference between a poet and a painter is a difference of material, not of method. And that, it seems, is another way of saying with T.S. Eliot that "the poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium" (Read, 1932. p.37).

My investigation of depth through the use of enclosed forms and blurry glazes is linked with a concern for interiority, whether of the subject or of the material. This concern with the inner dimension of the material raises tricky issues within a visual art practice where form is also an issue. If material is a primary concern, what, then, is the role of the form? How can matter transcend form within a practice that involves the creation of form?

Herein lies one of the core ambiguities of glaze, and one of its conceptual difficulties: is form a support for the glaze, or can the glaze be a material in itself, thus reaching something approaching formal indistinctness?

Gaston Bachelard investigated material imagination expressed in poetry and in the process of reverie. Material imagination is “this amazing need for penetration which, going beyond the attractions of the imagination of forms, thinks matter, dreams in it, lives in it, or, in other words, materializes the imaginary” (Bachelard, 1943, p. 14). Literary expression, and especially poetry, contains for Bachelard the essential characteristics of imagination because the poet is not tied to a bare representation of what is true and the essence of poetry is the creation of new images. Bachelard traces poetic imagery to some of its unconscious archetypes, to show the interconnectedness of dream and matter: reverie becomes an important source of material imagination. Though it comes directly from the French language, reverie or rêverie is also an English word much more common than its fully Anglicized version, revery, comparatively rare. It is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971, p.1252) as:

- “A state of joy or delight
- A fantastic, fanciful, unpractical or purely theoretical idea or notion
- A fit of abstracted musing; a “brown study” or day-dream
- The fact, state or condition of being lost in thought or engaged in musing”

For Bachelard, the creative process originates in the reverie.

Through this approach of the material, formal disjunction and indistinctness present no difficulty: “Meditated upon from the perspective of its depth, matter is the very principle that can dissociate itself from forms” (Bachelard, 1942, p. 2).

With reverie and material imagination, Bachelard opens up the possibility of another kind of depth. It is depth conceived as penetration, merging of Self and Material, and where outlines of a Gestalt, whether that of the Self or of the object/material looked at, not only become secondary, they disappear in the very process of fusion sought by the reverie. Lastly, Bachelard also points out the links reverie and material imagination have with poetry, thus hinting at the possibility of a new concept: ‘poetic depth’.

Before him, in the 16th century, Giordano Bruno had developed a philosophy that endowed the material with a new position. Bruno breaks with the long philosophical tradition of ‘hylomorphism’ that privileges form over material and in which matter (hyle), being itself inert and undifferentiated, is given shape by form (morphe) (Lloyd

Thomas, 2007, p.3). In Bruno's philosophy, the hierarchy between material and form comes to an end (Winter, 1999). Material becomes a creating principle. Traditionally, the material, which has no form, is given a form from outside. With Bruno, material and form cannot be separated. Cause and effect are now confounded. Material produces forms from within. Forms are contained within the material. Both are thought of not as a pair but as unity. God is both exterior and interior to creation, cause and principle, transcendental and immanent. Whereas God is traditionally thought of as the craftsman of the world, he becomes with Bruno the 'artist within' the one who shapes material from within. There is a new similarity between will and material, which excludes free and arbitrary will. There is a similarity between the power and being of God, between liberty and necessity. This reconciliation is Dionysiac and leads to an art of the accidental, of the furious. With Bruno, beauty has become bursting, epiphanic and vitalist. Humanity loses its privilege in ontology. Humanity is not at the centre. It is at the centre in a system where God is thought of as a human image. But humanity has lost his prima. Humanity cooperates with Nature. Humans can be at best magicians, alchemists; they only partake in the metamorphic display of matter. The destiny of humanity is to coincide with Nature.

In the history of art, the concept of formlessness and formless art (*art informel*) was first used by the French critic Michel Tapié in his 1952 book *Un Art Autre* to describe types of art which had in common the fact that they were based on highly improvisatory (i.e. informal) procedures. This would be an ideal way to push my work forward. But there is a difficulty in conceptualising and even more in making the formless as I feel caught in a dialectical process of making that would end up with a form, no matter how natural, organic, mineral, unpremeditated or accidental it might appear. Eventually, "To call for the formless does not mean to call for non-forms, but rather to engage in a work on forms equivalent to birth or a death throes: a tearing process destroying something and within that very negativity inventing something absolutely new" (Didi-Huberman, 1995, p.21 [my translation]).

Beyond the Bachelardian concept of formal indistinctness, Didi-Huberman points out what the formless could also mean for me: a recurring process of creativity.

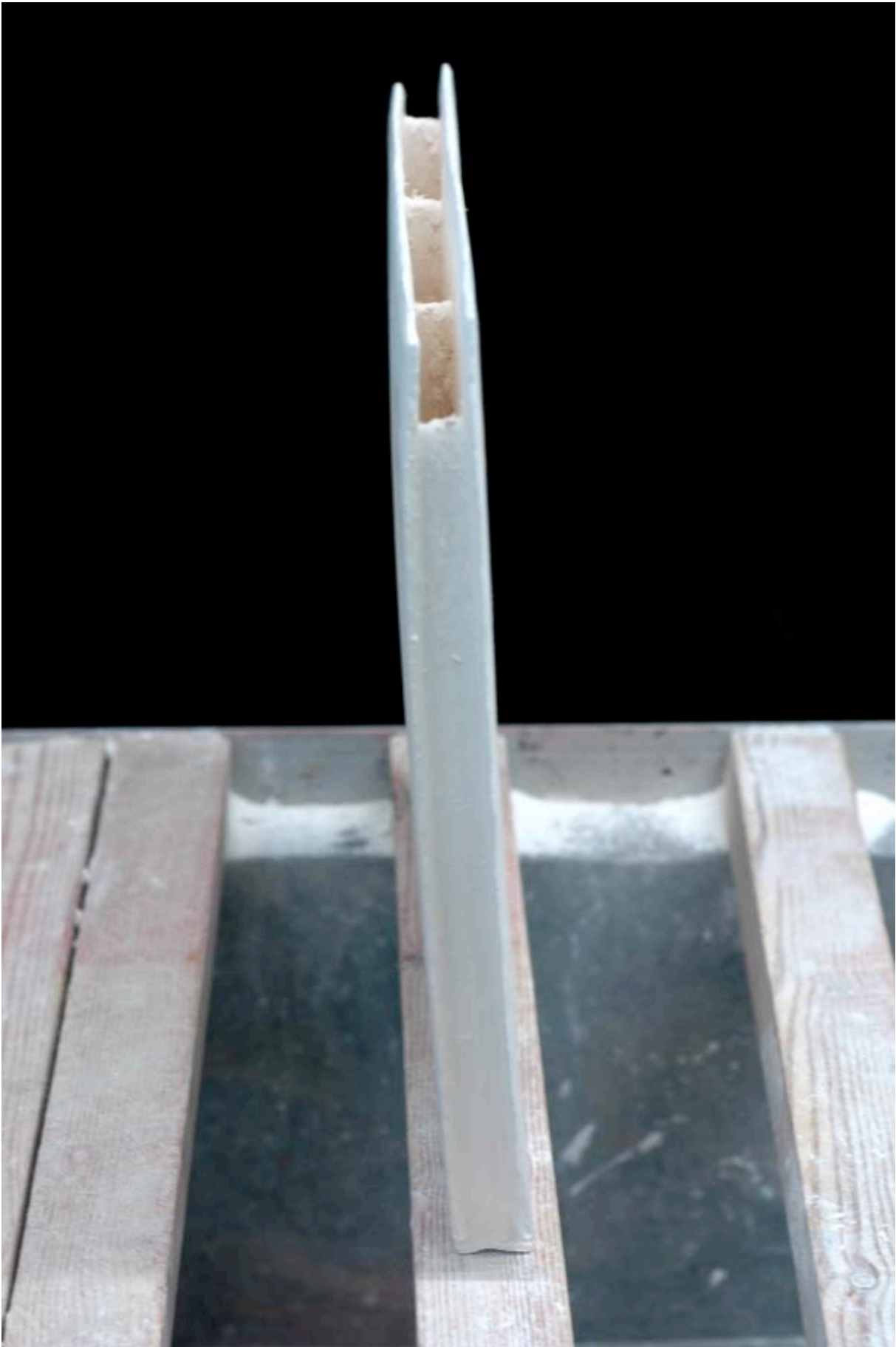
But in my difficulty in addressing the formless, it became clear that it was only a very specific issue of three-dimensional practices. Painting does not seem to have to deal with this issue of form. While a canvas is a form, its frontality calls for an immediate immersion.

A first series of objects addressed this privilege associated with painting by attempting to disappear as a volume thus enjoying a similar position to that of a canvas, and possibly resolving the difficult issue of formal indistinctness: the *Envelopes* made in the Summer term of 2007.

I faced considerable technical difficulties with the *Envelopes* and the pieces all collapsed and broke when fired. But above all, an envelope remains a form and a volume. How could a form enjoy a similar position as a canvas and yet remain three-dimensional, a form allowing immersion and disappearing as a form when doing so: a form that would share with the glaze its concern for interiority?



Envelope, bisque porcelain, 2007, 17 x 21 x 2 cm



Envelope, bisque porcelain, 2007, 17 x 21 x 2 cm



Envelope, bisque porcelain, 2007, 17 x 21 x 2 cm

Following this work on the *Envelopes* I later imagined three-dimensional canvases or sculptural paintings: volumes that would face the beholder. These could be shown in such a way that they both have a volume and are front-facing such as when set on a non-ceramic base, for instance. Only the base would be mounted on the wall: the ceramic object would remain three-dimensional. With these, I believe my intention was to keep an element of substantiality, a sense of volume and materiality, and not yield to the lure of pure surface, a lesson that seems to be stemming from the discovery of *The Emperor's Terrapin*.

Addressing my concern for interiority, the forms have a structure inside which supports them, a structure not visible to the viewer other than as indicated by the protuberances and by the slumping of the top slab during drying and firing. The form is an accident of the structure. So it, too, is about the inner space – and as such it is about other concerns than the form; the form is only a consequence. The awareness of form disappears in the light of another concern – a concern for interiority.

This was just the start of a new approach, and these structures will be addressed further in the chapter 'Glazes at Play'.



Enclosed form, biscuit porcelain, 2007



Enclosed form, biscuit porcelain, 2007

CLASSIFICATIONS OF GLAZE

Context

In the course of my research on depth in a ceramic glaze, I have developed a palette of glazes. Some of these I have refined from my former practice, some were given by tutors, technicians or students at the RCA, some were found at the Kolding School of Design's Glaze Library and some have eventually been developed as a result of analysis or advice found in technical literature. This development involved adapting glazes from the materials available and establishing firing schedules for the kilns I use at the RCA. These glazes have been developed as part of my research into poetic space and depth. To this end I limited the variables in order to test the different glazes on a repeated identical form: the cobblestone. I first researched the archetypal form of the cobblestone and settled for one with a ridge on its upper face, providing a hint of its interiority. Over 300 multiples of this form were made by slip-casting porcelain and stained porcelain slips into moulds.



Cobblestone, bisque porcelain, 2009, 10 x 10 x 10 cm

Having first tested the glazes on tiles fired vertically in order to assess their visual and physical qualities, such as viscosity, the glazes were then tested on the three-dimensional objects. At the end of the first phase of tests in 2009 there were approximately 50 glazed cobblestones. In the final year of my studio practice at the RCA, in 2011, I used the cobblestones to record a wider palette of glazes and materials, resulting in a collection of over 200 pieces, and I displayed these at the Jerwood Makers Open 2011 exhibition in London.

Objectives

In this chapter I describe various ways of classifying glazes. Singer writes that “as it is not possible to assign structure to glazes their systematic classification presents difficulties and many methods may be adopted, all of an empirical nature” (Singer, 1960, p.6). I will review some of these methods of classifying glazes documented in the literature, and when possible apply them to the glazes I use. According to the criteria used for classification, their relevance will provide insights into the salient elements driving my research into the perception of depth in ceramic glaze.

REVIEW OF CLASSIFICATIONS

Technical classifications

The most common classifications of glazes described in the literature focus on the technical or scientific composition of the glaze, while some are based on firing temperature:

Temperature

Traditionally “the most convenient classifications are those which are based on the temperature to which the pot has been fired and the degree of vitrification which has occurred in the body” (Cooper, 1978, p.3). Fraser identifies five main types:

- Raku glazes generally maturing below 900°C
- Majolica glazes maturing in the range of approximately 900-1050°C
- Earthenware types covering the range 1020-1160°C
- Stoneware glazes maturing between 1200-1300°C
- Porcelain types maturing in the range 1220-1450°C (Fraser, 1973, p.2).



Classification of Cobblestones according to temperature (coldest on the right)



High temperature glazes (stoneware and porcelain) vs. low temperature glazes (earthenware)

Composition

Kerl divided glazes into three groups based on the major flux:

- Lead glazes formed essentially from lead oxide, perhaps with part of the silica replaced by boric oxide or by tin oxide, and part of the lead oxide by alkalis or alkaline earths
- Earth glazes made from insoluble minerals
- Salt glaze, the result of the action of the fumes of common salt (Parmelee, 1973, p.5)

Chemical classification

A chemical classification was proposed by Parmelee (Parmelee, 1973, p.6-7) as follows:

A. Raw glazes

I. Containing lead

a. No alumina present

1. Lead the only base
2. With other bases

b. Containing alumina and various bases

1. High lead, 0.5 mol. equivalent or more
2. Low lead, less than 0.5 mol. equivalent
3. Containing boric oxide (not fritted)
4. No alkali present, containing boric oxide (not fritted)

II. Leadless, containing alumina, with various bases

a. Containing alkaline earths, but no alkalis

b. Containing alkalis and alkaline earths

1. Natural clay slips
2. Synthetic mixtures of minerals

c. Containing alkalis, alkaline earths and zinc oxide

d. Containing boric oxide

e. Salt glazes

B. Fritted glazes

I. Containing lead in addition to other bases

- a. Without alumina or boric oxide
- b. With alumina and boric oxide

1. Without alkali
2. With alkali

II. Leadless

- a. Without boric oxide
- b. With boric oxide
 1. Alkalis, the only bases present
 2. Alkalis, alkaline earths, with or without zinc present
- c. Containing important amounts of barium

Kolding classification

The Designskolen Kolding (Kolding School of Design) in Denmark taught both a graduate and a postgraduate programme in ceramics from 1968 to 2007. Lisbeth Voigt Durand (born 1946) joined the Ceramics Department in 1972 and stayed for 35 years until its closure in the summer of 2007, developing a very systematic approach to glaze testing. Throughout their study students were asked to contribute to the Department's Glaze Library by carrying out a minimum of 100 glaze tests that would complete the existing database. The library now fills over 35 large drawers, each with up to 30 shelves.



Kolding School of Design, Ceramics Department's Glaze Library, 2007



Kolding School of Design, Ceramics Department's Glaze Library, 2007



Kolding School of Design, Ceramics Department's Glaze Library, 2007

The Library's system of glaze classification reflects the Ceramics Department's different research projects, which focus on the importance of the materials used. Traditionally, chemical analysis and Seger formulation have neglected the specificities and variations of individual materials. Kolding's nomenclature adopts a different approach in that it uses Seger formulation, but with direct reference to the particular materials used.

KB09/5 is an example of the name assigned to a glaze

- K is for Kalifeldspat (potassium feldspar)
- B is for Barium Carbonate
- 09 refers to the amount of alkali (0,9) brought in by barium carbonate in the Seger formulation of the glaze (where the total of alkalis is always equal to 1). The rest of the alkalis (here 0.1) are brought in by the other element in the name of the glaze (here potassium feldspar).
- 5 is the quantity of silica in the Seger formulation of the glaze and ten times the quantity of alumina

0,070 K ₂ O	0,5 Al ₂ O ₃	5 SiO ₂
0,026 Na ₂ O	- Fe ₂ O ₃	
0,004 CaO		
0,900 BaO		

The material focus in the Kolding classification is reinforced by the testing methods, as these often are geared towards a comparison between the role/effects of the different materials, as shown in the series of glazes below:

FFD 07/3 (FF: potassium sodium feldspar, D: dolomite)

NSD 07/3

PD 07/3 (P: petalite)

KT 07/3 (T: talc)

NST 07/3

The Kolding nomenclature stresses the importance of materials used in glazes. The resulting classification in 35 drawers is eclectic, however, and whereas materials

used often provide a basis for classification (potassium feldspar, sodium feldspar, potassium sodium feldspar, nepheline syenite, petalite, lithium carbonate...) this is not the only criterion used. Glaze types (oil spot, temmoku, celadon...), colouring oxides used (nickel, copper, iron...) or tests protocols (tri-axial blends) also contributed to the classification of the Kolding glazes.

Other characteristics

Parmelee further describes characteristics used to define individual glazes or groups of related compositions:

- Relative fusibility, e.g., "easily fusible," "difficultly fusible," and sometimes by cone maturing temperature or range



Classification of Cobblestones according to relative fusibility



Classification of Cobblestones according to relative fusibility

- The use or absence of an important glaze ingredient, e.g., "salt glaze," "raw lead glaze," "leadless glaze," "tin enamel", and so on
- The kind of wares upon which the glazes are used, e.g., whiteware glaze, porcelain glaze, majolica glaze, stoneware glaze, and others
- The place of origin, such as Albany slip glazes, Bristol glazes, Rockingham glaze; or the name of the inventor, as in, for example, Seger porcelain glaze
- The method of preparation or application; that is, the glazes may be raw or fritted or applied by fuming (Parmelee, 1973, p.5)



Raw glazing vs. application over biscuit

These classifications seem of little relevance to my research, as they focus on issues of technique and/or science. Aesthetics, the appearance of glazes or their effect on the form – central to this project – are not discussed.

Other classifications

Rather than adopting a technical or natural scientific approach in this research, the classification needs to address aesthetics, perception and meaning. I propose to replace the scientific/technical approach with a more subjective perspective that attempts to qualify effect and appearance.

Glaze effects

One type of classification organizes glazes according to the effect produced by the fired glaze: for instance, transparent, opaque, matt, semi-matt, satin vellum, or crackle (Fraser, 1973, p.2). As a chemist, Parmelee argues that “such interesting properties as colour and texture – gloss, mattness, opacity – in all degrees are not peculiar to any limited group of glazes and cannot be considered as adequate bases for classification” (Parmelee, 1973, p.5). By contrast, within my project such an

approach can provide a useful tool for classifying the glazes I am using in my work. In terms of perceptible qualities, the following are of particular relevance: exploration of the different grades of mattness (opaque, matt, semi-matt), crackle (simple cracks, fish scales), fluidity (drops, running, pooling), veils (hair or oil effect).

In this research I will focus on the issues of fluidity and viscosity: more specifically, the phenomenon of dripping and drops will be central to my investigation.



Classification of Cobblestones according to mattness



Classification according to crazing and cracks



Ibid.

Fluidity and viscosity

A glaze is the result of the interaction between alkali and acid. When heated, these two are in active opposition, and the excitement engendered gives rise to a fluid state, the molten glaze. [...] The degree of fluidity involved is referred to in terms of viscosity when discussing glazes (Hamer, 1997, p.155-156).

The issue of viscosity is relevant when priority is placed on the greater stiffness of the glaze so that it does not move, or moves very little in the firing. Because I am also concerned with the liquid character of the glaze, I propose going beyond normal technical practice to consider the glaze from both points of view: viscosity and its reciprocal quality, fluidity.

Drops

Drops are a significant feature of the glazes I use, indicating as they do the surface and edge of the form, as well as asserting the presence of the glaze. But the term 'drop' is only one state of a wider-ranging phenomenon of a particular movement in a glaze.

Unlike a crystalline compound, which has a definite melting point which is also the solidifying point, a glaze on the other hand, has a melting point at the upper end of a melting range. It is not the same as its solidifying point which is at the other end of a melting range. [...] Thus a glaze is described as maturing rather than melting (Hamer, 1997, p.219 & 156)

Before reaching its liquid state and being capable of flowing and becoming a drop, the glaze loses its viscosity to become "first pliable and then a stiff liquid" (Hamer, 1997, p.220). Within the melting range, the glaze resembles a soft paste. Beyond the maturing temperature range the glaze becomes a very runny glass. Below the melting range there is no action involved besides setting the molten glaze, even though "it does not usually set completely at the lower end of the range but carries in a soft state until approximately 500°C" (Hamer, 1997, p.156). Hence, following the physics of glaze and the concept of a maturing range, it is appropriate to reproduce it descriptively and to speak not only of drops but also of accumulations, rolls of glaze,

runny streams and pools from the lower temperature end of the range to the higher. Drops are only one of the stages within a spectrum. In spite of the theory of the melting range, some glazes produce more fluid melts than others, and thus drops can be very different in their nature: drops can be fluid (and difficult to halt) or pasty.



Cobblestone with very fluid glaze (numerous drops and pools at the base have been ground with a lathe)



Cobblestone with fluid glaze (base has been ground with a lathe)



Cobblestone with pasty glaze



Cobblestone with pasty glaze



Cobblestone with pasty glaze

But drops are far from being only a testimony of the maturing range of the glazes. Drops are a key feature of this research and they express and stem from central aesthetic and psychological concerns.

Drops are a step in the process of the form melting away and appearing to disappear. As such, drops are an expression of the priority of material concerns over form. Drops are the promise of formlessness, and highlight the form as being merely temporary or incidental. The drop is the result of an accident of material. In the case of glazes and their maturing range, the drop, before becoming liquid, turns into something resembling a paste, an admixture (la pâte). Gaston Bachelard describes admixture as “the basis of a truly intimate materialism in which shape is supplanted, effaced, dissolved. It presents the problem of materialism in its elementary forms, since it relieves our intuition of any worry about shape. The problem of form is given a secondary role” (Bachelard, 1942, p.104). Bachelard describes further the implications of dreaming of admixture:

If these flaccid dreams could be studied systematically, they would lead to a knowledge of mesomorphic imagination – that is, of an imagination intermediate between the formal and the material. The objects of mesomorphic dream take form only with great difficulty, and then they lose it; they collapse like soft clay (pâte). [...] Those dreams [...] are by turns struggle or defeat in the effort to create, form, deform or mould (Bachelard, 1944, p.106).

How better to express the dream of formlessness implied by the contemplation of the drop of glaze?

But the drop is also a symbol of fusion and union.

Following Bachelard again, union and binding is one of the fundamentals of the imagination of water:

When we have succeeded in making water truly penetrate into the very substance [of the material] then the experience, the long dream of ‘binding’

begins. Sometimes the worker dreaming of his task attributes this ability to bind substantially through the sharing of intimate ties to the water. In fact, many people unconsciously love water for its viscosity (Bachelard, 1942, p.104).

Through this key concept of viscosity, glazes are intrinsically bound to the imagination of water. Viscosity is water and clay merged: the expression of union. In the case of glazes, viscosity is a physical characteristic of the glaze itself. But union in a glaze is also the merger of the glaze and the body, and it is possible to link the imaginary concept of union with another key characteristic of both the technique and the aesthetics of glazes: the body-glaze layer between the glaze and the body (also called the intermediate layer, or interface).

The body-glaze layer is the part of a fired pot where the glaze meets the body. [...] As the glaze becomes molten some of it will soak into the body [...] This layer is more strongly defined in stoneware and porcelain [...] A thick body-glaze layer develops in porcelain. Here it can be twice the thickness of the glaze remaining as pure glaze (Hamer, 1997, p.30).

This merging of body and glaze, this physical union, points to a significant aspect of my use of high temperature glazes on porcelain: their ability to be more than just surface, ornament, illusion, gaining depth to become the very volume of sculpture, the material and the substance itself. By linking the intermediate layer with the imaginary concept of union, material science supports the dream and the material imagination.

But to what extent does the poetic reverie need the support of science to exist? Can it not claim its own validity alone? Could it simply create a reality of its own? It is certainly satisfying to see knowledge and science corroborate reverie but it is not necessary, and often material imagination will be confounded by science, too. In one example, the liquid-liquid immiscibility analysed by Kingery can be seen as a key feature of some of the deepest celadon glazes (Kingery, 1985). The latter seems to emphasize the technique of layering, at the expense of the importance of fusion.

In his series of books on material imagination, Bachelard started with a psychoanalytic approach to fire. His first objective was scientific: to sever objectivity from individual, and especially archetypal, subjectivity. "To start with, everything must be called into question: sensation, common sense, usage, however constant, even etymology, for words, which are made for singing and enchanting, rarely make contact with thought" (Bachelard, 1938, p.1). In the psychoanalytic approach to science undertaken by Bachelard, the first objective was to suppress errors, whereas in art and poetic imagination no such healing is sought. Within the field of art, Bachelard's use of psychoanalysis is aimed at creation, not repression, and psychoanalysis consists of understanding – but only to better follow the developments of material imagination.

Further, and particularly relevant to the significance of glazes maturing through flames, is the union of water and fire. Bachelard quotes several poets dealing with the combination of water and fire: "Water is a burned body", is the last sentence of Balzac's *Garamba*. "Water is a dampened flame", writes Novalis, and in *A Season in Hell* Rimbaud also links the two elements, in a striking expression: "I crave. I demand! A blow struck with a fork, a drop of fire" (Rimbaud, 1873, cited by Bachelard, 1942, p.97). For Bachelard all those poetic metaphors "of astonishing daring and scintillating beauty" stem from a more essential reverie, whose sexual features are to be seen in myths and popular legends alike: the marriage of opposites. "When the imagination dreams of the durable union of water and fire, it forms a mixed material image of unusual power. It is the material image of warm humidity" (Bachelard, 1942, p.100). Here Bachelard points to a psychological principle:

Ambivalence is the surest basis for indefinite valorisations. The notion of warm humidity gives rise to an ambivalence of unbelievable power. It is no longer a question of an ambivalence that plays only upon superficial and changing qualities. It is really matter that is involved. Warm humidity is matter become ambivalent – almost, one could say, ambivalence materialized (Bachelard, 1942, p.100-101).

That ambivalence is at play on other levels: drops of glaze express the extreme fluidity of the material. Yet this fluidity is stopped and the drop is fluidity made solid, refused, reverted, and petrified. The drop of glaze is a former liquid petrified in the air, and the possibility of its bursting while falling has been suppressed. The drop of glaze is ambiguous. It is in between two states. That ambiguity is for Bachelard a prerequisite to material imagination, and he states it as a primordial law of the imagination:

A matter to which the imagination cannot give a dual existence cannot play the psychological role of fundamental matter. Matter that does not provide the opportunity for a psychological ambivalence cannot find a poetic double, which allows endless transpositions. For the material element to engage the whole soul, there must be a dual participation (Bachelard, 1942, p.12).

This ambivalence, this 'in-between-two-states-ness', endows the drop of glaze, and with it the glaze itself, with a transitional quality: on its way towards bursting, yet stopped.

Could this transitional quality in a physical sense be understood in a psychological way? What is 'transition', psychologically?

Donald Winnicott, English psychoanalyst and leading member of the British Independent Group, first developed the concepts of the 'transitional' or 'potential' object and space. Following the illusion of magical control and union with the world (the mother's breast), the child experiences the disillusion of objectivity and exteriority. In this learning process, the child develops intermediate spaces which are "at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control" (Winnicott, 1971, p.100). This is an intermediate area of experience for the child which is neither subjective nor objective, neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality. It is a zone in-between, between what Winnicott coined 'me-extensions' and the 'not-me'. It is a dynamic space, and it is possibly endowed with a form of dialectic. This dialectic is never resolved, it is always striven for, failed at and started again and its two terms, union and separation, follow a paradoxical pattern of separateness and symbiosis.

This potential space cannot, must not, disappear and it will eventually “yield to cultural experience in general and to the art-work in particular” (Ross, 2011, p.25). Winnicott assumes that

The task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is ‘lost’ in play. [...] Transitional objects or transitional phenomena belong to the realm of illusion [...] This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant’s experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts” (Winnicott, 1971, p.14).

For another psychoanalyst of the British Independent Group and a close associate of Winnicott, Marion Milner, this intermediate area is fusion of self and object. Eventually it amounts to “finding the familiar in the unfamiliar, which, incidentally, Wordsworth said is the whole of the poet’s business” (Milner, 1987, p.87).

Could a glaze be such a transitional space or phenomenon? How does a drop of glaze and the concepts of fusion and union relate to this transitional quality in the Winnicottian sense?

The glaze starts off as a mix of minerals in suspension in water. The ceramic piece is then sprayed or immersed in it. The body retains the water and the mix of minerals remains stuck on the surface. The piece is fired in a kiln. There, inside the kiln, it reaches its maturing range, where it merges with the body and possibly melts. When cooling down and eventually coming out of the kiln it is born as a new and separate object.

From the point of view of psychoanalysis, there is much to analyse: the spraying and immersing, the absorption and the sticking, the kiln, the firing, the emerging of the

new object. But here this discussion is confined to the drop and to the process of melting that led to it.

Marion Milner, analysing a young boy burning and melting toys in a case she called 'a game of war between two villages', writes: "But there was much material in this analysis to do with burning, boiling down, and melting, which seemed to me to express the idea of the obliteration of boundaries [between self and object]" (Milner, 1952, p.96). There is a correlation with the idea of the obliteration of boundaries at play in the glaze, especially when it reaches the far end of the melting range and starts dropping. This idea of melting and merging between self and object is central to this research. It is the idea

that the basic identifications which make it possible to find new objects, to find the familiar in the unfamiliar, require an ability to tolerate a temporary loss of sense of self, a temporary giving up of the discriminating ego which stands apart and tries to see things objectively and rationally and without emotional colouring. It perhaps requires a state of mind which has been described by Berenson as 'the aesthetic moment' (Milner, 1952, p.97).

Milner further cites Berenson:

In visual art the aesthetic moment is that fleeting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at, or with actuality of any kind that the spectator himself sees in terms of art, as form and colour. He ceases to be his ordinary self, and the picture or building, statue, landscape, or aesthetic actuality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness. When he recovers workaday consciousness it is as if he had been initiated into illuminating, formative mysteries (Berenson, 1950 cited by Milner, 1952, p.97-98).

It is this experience of becoming one with the work which is one of my central artistic interests. The obliteration of boundaries sheds another light on how the form eventually disappears through a concern for merging. The latter supposes form is

denied altogether as subject and object dissolve and become undifferentiated. But one of the questions not addressed by Milner is that of the direction of the incorporation: inward or outward? Rather Milner supposes the subject always incorporates the object. But can we conceive of the subject being incorporated, engulfed in the object?



Classification according to 'dripping ability'

Glaze types

Fraser distinguishes the following glaze types: Crystalline glazes (microcrystalline or macrocrystalline glazes), aventurine glazes, rutile glazes, matt glazes, satin-vellum glazes, flow glazes, crackle glazes, volcanic or froth glazes, lustre glazes, localized reduction glazes, ash glazes... (Fraser, 1973, p.66). Parmelee sees such a classification as being of limited use as "we cannot divide glazes into groups defined by the presence or absence of crystallization since that phenomenon may be developed in almost all kinds of compositions, depending in part on the concentration of particular components and the heat treatments" (Parmelee, 1973, p.5).

For this project, however, a classification into glaze types that encompasses elements of aesthetics, perception, technique and art history can prove helpful. Among the glazes I can distinguish several glaze types: flambés, celadons, copper reds, monochromes, the glazes of Jean Carriès...



Flammés, Copper reds, Celadons, Others

Flambés and Flammés

In English a flambé is an “iridescent red glaze produced by transmutation of colloidal copper into a relatively transparent glaze” (Hamer, 1997, p.134).

In French the flambé is part of a larger category of glazes also referred to as ‘flammés’.

In France, ceramic artists started trying to reproduce the effects of Chinese flambés towards the end of the 1840s, triggering a dynamic that would survive for decades in the wake of a general admiration for Oriental arts. Initially, flammés were “ceramics

fired under direct flame contact and on which fire has produced a variety of tones and effects. In technical language the metal oxides have undergone transmutations” (Albis, 1976).

The spectacular nature of flambé glazes caught the attention of early travellers to China. The French Jesuit priest François Xavier d’Entrecolles, ‘spy’ and missionary in China at the beginning of the 18th century, wrote in a letter dated January 25, 1722, from Kin-Te-Ching (Jingdezhen), a centre for ceramics:

They have brought me one piece of porcelain called Yao-pien or transmutation. This transmutation takes place in the furnace, and is caused either by excess or lack of heat, or by some other obscure causes which are not easily guessed at. This piece, though the workmen tell me it is the result of mere chance, and is a failure in manufacture, is not less beautiful nor less highly prized. It was the intention to make vases in soufflé red, and a hundred pieces were entirely spoiled; the piece that I am speaking of came out of the oven like a piece of agate. By incurring the necessary risk and expense of various experiments, it might be possible to discover the art of making with certainty what has once been the result of chance (Entrecolles, 1722).

Edmond de Goncourt writes, in a more literary response:

The Chinese are very fond of those ceramics called yao-pien (transmutations), turning porcelain into what seems a precious material: those metamorphoses are the result of chance combinations of fire, flames, oxygen flow turning copper red into purple, blue, green into shimmering and fluttering colours and all the more valued by the collectors of the Empire of the Middle as they resemble the tongues of fire that licked the vase during its firing (Goncourt, 1881).

To summarize (Poulet, 2008):

- The flambé effect is due to that of the glaze and its internal changes, like the 'flame of punch (Jacquemart, 1883)
- Firing conditions, temperature and atmosphere – oxidising or reduction - play a key role in the genesis of those transmutations.
- The big – and enduring – question of flambé comes from China and its copper red.
- The role of accidents and chance – or of the uncontrolled – led to praise for the quality of these pieces in spite of their lack of colour uniformity constituting a technical failure

The flammé effect does not just involve copper reds.

In the 19th century, the ceramists Chaplet and Dalpayrat used the term to describe glazes other than copper reds and it now encompasses a variety of effects, not always involving excessive smelting and transmutations of a single glaze. Drops, superposition, underglazes and engobes are other ways to obtain a similar rendering. In the 1920s and 1930s the word was so widely used it became a celebration of the triumph of drips and runs (Poulet, 2008, p.26).

In the glazes I use, the flammé effect can be referred to in describing a variety of glazes.

Some examples of flammé glazes follow.



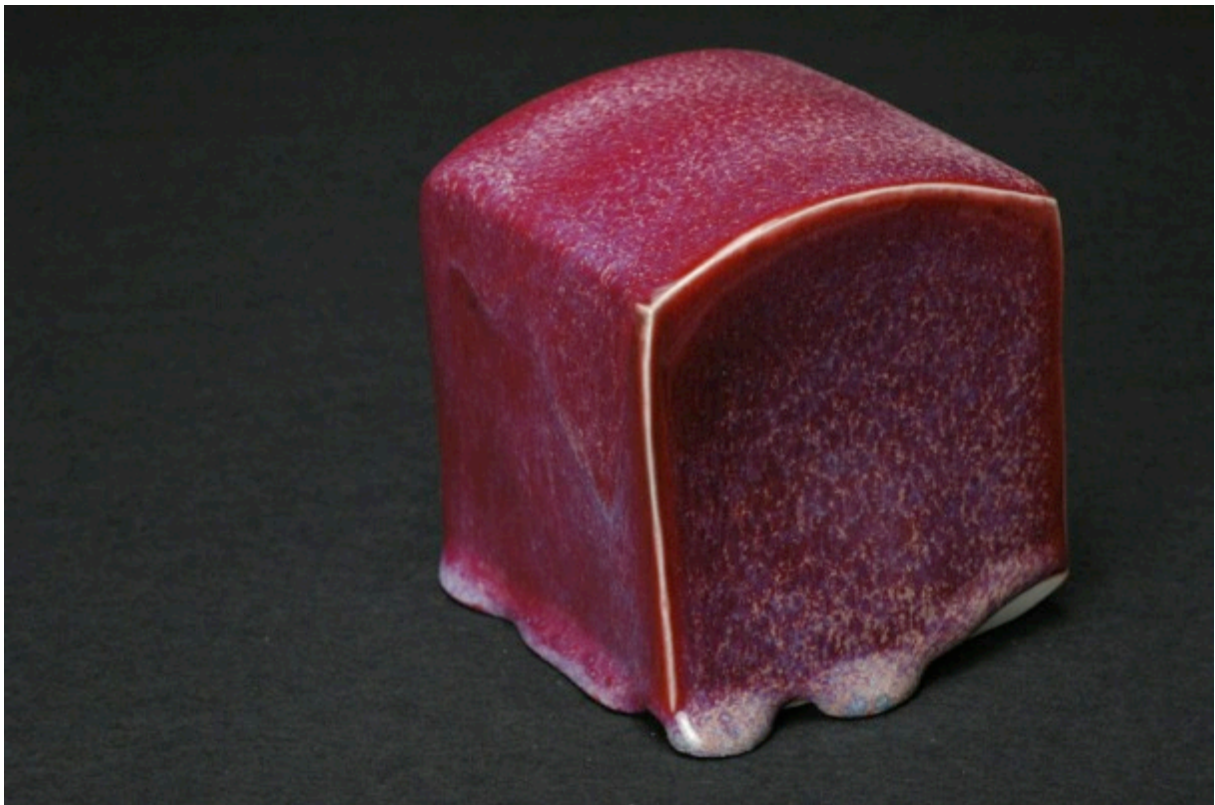
Cobblestone with flammé glaze



Cobblestone with flammé glaze



Cobblestone with flammé glaze (and iron slip)



Cobblestone with flammé glaze (copper red)



Cobblestone with flammé glaze (copper red)



Cobblestone with flammé glaze (copper red)

The French writer Edmond de Goncourt compares the flambés to the “palette of a painter shown under a piece of glass” (Goncourt, 1881), drawing attention to a significant aspect of these type of glazes: they seem somewhat akin to the techniques of painting. These glazes provide a sense of surface rather than a sense of volume. Donald Judd’s analysis of painting involves both surface and depth:

Anything on a surface has space behind it. Two colours on the same surface almost always lie on different depths. An even colour, especially in oil paint, covering all or much of a painting is almost always both flat and infinitely spatial. The space is shallow in all of the work in which the rectangular plane is stressed. Rothko's space is shallow and the soft rectangles are parallel to the plane, but the space is almost traditionally illusionistic. In Reinhardt's paintings, just back from the plane of the canvas, there is a flat plane and this seems in turn indefinitely deep. [...] anything spaced in a rectangle and on a plane suggests something in and on something else, something in its surround, which suggests an object or figure in its space, in which these are clearer instances of a similar world – that's the main purpose of painting (Judd, 2005, p.182).

In the flambé effect, streaks of different colours and tones or areas of different mattness could account for the impression of depth on the surface, as one always appears nearer to the viewer than the others.

In flambés, depth is achieved in part through painterly techniques. Yet my research into extending illusionistic depth (painterly, resting upon surface) to poetic depth (imaginary, absorbed into volume) may deny flambé glazes a poetic dimension. This would deprive painting of any poetic potential. Several aspects are at work here and the presence of illusionistic components need not rule out the poetic. Earlier I identified significant characteristics of flambé glazes – drops, runs and streaks, as well as the accidental – whose poetic dimension I have discussed.

Monochromes



Monochrome glazes and other glazes

An important characteristic of most of the glazes I am researching is that all are essentially monochromatic. By definition monochrome is imageless, and has “neither perspective, nor figure-ground relationships, nor other cues necessary for creating the optical illusion of depth. In its renunciation of illusionistic devices, it answers the call for a concrete, literal art that has the material presence of other real objects in the world” (Rose, 2006, p.21). Donald Judd sees the monochrome as enjoying a specific position within painting: it avoids illusionistic means. Judd acknowledges this specificity as he excludes “complete and unvaried fields of colour or marks” from sharing traditional illusionistic concerns with the rest of painting. This is exemplified in Yves Klein’s blue paintings, which Judd considers as belonging to a group of paintings that are “unspatial” (Judd, 2005, p.25).

In spite of this literality and materiality the monochrome simultaneously opens onto an infinite perceptual depth, and may be considered an experience of the metaphysical, the spiritual, and the immaterial. “Thus the monochrome has two sources: mystical and concrete, and its development in the twentieth century illustrates the division between the spiritual search for a transcendental experience

and the wish to emphasize the material presence of the object as a concrete reality and not an illusion” (Rose, 2006, p.21).

Monochromes seem to offer a paradox, an ambivalence that is the result of the links between materiality and interiority.

Several authors have addressed the issue of these links.

For the psychoanalyst Marion Milner, “the meeting of inner and outer world in art takes place through the medium of the materiality of the artwork: narrative, words, song, musical, sound, paint, clay or other material is simultaneously substance and communication” (Pajackowska, 2008, p.40).

For Jean-Paul Sartre,

When knowledge and feeling are oriented toward something real, actually perceived, the thing [material], like a reflector, returns the light it has received from it. As a result of this continual interaction, meaning is continually enriched at the same time as the object [material] soaks up affective qualities. The object [material] thus obtains its own particular depth and richness. The affective state follows the progress of attention, developing with each new discovery of meaning... with the result that its development is unpredictable. At each moment perception overflows it and sustains it, and its density and depth come from its being confused with the perceived object [material]. Each quality is so deeply incorporated in the object [material] that it is impossible to distinguish what is felt and what is perceived (Sartre, 1965, p.119).

Earlier I discussed how Bachelard claims “that every poetics must accept components of material essence” (Bachelard, 1942, p.3) and how he conceptualizes meditation over matter as a way to cultivate an open imagination, thus stressing the links between materiality and interiority. Through poetry, as the primary example, Bachelard demonstrated how poetry, materiality and interiority are essentially linked.

In his book *La Matière-Emotion* (The Matter-Emotion), the French poet and theoretician Michel Collot uses an aphorism by the poet René Char as a starting point for a reflection on contemporary poetry: “Dare become yourself the accomplished form of the poem. The joy of glimpsing matter-emotion sparkling, and instantly queen” (Char, 1936, p.2 [my translation]). Following René Char and Michel Collot, poetry brings matter and emotion together. The poem is matter-emotion, though these seem opposite terms. Emotion deals with the inner world of imagination and feelings, the world of subjectivity. Matter, on the other hand, is the outer world of objectivity, of knowledge. Through poetry, the self and the world, experience and expression, tend to merge. Emotion is an encounter between the self and the world, inner and outer.

While for Bachelard the ambivalence of the material imagination induces poetic reverie, Collot adopts a linguistic approach: as opposed to conceptual, transcendental and arbitrary signification, the poetic signified maintains a necessary and immanent relation to the signifier. Merleau-Ponty saw this as an “emotional meaning”: an act where content and form of expression are inseparable (Collot, 1997, p.27). The founding relationship between the perceived (or signified) and the object/trigger of that perception (or signifier) seems to be a common trait between an emotional experience and an aesthetic or a poetic experience (Collot, 1997, p.15). Further still, aesthetics and emotion are often linked. Yves Klein wrote: “I would say that the poetry of painting has to do with feeling. It should be a kind of revelation, even a reverent experience. You come away feeling delight. [...] Poetry does it, music does it, and painting does it. I think that's what art is, if it can convey that feeling” (Klein, 1983, pp.123-124).

My research into monochrome glazes has investigated the possibility of bringing together the matter-emotion, with the perception of the Cobblestones inducing an aesthetic and emotional response in the viewer. As meaning and content are neither literal nor arbitrary, that relation is necessarily immanent. Signified and signifier are merged, and this is a key dimension of the poetic and emotional character of the work.

The example of Monet's *Water Lilies*

Claude Monet's endeavours to convey an illusion of depth in his *Water Lilies* (*Nymphéas*) series of paintings suggest useful parallels with both the flambé and the monochrome glazes I use. In Monet's *Water Lilies*, is depth achieved through traditional painterly, illusionistic means, or is it the result of yet another dimension? Monet discards traditional painting techniques through the elimination of light-dark contrasts and the outlines of shapes against the background that had created the illusion of deep space in traditional, academic art. Despite these innovations, and in the light of Judd's remark quoted earlier, he remains almost traditionally illusionistic. Commenting on Monet's work, Debrus writes: "this depth and space is a very complex one, where several plans merge, juxtapose or even collide. The material (the paste, the touch) and the colour (its tone, its saturation, its value) come together, merging or contrasting to create plastic spaces that lose the gaze into vertigo" (Debrus, 2006, p.4 [my translation]). But whereas Debrus's description of Monet's space remains plastic and spatial, Clemenceau in another account of the *Nymphéas*, suggests a new dimension of depth and space:

To see, didn't this mean to understand? And to see, just learn to gaze. Gaze outside, inside, gaze everywhere to excite human sensations in all the trembling of the universe. Water drinks the light and transposes it, sublimating it at the brightest level before returning it to visual senses surprised by unimagined reactions. There, in fact, lies the miracle of the *Water Lilies*, in representing the order of things to us differently from the way we had observed them before. New relations, new lights. Ever-changing appearances of a self-effacing universe, which, however, finds expression in our sensations. In accepting hitherto unknown emotions, do we not gain new states of assimilation from the infinite silence? Do we not get deeper into the world itself, into the impenetrable world? Here is what Monet discovered in looking at the sky in the water of his garden. And this is what, in our turn, he aspires to reveal to us (Clemenceau, 1928 [my translation]).

Clemenceau refers to a further dimension of depth: one that is not visual, as it cannot be seen with the eyes only: one that is both external and internal, one that has to do with emotions and the unknown.

The example of Monet and his *Water Lilies* series offers a way of understanding what depth in monochrome might be. It is generally understood that the monochrome in art has its origins in the close-valued, radiant late works of Monet (Rose, 2006). Monet is seen as having established some of the essentials of contemporary monochrome art:

The absence of a horizon line in Monet's late *Nymphéas*, as well as their horizontal extension beyond the field of vision, produces the effect of visually immersing the spectator in the lily pond that fills the visual field. The elimination of the horizon line and the occupation of the total field of vision are the beginning of the progressive eclipse of the distance between subject and object that characterizes large-scale post-Cubist abstraction such as the paintings of Newman and Rothko (Rose, 2006, p.23).

But scale is only one tool, and a key concept of monochrome art is the possibility of immersion and the abolition of distance between subject and object. The possibility of immersion supposes a space and a depth within, regardless of how unspatial the work itself may be. Is this an intuition of an inner world? It is like staring at the sun, closing your eyes and being blinded by its own reflection opening up into infinity. Another way to immerse and abolish distance is by having the possibility of close contact with even a small object. Holding a cobblestone to stare at it leads precisely to this experience of immersion. Immersion can occur through passive overwhelming or active penetration: a 'diving into'.

Monet provides a useful parallel with the flambé and the monochrome glazes. In the flambé effect, as in the *Water Lilies*, depth perception is partly visual, perspectival, and illusionistic, but this plane is not the only one at work and there is yet another dimension operating, one where perception is not only retinal but has to do with interiority and feelings. Importantly the two planes combine and strengthen the perception of depth.

GLAZES AT PLAY

During the Summer term of 2009, following the work on the Cobblestones, its analysis, as documented in the chapter 'Classifications of Glaze', and the discussions/tutorials that the project triggered, I aimed to address the relationship between the form and the glaze in a subsequent body of ceramic work.

From the previous pieces, I had concluded that my interest in glaze lies in its alluding to an interiority: interiority of maker and viewer, interiority of the glaze/material and interiority of the form/object itself. Through the contemplative process and reverie which these pieces were intended to provoke, the perception of the form became secondary. The eye and the beholder were drawn towards an inner space, at the core of which the concern for the form and the 'Gestalt' eventually disappear. Similarly, the repetition of a single cobblestone form provoked the disappearance of the form through its ubiquity. The sole intention of both the piece and the form was to deliver, ultimately, the disappearance of the form. There is an obvious paradox in this, as the form never completely disappears, and even pure glaze would still remain a form. This concern for an inner space over the form is at best an endeavour to reverse the traditional priority of form and surface. How far can this be pushed? While there is always a form of sorts, could this imply that form is of no consequence, and therefore form can be anything?

Anything?

In Chapter 2, 'Classifications of Glaze', I identified some characteristics of glaze which I believe are significant for my practice. One was the drop.

My question then became: can the form be anything provided it is an appropriate support on which the glaze can develop its own sought-for characteristics? Can the form eventually coincide with the drop? Think, become, *be* the drop itself?

To address these issues I developed a body of work around the idea of providing playgrounds for the glaze. But instead of planning these playgrounds I set out to find them, in a process encompassing an element of randomness akin to Breton's 'trouvaille' of found objects. I found four objects around the studio and at home: a measuring jug, a bunch of bananas, an iron and a pancake pan. The process of making the objects revisited an earlier interest in interiority and underlying, hidden architectures. The four found objects were covered up with clay in the hope of providing a first layer of concealment. Eventually the glaze would provide another layer, so that the original object would almost completely disappear. A mould was then made, and multiples eventually slip-cast in porcelain. The multiples were glazed with runny and fluid glazes. Eventually, on the occasion of the Work in Progress Show at the RCA, in November 2009, 16 objects were displayed on a tilted shelf, alongside three enclosed forms from an earlier series, in a group piece entitled *Edge*. Between September 2010 and March 2011 the piece was displayed again at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Palais du Louvre, Paris, on the occasion of the show 'La Scène Française', curated by Frédéric Bodet.

In this chapter I am primarily analysing the piece entitled *Edge* through the lens of Winnicott's theory of play. Bourriaud's aesthetic of precariousness provides a context for embedding this within contemporary art practices. The potentially poetic elements of play are seen through Surrealist ludic practices, the phenomenon of laughter, Kristeva's theory of revolution in poetic language and Derrida's concept of undecidability. Eventually the concept of 'jouissance', as used by Kristeva, points to another potentially poetic dimension of the piece, leading to an understanding of glaze as a poetic space of love and desire in both their merging and differentiating dimensions.

In Chapter 2, I first raised the hypothesis of the transitional phenomenon: While I was developing glaze classifications, I identified various visual characteristics of glaze at play in my work. One of these is the way glaze can melt and run down the surface to form a drop. Using Milner's approach to aesthetic experience, further analysis of this evidence of the melting processes and low glaze viscosity indicated an artistic and psychological concern for the dissolving of boundaries and becoming one with the work through a process of poetic contemplation and merging. This gave rise to the hypothesis that, through the ambivalence of solid liquidity exemplified in running processes and drips, the glaze might be akin to a transitional space, as theorised by Winnicott: an "intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality" (Winnicott, 1971, p.14).

The notion of transitional space is one of the many elements of a wider array of developments grouped by Winnicott under the theme of transitional phenomena and ranging from "the early use of a transitional object or technique to the ultimate stages of a human being's capacity for cultural experience" (Winnicott, 1971, p.40). In this continuum described by Winnicott, "there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences" (Winnicott, 1971, p.51). Following this perspective, I will try to embed my artistic experience with glazed ceramic objects into this scale of development.

In Marion Milner's view the aesthetic experience, seen as play involving the re-enactment of fusion and merging of the boundary, seems more static or encompassing. These elements, separated in time by Winnicott, occur simultaneously in Milner's description of artistic practice. A significant difference is that Milner's focus and case studies relate to older children rather than to the very young child and baby who were Winnicott's prime subjects of investigation. For Milner it is less a scale than a homogeneous event in time, exemplified in her use of Berenson's concept of 'the aesthetic moment'. The theory of play, developed by Winnicott, and its dimension of temporal evolution provide further insights into my research.

Paraphrasing and translating Winnicott's theory of play, published in his seminal book *Playing and Reality* (Winnicott, 1971, p.47-48), I propose the following

statement. Additions or changes to the original text are between brackets [] and Winnicott's suppressed original statement or words are crossed.

I equate the artist with the baby and the mother with the kiln. Freud earlier paralleled child's play with the work of the artist (Freud, 1908) and I am suggesting that the kiln is transformational (turning the solid glaze into liquid and eventually solid again) just as the infant's relationship to the mother can be seen as transformational, the mother turning sensation into meaning.

A theory of play with ceramic glazes (after Winnicott)

It is possible to describe a sequence of relationships related to the developmental process, and to look and see where playing belongs.

A.

[Artist/ beholder] ~~Baby~~ and [the glazed] object are merged in with one another. [Drops symbolically express this fusion and enclosed forms allude to their interiority, echoing that of the viewer.] [Artist's/ beholder's] ~~Baby's~~ view of the [glazed] object is subjective and [the glaze/ kiln] ~~the mother~~ is oriented towards the making actual of what the [artist/ beholder] ~~baby~~ is ready to find.

B.

The [glazed] object is repudiated, re-accepted and perceived objectively. This complex process is highly dependent on there being a [kiln/ glaze] ~~mother or mother-figure~~ prepared to participate and to give back what is handed out. This means that the [kiln/ glaze] ~~mother~~ (or part of [kiln/ glaze] ~~mother~~) is in a 'to and fro' between being that which [the artist] ~~baby~~ has a capacity to find and (alternatively) being [itself] ~~herself~~ waiting to be found. If the [kiln/ glaze] ~~mother~~ can play this part over a length of time without admitting impediment (so to speak) then the [artist] ~~baby~~ has some experience of magical control, that is, experience of that which is called 'omnipotence' in the description of intrapsychic processes (Winnicott, 1962). In the state of confidence that grows when the [kiln/ glaze] ~~mother~~ can do this difficult thing well (not if [it] ~~she~~ is unable to do it), the [artist] ~~baby~~ begins to enjoy experiences based on a 'marriage' of the omnipotence of intrapsychic processes with the [artist's] ~~baby's~~ control of the actual. Confidence in the [kiln/ glaze] ~~mother~~ makes an

intermediate playground here, where the idea of magic originates, since the [artist] ~~baby~~ does to some extent experience omnipotence. All this bears closely on Erikson's work on identity formation (Erikson, 1956). I call this a playground because play starts here. The playground is a potential space between the [kiln/glaze] ~~mother~~ and the [artist] ~~baby~~ or joining [glaze/kiln] ~~mother~~ and [artist] ~~baby~~. Play is immensely exciting. It is exciting not primarily because the instincts are involved, be it understood! The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects. This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable. To be reliable the relationship is necessarily motivated by the ~~mother's~~ love [for the glaze], or its love-hate, or its object-relating, not by reaction-formations.

C. The next stage is that of being alone in the presence of someone. The [artist] ~~baby~~ is now playing on the basis of the assumption that the [glaze/kiln who is loved] ~~the person who loves~~ and who is therefore reliable is available and continues to be available when remembered after being forgotten. This [glaze/kiln] ~~person~~ is felt to reflect back what happens in the playing.

D. The [artist] ~~baby~~ is now getting ready for the next stage, which is to allow and to enjoy an overlap of two play areas. First, surely, the [kiln/glaze] ~~mother~~ fits in with the [artist's] ~~baby's~~ play activities. Sooner or later, however, [it] ~~she~~ introduces [its] ~~her~~ own playing, and [it] ~~she~~ finds that [artists] ~~babies~~ vary according to their capacity to like or dislike the introduction of ideas that are not their own. Thus the way is paved for a playing together in a relationship.

Following this modified theory of play after Winnicott, and his assumption that there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to play, I will discuss my work *Edge*.

The piece, as it was displayed at the Work in Progress Show at the RCA in December 2009, consists of sixteen of the cast domestic objects and three enclosed forms. This piece exemplifies the developments pointed out by Winnicott, and can be seen to express the opportunity of play.



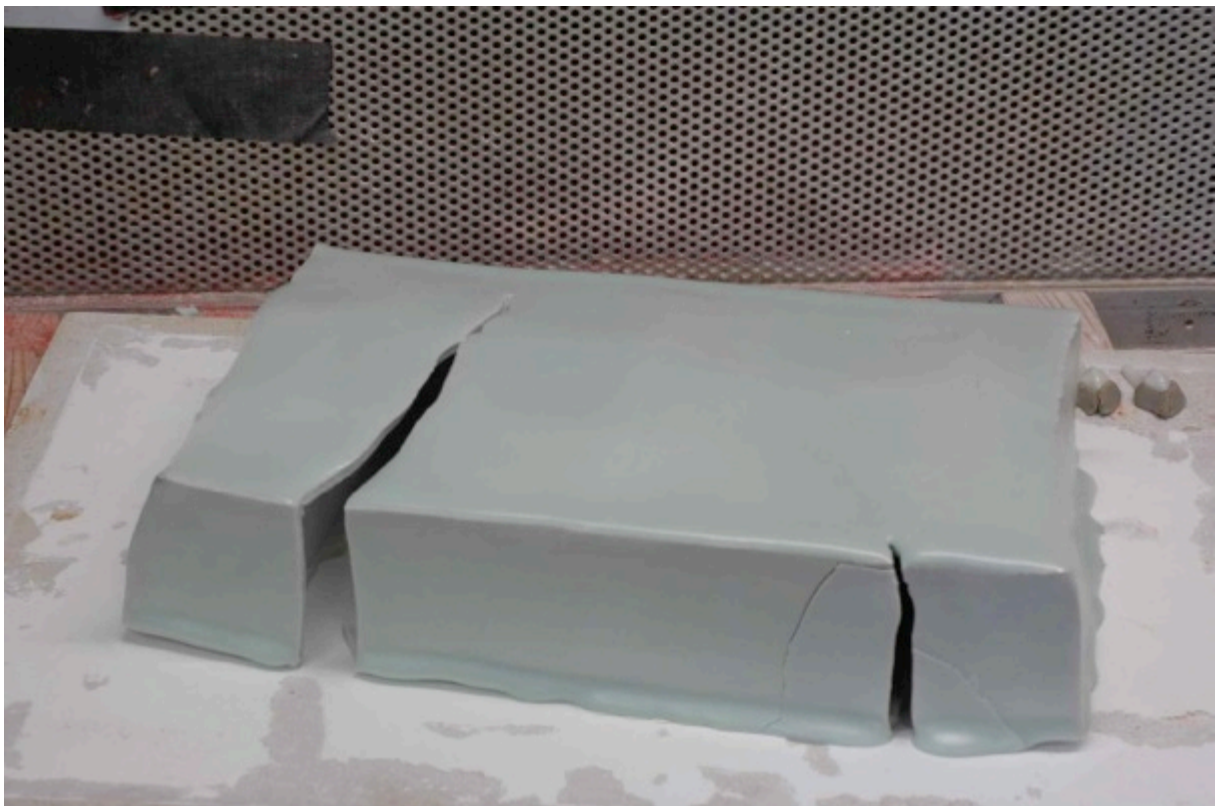
'Edge', Work in Progress Show, Royal College of Art, December 2009

Edge followed two series of enclosed forms, through the making of which I gained expertise in producing enclosed pieces covered with low-viscosity glazes. The learning process was long, costly in kiln shelves (as runny glazes often stuck the piece to the shelf), and frustrating. My practice was oriented towards making actual what I was ready to find: 'happy' accidents with glaze and preferably not unwanted ones. I then selected and discarded pieces subjectively.

Pictures of the discarded pieces follow:



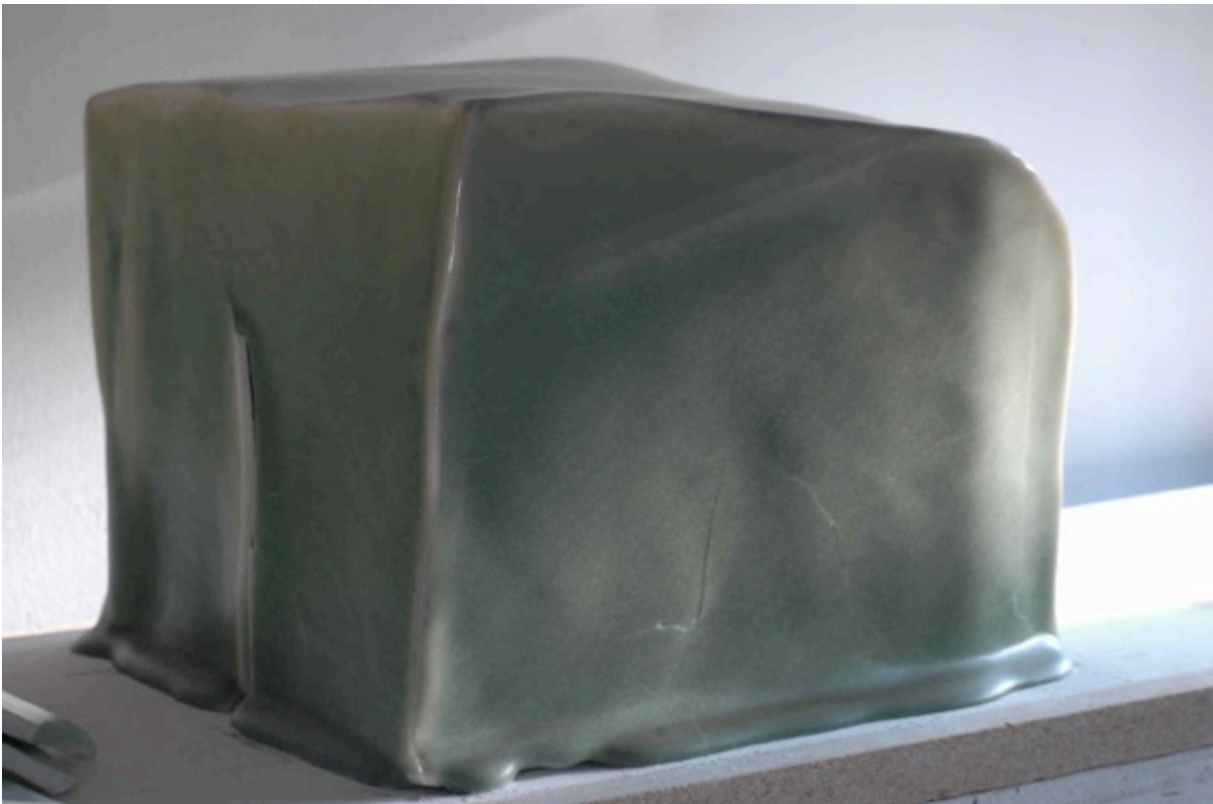
Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 34 x 25 x 10 cm



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 37 x 26 x 12 cm



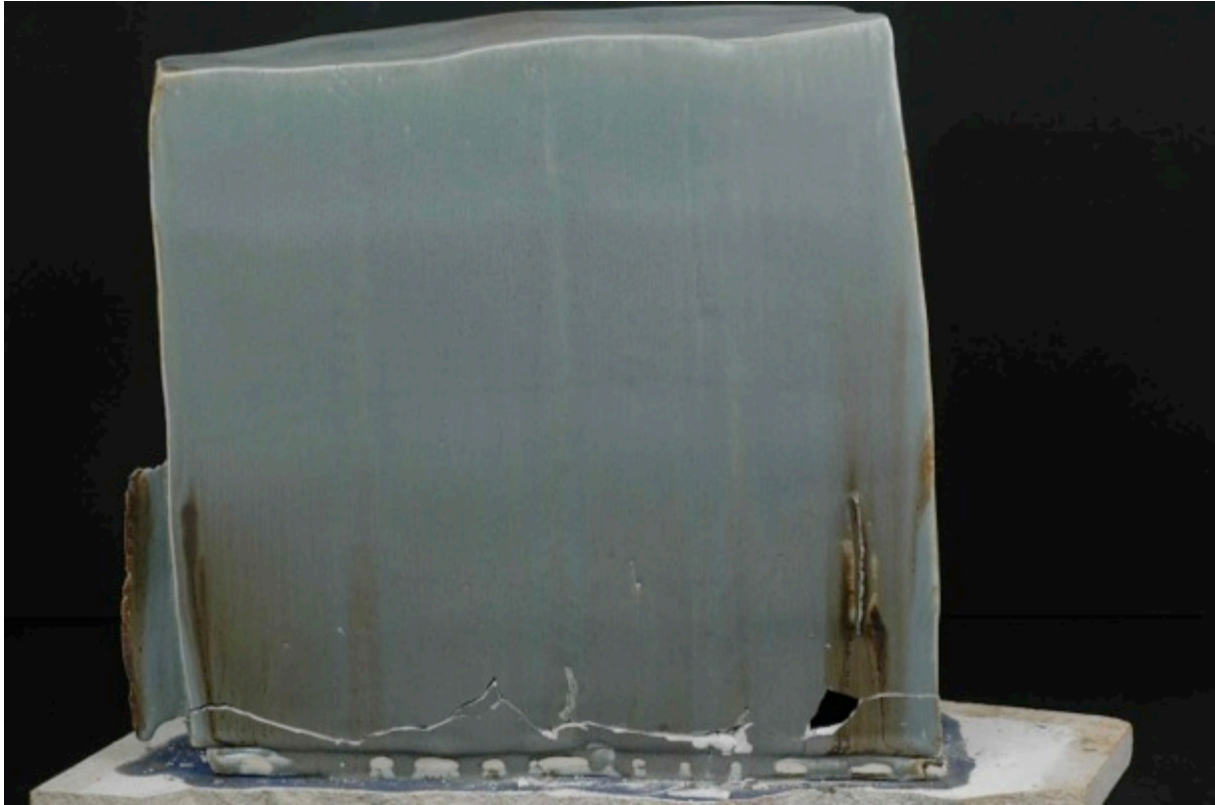
Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 29 x 23 x 24 cm



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 29 x 23 x 24 cm



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 29 x 23 x 24 cm



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 39 x 33 x 12 cm



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 34 x 22 x 16 cm

Successful pieces – the pieces are viewed again subjectively – are those I considered graceful in form and surface, representing a symbolic fusion and the merger of boundaries, inviting the beholder to an experience of losing him/herself within them. As demonstrated with *The Emperor's Terrapin*, a key element of the illusion of poetic depth is the perception (real or fake) of the object as a whole; substance, rather than surface. Is this precisely what these *Enclosed Objects* are aiming to convey?



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 30 x 25 x 25 cm



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 37 x 27 x 10 cm



Enclosed Object, porcelain and glaze, 2008, 8 x 8 x 10 cm



Cobblestones, 2009

The aim of the *Cobblestones* project was to provide a catalogue of glazes and to allow for their classification according to various sets of criteria. It connotes a systematic exploration and ordering of experience. The numbering and arrangement of the cobblestones along a grid structure convey an impression of order and efficiency, voluntary control and will. In terms of craft and technique, the making of the cobblestones resulted in a better control and understanding of the way the glazes worked, and of the most effective way to pack and to fire the kiln: a feeling not far from that of intimacy. The process involved a renewed awareness of glaze. Rather than representing a search for the perfect glazed object, the piece accepted a wider variety of occurrences, not only 'happy', graceful accidents but also 'unhappy' ones, and less spectacular glazes, something akin to a catalogue.

With the *Cobblestones* project, the glazed object (stand-alone) is first repudiated as the main individual objective for my artistic practice, re-accepted – the glaze remains the object of practice, albeit as a group – and perceived objectively, accepted in its various occurrences without aesthetic choice and discarding. The final piece consists

of individual test objects. The research itself has become the final artwork. This allows what Winnicott described as a process highly dependent on there being a [kiln/glaze] mother (or part of [kiln/glaze] mother) able to accomplish a 'to and fro' between being that which the [artist] baby has a capacity to find and (alternatively) being [itself] herself waiting to be found. The 'to and fro' was achieved because the process of testing is all-encompassing and retains both what the artist is ready to find and what is found or discovered.

This led me to experience magical control and a marriage of a feeling of omnipotence with the control of the actual. A feeling of confidence and intimacy with the glazes arose in which I felt a desire for differentiation and not a loss of self. Glaze acquired its individuality. It became objective. I/it were ready to be separate. Yet to be separate does not mean separation and loss of interest. I felt ready to meet and play with glaze. I felt an urge to play. I imagined playgrounds on which the glaze could develop, enabling it to fully explore its own ability to play. But it was not only the glaze that would play, but I, the artist, too, paving the way for an artistic relationship.

With a desire to play in mind, I rejected the making of a form. To play is to relate. It is an attempt to overcome the reduction of reality to the subject-object antinomy. There is no omnipotent artist at one end of the artistic process, and no completed and compliant object at the other end. There is a dynamic relationship between subject and object, an encounter encompassing an element of chance and randomness. I wanted to challenge the omnipotence of the maker, to challenge his creativity. The object will be found rather than made, and in the process the subject, too, may be found.

In September 2007 I had made a series of 'automatic pieces' in which I already approached the possibility of play. Yet in this first series I did not investigate the play with the glaze itself.

For this new series, I identified objects around the studio and the house that I thought could become playgrounds when offered to a running and drip-prone glaze. From the objects at hand, I chose a measuring jug, an iron, a bunch of bananas and a pancake pan.

The objects found or 'grasped' to become material substrates for the glaze-play are objects that have meaning for the studio and the domestic space of the kitchen. This equivalence and proximity between kitchen and studio revolves around well-known analogies between oven and kiln, baking and firing, playing and working, infant and artist. The transformational process is facilitated in infancy by the mother, and in my ceramic practice by the kiln.

Less obvious, yet equally relevant, is the question this analogy between artistic and domestic practice raises about the relationship between labour and play. Is it a denunciation of the myths of non-work that surround both practices (artist as genius, mother as natural), or an invitation to allow, through play, a flow of 'jouissance' in both artistic and domestic practice?

In this new attempt to play with the 'found', the revealing of the unconscious is only one of the possibilities at stake. Equally important for me was the possibility for the glaze to play, too. Play becomes a relationship between the found object, the maker and the glaze. Play is not only a space within, a space of fusion and unity. It is a space in-between. It is transitional. It allows eventually for differentiation.

The measuring jug

For the potter, a jug requires a properly-made spout to prevent dripping. In this sense, the jug is anti-drip: "the lip of the spout should cut the flow effectively and preferably without a drip. A thin section or sharp edge to the tip is the most effective non-drip finish" (Hamer, 1997, p.324). Yet when tipped upside down I imagined the jug "that fills drip by drip" could, once covered with glaze and slightly tilted, reverse the process and become a 'drip paradise' through a cantilever between its lips and its plinth. The container of liquid becomes a substrate for displaying liquid. The container is inverted, 'killed'.



Jug covered with clay and its base (Edge, 2009)

The bunch of bananas

The bunch of bananas was placed as if it were a slide resembling a ski-jump to allow the glaze to run over it, gain momentum and eventually drip as it slows down towards the tip of the fruit.

But the bunch of bananas is food too, children's food. It becomes symbolic nourishment, meaning.



Bunch of bananas covered with clay and its base (Edge, 2009)

The steam iron

The iron uses both the cantilever and the slide effect. It adds yet another: the funnelling of the drips towards the pointed end.

The iron conveys feelings of smoothness, obliterating creases and chaos. Does this diving position signify an enhancement of its potential, or the imminence of crash?



Steam iron covered with clay and its base (Edge, 2009)

The pancake pan

The pancake pan can be cantilever, slide, and funnel. Moreover, it offers a large central flat pooling area where the glaze could accumulate yet run.



Pancake pan covered with clay and its base (Edge, 2009)

All the objects were made using a new process within my practice, involving the covering up of each object with clay in the hope of masking or veiling them. Voids were filled. They all stood above the ground on a plinth. A splash mould of each

covered object was made and porcelain slip-casts of the objects produced. After biscuit-firing they were covered with 'runny' glazes.

Within his extensive theory of play, Winnicott identified further characteristics of play. But to what extent does *Edge* match them?

Transitional

Winnicott points out that:

Into this play area the [artist] ~~child~~ gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Without hallucinating the [artist] ~~child~~ puts out a sample of dream potential and lives with this sample in a chosen setting of fragments from external reality (after Winnicott, 1971, p.51).

Edge was rooted within, and encompassed, elements of my personal reality: my immediate daily surroundings – the domestic, whether studio or home. Paradoxically these objects were both intimate and impersonal, a paradox I will address later. The glaze played the main part of the external phenomenon. The internal dream element was the occurrence of 'happy' surprises in the glaze, creating a feeling akin to magic.

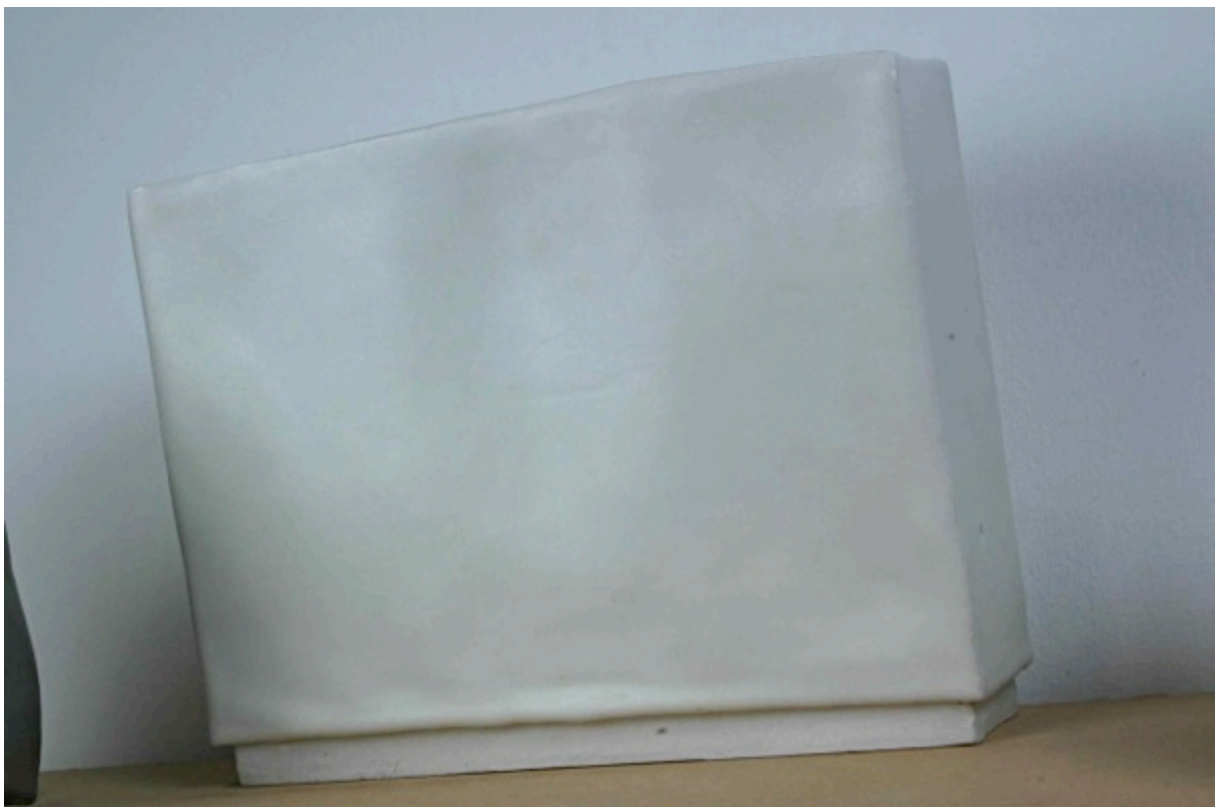
The play took place in a space between inner and outer reality. This area of play is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual but it is not entirely the external world. In play, the [artist] ~~child~~ manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling (after Winnicott, 1971, p.51).

Earlier I pointed out the transitional element in this series of pieces as play becomes a relationship between several elements involved: the found object, the maker and the glaze. In the series of automatic pieces made in 2007, playfulness did not seem to be reciprocal, and the glaze was not allowed to play. There did not seem to be an 'in-between', there was no transitional space, at least not with the glazes, which were not manipulated in the service of the dream.

Importantly, *Edge* is also transitional (in the sense of intermediate), as it juxtaposes two series of work. On the one hand, there are the three *Enclosed Objects* in the manner of previous works. On the other, the 16 cast domestic objects of the new work. The three *Enclosed Objects* resemble buildings, and thus share with the other objects a reference to the domestic. In spite of their being covered with runny glazes, they do not convey a similar feeling of precariousness, despite their display on the tilted shelf or the crack in one of them. Their display in a group and above eye level makes it more difficult for the beholder to experience merging and fusion with the object as initially intended, and thus there is now a far greater awareness of them as forms.

Edge is a transition between an endeavour to classify and order (the *Cobblestones*) and an excess of flux, the 'jouissance', the disordering of order; the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

The running of the glazes, the dynamic position of the objects (the jug taking off, the diving iron, the flying pan) and the tilted shelf further connote a sense of imminent movement, an element of the transitional. It is a piece in transit, dynamic, in flux, in 'play'. It is not static.



Edge (detail) – 29 x 22 x 9 cm



Edge (detail) – 28 x 17 x 16 cm



Edge (detail) – 24 x 22 x 12 cm



Edge (detail) – 24 x 22 x 12 cm

Surprising

The play was spontaneous and came as a surprise, an important element when making the piece. The idea of the playground was also a surprise, the found objects were a surprise, their making a surprise. For Winnicott, surprise is an important element of play. The significant moment in playing is that at which the [artist] ~~child~~ surprises himself or herself. It is not the moment of my clever interpretation that is significant (Winnicott, 1971). Interpretation outside the ripeness of the material is indoctrination and produces compliance (Winnicott, 1960a). [...] Playing has to be spontaneous, and not compliant or acquiescent (after Winnicott, 1971, p.51).

Non-seductive

Excellence in making and good craftsmanship were not key elements. Nor was their negation in a provocative way, which could be interpreted as negative compliance. I discarded both compliance with professional excellence and any endeavour to seduce, which Winnicott also warned against: in seduction some external agency exploits the [artist's] ~~child's~~ instincts and helps to annihilate the ~~child's~~ sense of existing as an autonomous unit, making playing impossible (cf. Khan, 1964) (after Winnicott, 1971, p.51).

Exciting

For Winnicott “play is inherently exciting” (Winnicott, 1971, p.52).

For me the making of the work was essentially satisfying and exciting. It is the excitement and pleasure of the unknown, of the possibility of discovery, of change, which is at the centre of the transitional. At the same time it led to a certain degree of anxiety, triggered by the feeling of entering unfamiliar territory.

This excitement is a feeling resembling what Nietzsche described as the “primordial joy of the Dionysian” in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

We must recognize a Dionysian phenomenon: again and again it reveals to us the playful construction and destruction of the individual world as the overflow of a primordial delight. Thus the dark Heraclitus compares the world-building force to a playing child that places stones here and there and builds sand hills only to overthrow them again (Nietzsche, 1872, p.24).

This image of a playing child, and the pleasure and excitement associated with it, are for Nietzsche the definition of the aesthetic phenomenon in which “even the ugly and disharmonic are part of an artistic game that the will in the eternal amplitude of its pleasure plays with itself” (Nietzsche, 1872, p.24). Nietzsche advocates excitement and intoxication in play, the ultimate affirmation of life, a trance-like state that creates art (Pérez-Gómez, 2006, p.24).

Precariousness

The way *Edge* was shown at the Work in Progress Show in 2009 suggested precariousness. Pieces were placed on a shelf that was tilting forward and from which falling seemed a constant threat. The pieces melting away and collapsing further conveyed the impression of the precarious.



Edge, Work in Progress Show, Royal College of Art, December 2009



Edge, Work in Progress Show, Royal College of Art, December 2009 (detail)



Edge, Work in Progress Show, Royal College of Art, December 2009 (detail)



Edge, Work in Progress Show, Royal College of Art, December 2009 (detail)

The precariousness of the work is not only formal or demonstrative; it is also ontological. It is part of play. This is partly because it is on the theoretical line between inner and outer realities, with the latter possibly conflicting with the former in a sudden “reality clash”. As Winnicott wrote:

Playing is inherently exciting and precarious. This characteristic derives not from instinctual arousal but from the precariousness that belongs to the interplay in the child's mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality) (Winnicott, 1971, p.52).

Winnicott refers to “the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arose in the intimacy of a relationship found to be reliable” (Winnicott, 1971, p.48).

These feelings of magic, grace or wonder are important elements of my artistic practice with ceramic glazes. When opening up the kiln, I confront the objectivity of outer reality. Will the dream come to life? Will the glazed object trigger and foster the dream? I hope for an encounter beyond plan, beyond will, beyond craft and design and beyond knowledge. An encounter in which

the disclosure of beauty and meaning [...] has the capacity of changing one's life in the vivid present – exactly like magic, or an erotic encounter. Like falling in love, it strikes a blow that reveals reality as is. Thus it can be said to embody knowledge, but rather than clear logic, it is knowledge understood in the Biblical sense: a carnal, fully sexual and therefore opaque experience of truth (Pérez-Gómez, 2006, p.109).

Following Winnicott, for this magical encounter to happen trust and reliability are required. Intimacy does not mean control or predictability. It is a loving relationship, one which can marvel at otherness and allows for both fusion and differentiation. And whereas the magic of the encounter can be deemed precarious and uncertain as to its outcome, love brings in an element of reliability, or one through which the paradoxical simultaneity of unity and heterogeneity is overcome.

Aesthetics of precariousness

Precariousness is not just the monopoly of magic and play. Nicolas Bourriaud argues that precariousness is also an element of the ethics of contemporary art practice.

The contemporary artwork does not rightfully occupy a position in a field, but presents itself as an object of negotiation, caught up in a cross-border trade which confronts different disciplines, traditions or concepts. It is this ontological precariousness that is the foundation of contemporary aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2009b, p.32).

His analysis is based on the precarious state of the consumer and the disposable society in which we live, one of “liquid modernity, a society of generalized disposability, nudged from behind by the horror of expiry, where nothing is more decried than the steadfastness, stickiness, viscosity of things inanimate and animate alike” (Bauman, 2005, p.3). Contemporary art practice not only resists this instability, it also flourishes on it, leading to a precarious regime of aesthetics based on speed, intermittence, blurring and fragility, and which, significantly, is not to be confused with the demonstrative properties and outward appearance of the immaterial or ephemeral character of the artwork: “precariousness now imbues all artistic production with its uncertain hues and constitutes an intellectual substrate, an ideological backdrop before which all forms pass in review. In short, precariousness now pervades the entirety of the contemporary aesthetic” (Bourriaud, 2009a, p.83). Bourriaud contends that art has drawn new strength from precariousness, leading to new forms of culture and new types of formal writing. He distinguishes three main patterns in precarious aesthetics: transcoding, flickering and blurring.

- Permanent Transcoding (Formal Nomadism) describes the process of production and processing of forms, waiting in translation, unstable, spectral, always abolishing the original form and surfacing as transitory incarnations.
- Flickering (Intermittences) is the specific regime of intermittence of perception, but it is also associated with a flickering reality where the present lags behind itself, as is pointed out by Jacques Derrida (Différance as the gap between being and meaning).
- Blurring (The Indiscernible)

Bourriaud analyses the political agenda of contemporary art within a social body seen as a “disparate collection of structures, institutions and social practices”. The content of contemporary art is to confirm the precarious nature of social reality: “maintaining the world in a precarious state or, in other words, permanently affirming the transitory, circumstantial nature of the institutions that partition the state and of the rules that govern individual or collective behaviour” (Bourriaud, 2009b, p.36). According to Bourriaud, by demonstrating through mimicry the precariousness of social reality and institutions, contemporary art makes change possible. Contemporary art thus entails a political agenda both “more effective (in the sense that it generates real effects) and ambitious (insofar as it refers to every aspect of political reality)” (Bourriaud, 2009b, p.36).

How does *Edge* participate in the precarious aesthetic regime of contemporary art? Is it excluded by its high degree of material solidity and its commitment to a medium? Can it be viewed as political?

In the glazes I use, there is a preference for low viscosity (the property of resistance to flow) and demonstration of liquidity in the glazes I use, very much akin to Bauman’s description of a ‘liquid modernity’.

The permanent transcoding also seems present in the process used for making the cast pieces: a real object has been chosen and then covered with clay, in reference to the process of transformation and veiling. The object is a spectre of the original, in which the former is eventually abolished. By implication, it is different from free modelling, or modelling from a model where the form does not encompass the original. Making the objects in *Edge* resembles a game of Chinese whispers. The forming of the model is yet another translation, as is each cast taken from the mould. Similarly, the glaze further veils and disguises.

The flickering can be seen in the gap between being and meaning. The meaning of the piece is not given or prescribed. It emerges possibly in retrospect, in the wake of the making. The process of deciding how to show *Edge* for the Work in Progress Show is a useful example of ‘deferred-sense’ making. What seemed at first a random

display surfaced as a potential narrative on the precariousness of the domestic, an unsettling still life.

Blurring/veiling was central to the process of covering the objects with clay, and the glazing/firing process even more so.

In terms of a political agenda, or at least of a potential social resonance, the piece can be read as stressing the precarious nature of a constructed social reality, that of domestic life. Domestic items, architectural symbols (the tower block [community housing], the house), and anthropomorphic symbols (the jugs have been described as half-heads) are set on the edge of a tilted shelf. The position of the tilted shelf at eye level (1.60m) offers the opportunity to see the liquidity and precariousness of constructs where these are most obvious: from underneath, where drips form.



'Edge', Work in Progress Show, Royal College of Art, December 2009 (detail)

Unlike Bourriaud's truly political art, the social resonance of *Edge* does not have an undertone of political denunciation, engagement or resistance, but rather one of empathy and compassion: the intrinsic fragility of the domestic is experienced and

shared with the beholder as fall and collapse also threatens him/her, directly and physically.

The poetics of play

Play is an important element of *Edge*. How does this relate to research into the poetics of glaze? Could the ludic possibly entail new poetic dimensions that I have not yet encountered? Could play shed a fresh critical light on the poetics of glaze? Here I identify the poetic elements at work specifically in this piece, but also more generally in the concept of play.

I will use the following to address this issue:

- The Surrealist ludic
- Revolutionary play and undecidability
- Laughter
- Jouissance

The Surrealist ludic

The use of play and games by the Surrealist poets provides insights into possible relationship between play and poetry, especially in terms of methodologies and processes devised for artistic and poetic practice.

“It is not to belittle Surrealist activity to consider it as a game, in fact as The Great Game” writes Philippe Audouin (Audouin, 1964).

The Surrealist ludic consists of a range of processes and strategies with chance being their central operative principle. For the Surrealists, chance is understood “not as fully random coincidence but as the unconscious contriving to place the subject in situations favourable to a traumatic return of the repressed” (Laxton, 2003, p.3).

Surrealist games and procedures include among many others, ‘Surrealist Errance’ (an aimless wandering in the city’s streets meant to encourage the eruption of

unconscious images into the perceptual field), 'Cadavre Exquis' (a language or a visual game), Collages, Automatic Writing, Collaborative Poems...

In relation to *Edge*, Breton's description in *Mad Love* offers another Surrealist strategy, the finding of an object 'trouvaille' that serves "exactly the same purpose as the dream, in the sense that it frees the individual from paralyzing affective scruples, comforts him and makes him understand that the obstacle he might have thought insurmountable is cleared" (Breton, 1937, p.32-33).

In my first attempt to use automaticity as a random strategy to make pieces in September 2007 I quickly realized that I could not maintain Breton's diktat to reject human volition and control through automaticity. I felt I had reached the limits of this Surrealist strategy: there is always an editing of sorts, even if it only consists in making choices about which pieces should be kept and which rejected.

However, this other series of pieces consisting of found objects that led to *Edge* seems more in keeping with the objectives set by Breton in this new process of the 'trouvaille'. The objects I eventually cast were genuinely 'found'.

In this first phase of making the cast pieces (from selecting the 'found' objects to their moulding and casting), the emphasis was on finding the objects rather than on making them. The final phase of displaying the pieces seemed equally random, yet psychoanalytically significant.

Can glaze be read as part of a Surrealist ludic? This is defined by the art historian Susan Laxton as "an early deployment of chance to militate against means/end rationality" (Laxton, 2003, p.4). When writing about earlier pieces I looked at how my concern with glaze is an endeavour to escape the idea of craftsmanship, technique and authorship, not unlike Surrealist strategies. I drew the conclusion that a poetic dimension of glaze lies precisely in the tension between unpredictability and control, between the unbidden – the self-born – and the constructed. Whereas chance and indeterminacy are used predominantly with a view to investigating the mind, glaze as a natural process might first appear devoid of any connection with Surrealist principles. I will come back to this later, and investigate the way in which Breton

paralleled natural processes and the artist's psyche, thus opening the way for a poetic analogy based upon their convergence.

Revolutionary play and undecidability

Traditionally, play is seen to convey a strong connotation of futility and unimportance. A widely-accepted definition of play was offered by Johan Huizinga:

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary' life (Huizinga, 1938, p.28).

Susan Laxton demonstrates that with this definition there seems little at stake.

Play comes by its connotations of frivolity and un-productivity to this dominant characteristic: it exists at a remove from a reality driven by practical necessities and its activities have no consequences in that reality. It is conceived as bounded or, to use a term familiar within the discourse of modernism, autonomous. In philosophy, play is any pursuit undertaken for its own sake: it is neither conceptual nor sensuous; it has no stake in intellectual or material worlds; it doesn't matter (Laxton, 2003, p.5)

Winnicott, who saw play as a transitional space between inner and outer reality, disputes this unimportance and autonomy. This unimportance and autonomy are also out of place in the context of the ambitious and far-reaching goals of the Surrealists. Laxton further shows important contradictions in the philosophical use of the concept: "Play is claimed as the underlying justification for such radically opposed concepts as Schiller's autonomous aesthetics and Nietzsche's Dionysian excesses" (Laxton, 2003, p.5).

But these contradictions and paradoxes, this 'undecidability' of play (Derrida, 1994), are also obvious in the wide array of its definitions and contradictions.

To play is to engage – to put into play; yet to play is to disengage from consequence. Play is artificial, as in mimetic illusions, yet it is characterized as a primal impulse. It is useless and it produces nothing, yet is understood psychologically as a form of practice, trial action for life. It is constructive, as when the smooth play of machine parts keeps up production, and it is destructive, as when too much play in a part can bring the whole to a catastrophic halt. Play claims to be free – it cannot be coerced – yet it is valued for the restrictions that keep it circumscribed from life (Laxton, 2003, p.5).

Laxton concludes with the indeterminacy of play, a conundrum in which its 'eccentricity' and lack of limits is also its power. In the wake of this indeterminacy and undecidability, the Surrealist ludic is viewed by Laxton as a fundamentally subversive phenomenon. In this respect, Surrealist play is akin to a kind of provocative magic with an underlying political agenda, a revolutionary intent (Gooding, 1995).

If Surrealist poetry, through play, is essentially subversive, poetic practices in general can also be seen as set against the normative, questioning established use of language. The position of poetic language is double and ambivalent. It is the enemy within and without, recognizing the necessity for meaning and signification yet questioning it and creating new ones. Poetry entails a revolutionary intent (distinct from any political agenda); one of its objectives is that of a rediscovery of language or of the experience of its creation. In his *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley speaks of poetry as "connate with the origin of man" and every language "near its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem" (Shelley, 1821). Revolution is the replacement of an order by a new one, a new origin and source.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Julia Kristeva defines poetic language as both a rejection of the social codes entailed in the very structure of language and a resort to an experience of madness pressing for freedom. Poetic language is the space where 'jouissance' transits through code to transform it (akin to a transitional space). It is a practice of negativity, break-up and revolution through language and geared towards experiencing the possibilities, the risks and the limits of the subject within the social

whole. Ultimately, the practice of poetic language leads to the questioning of all practices.

In contrast to earlier pieces, *Edge* moves away from abstraction to enter the realm of figuration and symbolic form. It shares with poetic language a similar ambiguity: It is both common and intimate. The objects are known. Bananas, jug, iron, and pan are part of a common vocabulary of the domestic. But they are now emotionally loaded. Through considering psychoanalytic principles in the choice of objects and in their final display, a new meaning emerges which becomes the syntax of an artistic practice replicating the logic of desire and of the unconscious.

Edge not only questions language or symbols now invested with psychoanalytic meaning, it further prompts an investigation of the practice of ceramics itself. In *Edge*, the poetic may lie in a questioning and disruption of traditional ceramic practices and an underlying hierarchy between form and surface. The two terms form a binary opposition (Derrida, 1994), where each depends on the other for its meaning, eventually establishing a conceptual order in which form is privileged over surface and material. The opposition is described as hylomorphism: “matter, or ‘hyle’, is given shape by form, or ‘morphe’. Matter in itself is inert and undifferentiated; it is the servant of form and gives it presence. It does not determine form” (Lloyd Thomas, 2007, p.3).

In any binary opposition it is not only that the secondary term is degraded but that it is defined negatively, as ‘not form’. Within such a definition there is no space for a positive appearance of the term, and therefore for the possibility of differentiation [individuation]. Hylomorphism, which understands materials [surface] as a subset of matter, does not provide a way of positively distinguishing materials and underscores the tendency to use materials as mere finishes, exchangeable and superficial. In turn, it is no surprise that materials become supplementary [...] and are used to decorate or signify (Lloyd Thomas, 2007, p.4).

The use of glaze in *Edge* disrupts this oppositional logic. Glaze can be viewed as an undecidable, in a Derridean sense (Derrida, 1994). “It slips across both sides of the

opposition but doesn't properly fit either. It is more than the opposition can allow. And because of that, it questions the very principle of opposition" (Collins, 1996, p.20).

Glaze is surface, material and form: the relationship between form and surface is not that of submission or dominance. The balance is blurred and uncertain, displaced, ambiguous, un-decidable. Whereas traditionally glaze covers an object and coincides with the form it covers to become its exact surface and its skin, the glaze now uses the form to play and develop its own random qualities akin to fluidity and formlessness. The glaze does not reveal (or mask) the form. It is the form that serves the glaze. Glaze partly separates from the form, which it no longer needs to cover. It is independent, playful. It is its own form, or the negation of form through formless indeterminacy and liquidity. It is an indication of a displacement of the form: the glaze does not coincide with the porcelain form it covers, it creates its own as in a "blurred mise-en-scène of the formless" (Bourriaud, 2009b, p.35).

Laughter

Basing her analysis on the poetry of Comte de Lautréamont and Stéphane Mallarmé, Kristeva likens the poetry of the former to laughter and play. Speaking of Lautréamont's poetry she writes:

the practice of the [poetic] text is a kind of laughter whose only explosions are those of language. The pleasure obtained from the lifting of inhibitions is immediately invested in the production of the new. Every practice which produces something new (a new device) is a practice of laughter: it obeys laughter's logic and provides the subject with laughter's advantages. When practice is not laughter, there is nothing new; where there is nothing new, practice cannot be provoking: it is at best a repeated, empty act. The novelty of a practice (that of the text or any practice) indicates the jouissance invested therein and this quality of newness is the equivalent of the laughter it conceals (Kristeva, 1974, p.225).

The proximity between play and laughter is obvious. Her description of the necessity of laughter for the emergence of the new is very similar to Winnicott's account of the

direct relationship between play and creativity: “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality” (Winnicott, 1971, p.54). Play, laughter and poetic practice can have in common a profoundly subversive and creative position, set against the normative, the known and the established; against what Winnicott denounced as compliance.

In the same way, *Edge* although quite dramatic and tragic in its undertones, incorporates a dimension of laughter. Following Freud, in his review of literature on jokes (Freud, 1905), *Edge* can be seen as a “playful judgement” (Fischer, 1889, cited by Freud, 1905) on the precariousness of domestic life. *Edge* is also an attempt to “bind into a unity, several ideas which are in fact alien to one another both in their internal content and in the nexus to which they belong” (Vischer, 1857, cited by Freud, 1905): aesthetics and the domestic, contemplation and excitement, laughter and tragedy... It meets herewith another definition of joking as a rapprochement of the dissimilar. *Edge* was also an experience of freedom: I broke away from former practices and aspirations: the aesthetic, the contemplative, the sublime... And Freud quotes Richter (Richter, 1804, cited by Freud, 1905): “Freedom produces jokes and jokes produce freedom.”

The paradox between laughter and the tragic is only an illusory one. For Nietzsche, it is precisely the Dionysian, joined with the need to impose form - the Apollonian - which produces the tragic: and for Deleuze “What is tragic is joy” (Deleuze, 1962, p.20).

Jouissance

Poetic language can be understood as an experience of the materiality of language and of the individual’s sensibility to this materiality beyond that of coded and normalised forms upon which the possibility of language ultimately depends. The practice of writing becomes poetic when it addresses the materiality of language, the signifier (Saussure, 1913).

The signifier is the material dimension of language. It is different from the signified, which is its intelligibility. The relation to the signifier is individual and unique and it

questions the institutionalized dimension of language of the signified: collective norms striving to reduce language to unified codes, and thus normalizing individual perception. This normalization through the arbitrary process of language potentially entails the loss of individual desire and pleasure.

Kristeva sees art and the poetic as clearly being the result of the flow of 'jouissance' into language. 'Jouissance' (enjoyment, excitement but also orgasm in the French language) is to be defined as the result of the subject's drive to transgress limitations placed upon pleasure (Taylor, 2001, p.196). The prohibition of 'jouissance' is a constitutive element of the linguistic and social field that Lacan calls the Symbolic. This flow of 'jouissance' into language defining the poetic is similar to the concept of 'the text of bliss' developed by Roland Barthes: it "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (Barthes, 1975, p.14).

Breton, too, views in the poetic practice a means to liberate and recreate desire (Breton, 1924), and desire has become the sole unifying principle of psychic life. "Desire, the only motive of the world, desire, the only rigour humans must be acquainted with" (Breton, 1937, p.88).

Desire and 'jouissance' are not purely sexual or instinctual dimensions, but are more akin to a surge of energy; it is excitement for the unknown and for the new, stemming from transgressive and subversive behaviour. Winnicott does warn that "bodily excitement in erotogenic zones [that] constantly threatens playing, and therefore threatens the child's sense of existing as a person" (Winnicott, 1971, p.52). Furthermore, he stresses that "the pleasurable element in playing carries with it the implication that the instinctual arousal is not excessive [...] Playing can be said to reach its own saturation point, which refers to the capacity to contain experience" (Winnicott, 1971, p.52).

In *Edge*, the instinctual, sexual dimension of jouissance can probably be seen in the phallic allegory of the bananas and the pan, but even more poetically in the paradoxical simultaneity of fire and water, solidity and liquidity, expressed in the glaze but also in the choice of objects: the iron (through steam production) and to

another extent the pancake pan (the hardening of liquid paste through cooking) link water and fire. “The water, mad for its swirls like a real mane of water. To glide like water into pure sparkle...” (Breton, 1937, p.6).

What can be seen as a paradox is the very moment of ‘jouissance’, in its instantaneity and indefinite persistence.

It is there – right in the depths of the human crucible, in this paradoxical region where the fusion of two beings who have really chosen each other renders to all things the lost colours of the times of ancient suns, where however, loneliness rages also, in one of nature’s fantasies which around the Alaskan craters, demands that under the ashes there remain snow (Breton, 1937, p.8).

Desire, for Breton, not only commands humans, it equally commands nature. There is a profound relationship between the surge of desire in poetic practice and that of nature in its natural manifestations. For Breton, the possibility of convergence between Humanity and Nature in its constant formation and destruction leads to another possibility of the poetic. Breton, when defining the ‘convulsive beauty’, “the only beauty which should concern us” (Breton, 1937, p.88) describes the process of the formation of stalagmites from drips in a grotto, and concludes with a eulogy to crystal:

There could be no higher artistic teaching than that of crystal [...] Please understand that this affirmation is constantly and categorically opposed, for me, to everything that attempts, aesthetically or morally, to found moral beauty on a willed work of voluntary perfection that humans must desire to do. On the contrary, I have never stopped advocating creation, spontaneous action, insofar as the crystal, non-perfectible by definition, is the perfect example of it” (Breton, 1937, p.10-11).

Breton adds another condition to which convulsive beauty must respond. It is found, and the ‘trouvaille’ is always superior to what is wished for. “This ‘trouvaille’ is enough to undo the beauty of everything beside it. In it alone can we recognize the marvellous precipitate of desire” (Breton, 1937, p.14). For Breton the poetic analogy

between Humanity's surge of desire and Nature is based upon a possible convergence of the two, leading to symbiosis.

Earlier in the research I looked at this desire for symbiosis and the merging of boundaries as a central operative concern in my artistic interest in glazes and in earlier series of pieces.

Breton marvels at mineral formations. His obvious aesthetic interest in the drips is strikingly reminiscent of some of my own description of glazes. The final condition for convulsive beauty (the dissimilarity sought between the object wished for and the object found) is expressed similarly in the idea of the 'happy' accidents and unexpectedness I hope for in glazes. Winnicott's development scale demonstrated that this interest for merging was not operative (or not predominantly operative) in *Edge*. My interest consists in play and differentiation, not in fusion.

In *Mad Love*, where Breton develops the notion of convulsive beauty, the latter is ultimately related to the experience of sexual love, an experience of fusion and overcoming of boundaries. For Winnicott, if love equally comes into play, it is far from being sexual or regressive. Winnicott's love is the condition of differentiation. It is love based upon alterity, not unity. Motherly love? It too has probably strong sexual and erotic elements. Rather, maybe, there are two phases of love, allowing for its evolution in time.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado developed the concept of 'otherness' whereby the unavoidable failure of the loving (merging) impulse leads us to experience the irreparable otherness, the essential heterogeneity of being, which we can only access and accept through poetic faith away from reason. Once the 'other' has been viewed as he/she is not, and unity has proved impossible, it is useful to consider the other as he/she is and endow it with its rich and inexhaustible heterogeneity (Abellan, 1979).

Differentiating thought is the conscience of all things, and it can be accessed through poetic thinking, which remains open to the inexhaustible wealth of both reality and imagination. Machado concludes with a paradoxical indissoluble unity in heterogeneity, which only the poet can address.

In love, in poetic practice, in the transitional space and in the space created by a glaze “thirst and satisfaction are joined together: at once fruit and mouth” (Paz, 1956, p.119-120).

Glaze is the space of desire, a poetic space of love, in both its merging and its differentiating dimensions, which is what the poet René Char demands of poetry: “Realized love of desire remained desire”.

The fundamental nature of this space [erotic space] is lack rather than the possession of plenitude [...] It is not a space that entrenches systems of power, seeking perfect efficiency, comfort, and control over time. Rather it is a revelation of enigmatic depth, of density and uncertainty [...] depth is again mysterious and light recovers its qualities as lux, lumen and splendor and is once again endowed with shadows; desire is exacerbated and, in its bittersweetness, is elevated to a way of life (Pérez-Gómez, 2006, p.64-65).

FAILURE

In one of my various endeavours to give the glaze priority over the form, I had attempted to bring the form into disrepute by limiting it to its supportive role for the glaze through a playful irony of found objects prone to enhance dripping potential (*Edge*). Yet can play and irony alone undermine the importance of form and enhance the importance of glaze in the way I was seeking originally? I was not sure *Edge* and the found objects covered with clay and glaze were the right way forward. I was not completely sure why yet. It had to do with the object's ability (or inability) to be entered and penetrated as if the viewer was now deprived of an entry through and into the glaze. Were the found objects of *Edge* doomed to superficiality? Were they unambiguously only a surface? Had they made impossible any pretence of interiority, even if only illusory? If so, how? I confess my frustration, a sense of failure. Yet, thanks to *Edge* I discovered another dimension of depth: "the deep [had become] a secret absolutely superficial [...] depth [was] nothing but a game, just a fold on a surface" (Foucault, 1980), which Michel Foucault had linked to Nietzsche's Zarathustra.

With this fresh revelation in mind, I embarked on a different body of work: the *Planes*. With hindsight, I believe the conscious idea of this new body of work was to embrace surface and two-dimensionality while retaining the perception of substance, volume, three-dimensionality and interiority: surface and depth.

When I was making the enclosed pieces of *Edge*, I had saved some scraps left over from the making which had won my attention: a mark, a curve, a fold, a form, which I thought were of interest. I had kept them in the hope I would at some point know what to do with them. These, too, were 'found'. I decided to mount them, like a stone on a ring. They were to be shown, looked at. A key element of my approach was that those surfaces to look at were developed along three dimensions, embracing space, creating depth: planes twisted, assembled, bent or imprinted were meant to exist beyond the mere surface, as volumes. Eventually, in the later series of the *Planes*, I dreamed of monochromatic, extra flat canvases, displaying vast areas of pure glaze on a standard abstract plane. I thought I had found a final answer to my quest and that these canvases, these sheets of pure glaze, could resolve the issue of the relationship of glaze to form, surface to volume. But when I opened the first kiln, my

disappointment was huge. All the canvases had cracked. I discarded the pieces on a shelf and set out to model the next load. It wasn't until much later that I eventually 'saw' the pieces, and they triggered a strong aesthetic and emotional resonance in me. Could these cracks and these splits be an important element of the poetics of glaze?

Lucio Fontana had already demonstrated extensively, with his cut canvases, that slits can offer an opening into a dimension beyond the plane. But there is volition (sadism?) in Fontana's cuts that is difficult to find in my accidental slits, which have been forced upon me by the process. Slits happen. Slits fail the will of the artist. Slits have let me down. So much so that at first I did not see in them any artistic potential. Slits express failure. Slits are failure.

But could failure actually be an important element of the poetics of glaze?

Mythology

Mythology shows that failure is very closely associated with the practice of ceramics.

Looking at the role of crafts in mythology, it is striking to observe how blacksmithing has been endowed with positive values, whereas pottery seems to have been associated with lower status, in numerous mythological accounts. Whilst in the Bible there are references in Genesis to the importance of pottery, European mythologies and cosmogonies relating to pottery are scarce, if they exist at all (Ribault, 2009, p.59).

Claude Lévi-Strauss writes:

One might conjecture that, in contrast to ancient China, where potters and blacksmiths were on an almost equal footing, popular European thought viewed the potter's work as a paler version of the smith's art. The latter would then become the sole repository of the magical and mystical values that might also have been conferred on pottery. Smithing and pottery are the two great arts of fire; however, one digs deeper for ore than for clay, metal requires

higher temperatures, and, on the whole, when compared to the smith's, the potter's work looks far from heroic (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.10).

Lévi-Strauss is not completely correct in his assertion that the temperatures of pottery are lower than those of blacksmithing. They are actually pretty similar, if not higher: aluminium melts when it reaches 660°C, and some porcelains can be fired up to 1400°C. Yet this does not weaken Lévi-Strauss's point; on the contrary, in spite of the possibility of heroism associated with working at high temperatures, pottery has never had the prestige of metalwork.

Lévi-Strauss points to the frequently negative attitude towards pottery in the mythology of American Indian peoples who, unlike Europeans, rarely knew metalwork. In his view it is the formlessness of clay from which its plasticity stems that accounts for this negativity: "Pottery can be correlated and opposed to metalwork by the fact that with fire the potter makes soft matter hard, whereas the smith, also urging fire, makes hard metal malleable" (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.19).

It is easy to understand why the ability to make the hard malleable is more impressive and valued than the ability to model what is already soft: metalwork is the expression of the strength and domination of the metalworker over his material. Metal is beaten. Symbolically, in the making process pottery is not an obvious activity in which to show, express or demonstrate male strength. Consequently, pottery was often viewed as a feminine activity, or one reserved for women: in most American Indian peoples it was only women who would work with clay and make pots, and in American Indian mythology, pottery and clay is produced or given by female deities. Pottery is gendered. There are a number of reasons for the fact that a feminine association is ascribed to it. One of these lies in pottery's inability to demonstrate the power and ability to control of those who work with it. Metalwork, on the other hand, is much better suited to a demonstration of pure strength. Man becomes a man when overcoming what resists him.

Lévi-Strauss thought that the higher the temperature, the more evident the power of the practitioner becomes. American Indians did not use glazes, let alone high temperature glazes: they fired at 950°C.

Within the field of European studio pottery, there is a sort of prestige attributed to those who work with higher temperatures. The fact that glaze incorporates metal oxides might be seen to put glaze practitioners on a par again with the blacksmiths. A glaze consists of solid rocks, minerals and metal ores that have been ground and which will eventually turn viscous when melted in the kiln. The ability to transform materials, measured on the scale of hardness and resistance, is similar between the glaze practitioner and the blacksmith: turning hard into soft and not soft into hard, the latter a characteristic of the work of an American Indian potter. Accordingly, glaze, by turning stones and ores into a molten paste, seems better suited to expressing male strength and domination and the majority of 'major' glaze practitioners are male with notable exceptions, such as Lucie Rie or Bente Skjøttgaard. With the birth of independent studio pottery pioneered in France by Bernard de Palissy in the 16th century, the practice of ceramics, and especially glazed ceramics, was frequently a display of heroic and often traditionally virile qualities: solitude, independence, autonomy, will, and physical and intellectual strength. Bernard de Palissy is shown in most French history textbooks burning his own furniture to complete a firing. Ernest Chaplet, determined to do everything alone, reached a quasi-mythological independence. Andoche Praudel, a contemporary French glaze practitioner, once admitted to having chosen his artist's name Andoche (in his local dialect meaning the one who is weak and sick) as a retort to those virile qualities but thus acknowledging their significance.

But if the practice of glaze seems better suited for a display of virile qualities to reverse or override the femininity and corresponding negativity of this gendering traditionally associated with the practice of ceramics, it remains, however, too little known an activity, too recent a practice, and glazes too technical and secret in their composition, to reverse mythologies and cosmogonies. Above all, the practice of glaze shares similar limitations and uncertainties, as does the rest of the field of ceramics. It is possible that glaze faces even greater ones, and the harmless display of virile qualities cannot resist for long the difficult objectivity of ceramics, which, as demonstrated by Lévi-Strauss, has led to very protective behaviours.

In his account Lévi-Strauss demonstrates a link between pottery and jealousy. The women associated with pottery in the American Indians' mythological accounts were

often characterized by their jealousy, and Lévi-Strauss thus unveils and coins the concept of ‘the jealous potter’:

Whatever her name – Mother-Earth, Grandmother of Clay, Mistress of Clay and Earthenware, etc. – the patron goddess of pottery is benefactress. Depending on the versions, humans are indebted to her for the precious raw material or for the shaping, firing, or decorating techniques. But, as we have seen, she is jealous and fussy (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.28).

Jealousy is a way to qualify the constraints forced upon the material. It is what Lévi-Strauss describes as the jealousy of the demiurge: “Imposing a form on matter does not mean simply imposing a discipline. The raw material, pulled out of the limitless range of potentialities, is lessened by the fact that, of all these potentialities, only a few will be realized: all demiurges, from Prometheus to Mukat, have jealous natures” (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.178). “The potter is another demiurge” (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.236), exerting a constraint on a free material. This applies not only to pottery: most art forms impose a form upon a material, but with pottery the distance between material and form is minimal and the transformation is very direct, deprived of intermediate steps. The constraint is all the more significant because the raw material of clay is “the ‘crudest’ of all raw materials known to and used by man. With its coarse appearance and its total lack of organization, it confronts man’s sight and touch, even his understanding, with its primacy and the massive presence of its shapelessness” (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.177).

Lévi-Strauss points to a chain of constraints, and the container which has been shaped (constrained) by the potter will itself later constrain the vegetal and animal substances it holds in order to “culturalise” them.

Lastly, the technical difficulties of making and firing pottery, the whimsical and very risky character of its production (and Lévi-Strauss repeatedly emphasizes the occurrence of cracks, in particular), have generated attitudes and practices of protectiveness and defensiveness. Lévi-Strauss cites the American anthropologist George M. Foster, who has observed the conservative attitude of potters’ families in Mexico and believes that

[The] reason lies in the nature of the productive process itself, which places a premium on strict adherence to tried and proven ways as means of avoiding economic catastrophe. Pottery making is a tricky business at best and there are literally hundreds of points at which a slight variation in materials or process will adversely affect the result. A slight difference in raw materials, in glazes, in paints, in firing temperatures – any of these may mean that a week's or a month's labour is in vain. Hence, economic security lies in duplicating to the best of the potter's ability the materials and processes he knows from experience are least likely to lead to failure. A premium is placed on hewing to a straight and narrow productive path. Straying very far from one side to the other is apt to mean economic tragedy... This breeds a basic conservatism, a caution about all new things, that carries over into the potter's outlook on life itself (Foster, 1965, cited in Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 178-9).

In the field of ceramic glazes, the prevailing culture of secrecy surrounding glaze recipes is another expression of this protective and defensive attitude associated with jealousy. It can be argued, however, that the numerous glaze recipe books available today have successfully put an end to the jealousy of the glaze practitioner. But the glaze practitioner's jealousy is merely a consequence of the materials and of the resistances of the processes themselves, and these conditions can hardly be resolved, even with recipe books. It is common among users (and even authors) of any glaze recipe book to complain that most recipes do not work, but it is indeed very difficult to recreate all the conditions in which a glaze was made. The number and complexity of variables at play are high. What was the exact ceramic body used? What was the firing temperature, and the firing schedule? But first of all, what was in the glaze? Recipes vary in their forms. Most recipes list materials. However, except in the case of the Kolding Glaze Library, the materials have only a generic denomination. Their precise geological and geographical origin, their grade or their type, are rarely listed. Yet a Cornish stone or a potash feldspar can vary enormously in their composition and in their properties, and the glazes that use them vary accordingly. Even where the materials are listed precisely, the chances that they remain the same are low, and follow complex geological circumstances, or more opportunistic commercial or production issues. To compensate for the high volatility of materials, other recipes list not the ingredients but the molecular composition of

the molten glaze. This is especially the case in archaeological finds, where elemental and chemical analysis of a ceramic shard by X-ray fluorescence can provide an accurate reading of the molecular composition of both glaze and body. The molecular formula of the molten glaze can be approached by combining materials available to the practitioner and for which he/she possesses a precise molecular analysis. However, the resulting recreated glazes may be equivalent in their composition, yet very different in their final appearance, according to how the materials differed.

A major interest of the Kolding Glaze Library was precisely its reproducibility. Materials were listed: not vague and imprecise categories, but the exact materials used. The ceramic bodies were known and invariant, as were the firing schedules. Above all, Kolding was accessible. But the school's Ceramics Department closed in 2007 and the library has been transferred to Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center near Copenhagen. Whether the library, now lacking any ongoing testing activity, will still be of interest is uncertain.

It is the complexity of the process of glaze which makes it difficult, demanding and resistant to access. Jealousy is a protective behaviour, induced by this complexity.

With the issue of recipes now raised I shall risk a comparison with cooking. Culinary recipes rarely provide cooks with similar difficulties. The ingredients of cooking are often considered key to the success of a dish, yet their choice is intuitive, and using them appropriately is easy and immediate for those who wish to do so without resorting to complex molecular analysis. Lévi-Strauss draws a similar parallel between the potter's kiln and the cooking fire, but he points to the double difference highlighted in American Indian mythology:

First, cooking fire was conquered by humans, who had to fight either animals (i.e., nature opposing culture) or the people Above (in that case, earthlings still in their natural state oppose supernatural, celestial beings). On the other hand, when pottery is at stake, humans do not identify with either side of the conflict. Placed *between* the Snakes and the Birds, they act more as witnesses to a battle that does not involve them. Instead of taking responsibility or initiative in the action, they become passive beneficiaries or

accomplices. Second, [...] all the myths about the origin of cooking fire agree on one point (actually they agree with experience too): conquering fire was a difficult achievement for humans, but, once they had succeeded, fire was theirs forever. But in their possession and practice of pottery, they are, on the contrary, constantly challenged, for the rivalry between the powers Above and the powers Below never comes to an end. Small as their part may be in the cosmic struggle, men are contaminated by the spirit of jealousy that animates these contending powers. Consequently, the practice of pottery is subject to countless rituals and fussy, cautionary measures, and this does not fail to affect the craftsmen's moral disposition (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.48-9).

The myths concerning pottery points out an important difference between the fire of cooking and the fire of ceramics: while the former can be won and dominated once and for all, the latter is always threatened by great difficulties inherent to its very nature: a nature both elusive and unattainable, a nature of flux where a war seems always to be waged.

The revealing of the jealous female potter in American Indian mythology is linked to central issues for my research: strength and power, ability and control. Pottery proves unsuitable as a medium to express the former characteristics and seems doomed, or at best constantly threatened, by failure. In the face of such difficulties, is jealousy the inescapable fate of the practice of glaze? Or can weakness and impotence, inability and lack of control become the basis for an artistic practice incorporating the accidental and the flawed: cracks, splits, fissures, breaks, mistakes, failures, fault lines, chasms, gaps, splits, seams, wounds, traumas, questions and flux – endowing it with the very essence of its poetics?

Ceramics by accident

In 1810, just a few months before he shot himself on the beach of Wannsee, the German dramatist Heinrich von Kleist composed a brief, curious essay about the perils of trying too hard (Kleist, 1810). Framed as a conversation between the narrator and a ballet dancer he meets in a public garden, 'On the Puppet Theatre' unfolds as a series of parables, all circling around a certain quality of unselfconscious grace. The ballet dancer speaks about the mechanical grace of marionettes, which, unlike human dancers, are incapable of affectation. In response, the narrator recalls an incident that occurred after he had been swimming with a modest but uncommonly graceful young man of about sixteen. Shortly beforehand, they had gone together to see the 'Spinario', the famous Roman statue of a youth removing a thorn from his foot. As the young man was drying himself after swimming, he sat down and rested his foot on a stool. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he was immediately reminded of the statue. The narrator noticed the resemblance as well, but decided to challenge the boy's vanity and told him that he was seeing ghosts. The young man blushed and lifted his foot again to demonstrate, but failed to produce the same effect. He lifted his foot again and again, but in vain; he was utterly incapable of reproducing his original gesture. "From that day, as though from that very moment, an inconceivable transformation began in that young man," the narrator recalls. "He would stand whole days before the mirror; one charm after the other fell from him. An invisible and incomprehensible force, like an iron net, seemed to spread over the free play of his gestures, and when one year had passed not a trace could be detected of that sweetness which had once so delighted the sight of all who surrounded him" (ibid.)

The debilitating self-consciousness of the young man who tried too hard to look like a statue is a curse that can afflict any artist, at any time. Because of this, the world is crowded with "painterly" paintings and "writerly" prose and "architectural" architecture – art that spends a little too much time in front of the mirror, admiring its own artistry. "Such blunders are unavoidable, since we have eaten from the tree of knowledge," Kleist's narrator comments. "But paradise is locked and the Cherub is behind us. We must make a journey

around the world, to see if a back door has perhaps been left open” (ibid.) For Kleist, the Fall of Man into self-awareness was not an event in the Biblical past, but something that is happening all the time. At its most profound level, his essay is a meditation on the human condition of knowing both too much and not enough. But it is also a manifesto of sorts, an effort to imagine an art that would partake of the unself-conscious grace of animals, children, and marionettes – an art that would succeed, paradoxically, by not trying too hard (Fineman, 2004, [pages not known]).

In the field of ceramics, practices, styles and standards are very diverse. However, this concept of unselfconscious grace is an important element structuring both the practice and the appreciation of a certain kind of ceramics. Bernard Leach, when translating Soetsu Yanagi’s thoughts, raised that very issue of self-consciousness:

I have had a sense of doubt on one main issue - the relationship between the conscious artist and the comparatively unconscious craftsman. Soetsu Yanagi turns to the artist-craftsman to act as the pilot in this dilemma because of his greater awareness, thereby indicating the power that has come to conscious man through the evolution of intellect. The results are not the same, Bach is not plainsong, Michelangelo is not Mokujiki, and Hamada’s bowls are not O Ido. But they are as flowers, cultivated or wild, and who is to say which are more beautiful at that round table of Heaven (Leach, 1972, p.98).

In spite of this, Yanagi’s book celebrates the Unknown Craftsman, and with it the idea of an irreflexive and unpretentious practice (Yanagi, 1972).

Similarly, Margaret Medley, who pioneered a practical approach to the study of Chinese pottery of the Song dynasty, entitled her research *The Chinese Potter* (Medley, 1976) – equally a conceptual celebration of artistic anonymity.

In the field of ceramics, this quality of unselfconscious grace underlies the operating concepts of the material, the natural and the accidental.

In Japan, aesthetics remain very much that of the natural, and ceramics often exemplify this. Wabi-sabi is a quintessential concept in Japanese aesthetics. It was defined by Leonard Koren thus:

Things wabi-sabi may exhibit the effects of accident [...] or they may show the result of just letting things happen by chance [...] Things wabi-sabi are suggestive of natural process. [...] They can appear coarse and unrefined. They are usually made from materials not far removed from their original condition [...] Their craftsmanship may be impossible to discern [...] Conventional aids to discernment, like the origins and names of the object makers, are of no wabi-sabi consequence (Koren, 1994, p. 62-72).

Earlier than this, Chinese ceramics of the Tang and Song dynasty expressed similar concerns for the natural and the accidental:

In China, the clays are often coarse and usually exposed, the glazes are thick, and crackled, and run, and occasionally skip, the brushwork is vigorous and calligraphic, not realistic and “finished”, the throwing and moulding are frank, and accidental kiln effects are frequent. The Chinese point of view is that all these qualities can be used and that they are incidental to nature rather than accidental to man (Leach, 1940).

The two concepts of natural and accidental are applicable to glazes in which “crackles, streaks, embossings, ruffles, soufflés, flambés” are happy accidents on the surface of a vessel which often account for the specific interest of monochromatic glazes and their depth (Blanc, 1882, p.390-391). They are also applicable to forms where the irregular can become a quality, and where shapes can be sought to translate an essence of the material.

Most of this draws on Japanese and Chinese Song dynasty aesthetics. But there are early Western conceptual counterparts: Lucretia, Virgil, Epicurus, and Giordano Bruno, for example (Winter, 1999). Later, the British author and psychoanalyst Marion Milner similarly advocated an artistic practice that would succeed, paradoxically, by not trying too hard. In her best-known book *On Not Being Able to*

Paint she admits compellingly to her own inability to paint, an activity she momentarily replaces with the practice of doodling, allowing for another kind of thinking to take place through absent-mindedness and vacuity. In this, Milner is saying that “the creativity of the self cannot be sought, it can only be found” (Pajaczkowska, 2008, p.48).

As an artist, my interest encompasses the accidental and the natural, the self-born rather than the man-made. I have developed an interest in ceramic glazes that goes beyond their use as a colour and a mere pigment. As Charles Holme suggested, in a groundbreaking article calling for the development of studio pottery based on Japanese aesthetics, written 40 years before the work of Bernard Leach, “the most successful productions of recent days are those in which the potter, by the happy choice and manipulation of his clay and glazes, and his thorough understanding of the mysteries of firing, has rendered himself independent of the painter” (Holmes, 1901, p.48). I believe ceramic glazes exceed human creativity especially through their imperfections and accidents. This has much to do with surprise and wonderment.

My pieces are often made in a random, accidental way, hoping to show the nature of the material rather than human imagination and creativity dictating its shape. I seem to want to efface myself in the face of Nature. Powerlessness or lucidity? With porcelain, there is not always room for the practitioner's ego; he must cut himself off from his preoccupations. Submission? It is rather a matter of discovering a new relationship to Nature: complicity and exchange. I am aiming at a friendly relationship with Nature. My plan is not Promethean, or domineering. Like a surfer, I slide, and go along with the wave. By not trying to produce beautiful, well-crafted ceramics, I hope to allow the beauty of the material to enter the work. “We normally consider stability to be the constant in life, and accidents to be the exception, but it’s exactly the opposite. In reality the accident is the rule and stability is the exception” (Fineman, 2004, p. 23). Many of my pieces are the result of chance, luck and accidents. But it is an incongruous concept, that of artist-cum-spectator. It contradicts the inscription over the main entrance of the Victoria and Albert Museum: “the excellence of every art must consist in the complete accomplishment of its purpose.” Can withdrawal, or even absence, constitute an artistic practice? Is it opportunism? Is it empty? Is

withdrawal even possible? Is it a matter of degree of involvement? Is it a paradoxical concept, if we bear in mind that this contemplative artist is also in part a technician, and that some planning and mastering is always necessary? It should not be forgotten, however, that within the potter's intentions are included all sorts of variations depending on the nature and manner of the use of his materials, ranging from the fortuitous and often highly effective skipping of a glaze to wide differences in its colour and quality, and that so long as they do not involve structural weaknesses, or by their eccentricity distract from the beauty of the pot, they are acceptable to him. But is a structural weakness an acceptable attribute by which to judge the reason that some accidents become artful and others don't? Is this just another contradiction, or a key to understanding that what we call the accident might in fact only be a cusp, or an unlikely balance?

Part of my artistic practice involves creating the internal and external conditions that allow accidents to enrich my work without overwhelming it. What this requires is a delicate balance between intention and improvisation, a continual negotiation between the structuring demands of the eye and mind and the inchoate richness of materials.

An important question is that of self-consciousness, and whether a practice based on the accidental can be sustainable in the long term. What's an accident if you can provoke and master it? Without assigning a moral to the accident, need accidents be authentic and honest?

How do you raise the accidental to the level of an art practice?

Throughout my research I have been confronted repeatedly with those questions. Before embarking on the PhD my artistic practice was based on the accidental. Essentially, this concerned the first part of the making: when throwing porcelain on the potter's wheel I was confronted with the occurrence of the unplanned. Yet glazes and the firing process seemed relatively accident-free. The issue of self-consciousness was very present in this process, as it became difficult for me to escape the reality of the learning curve, and the prospect of an accident-free

throwing process loomed. It was the emergence of an artistic pose, akin to the loss of innocence, that I most dreaded.

When embarking on my PhD research the issue of the accidental soon re-surfaced, unexpectedly, however, and raising different questions. In the first part of the research, in the Autumn term of 2006, involving a series of illusory objects (a body of work related to the perception of depth through ceramic glazes), I soon faced an artistic dilemma: illusion required control, but my artistic sensibility on the other hand, called for accidents. The process of using glazes, which I had believed to be accident-free, was in fact just as accident-rich as the process of throwing. What I was after in a glaze was precisely the unplanned: apparent imperfections and surprises. In the 19th century, the art critic Charles Blanc believed that accidental variations of monochromatic glazes were responsible for their artistic interest and for the perception of depth they conveyed (Blanc, 1882, p.390-391). In this first body of work, one of the objectives of my research on the fish-scale glaze was to understand its appeal and interest within my own artistic practice. As a finished surface, this interest is probably in the depth it creates – but I believe that my work is about more than the slick realization of ideas (or effects). I am as much, if not more, concerned with the realization of the thing itself, and what happens during the process of making – or failing to make – the accidental, the unplanned. Therefore the interest in fish-scale is also partly grounded in process. And as a process its interest lies in its occurrence as a natural phenomenon and in the possibility of faults and accidents. In itself the fish-scale glaze already represents an accident, as the scales are, in effect, cracks.

The series of *Enclosed Objects* that eventually resulted in the *Cobblestones* were subjected to an accident-rich glazing process: the first pieces not only cracked, but most of them were completely stuck to the kiln shelves. Eventually I started using these accidents which had destroyed the first pieces and transformed them into drops and slits.

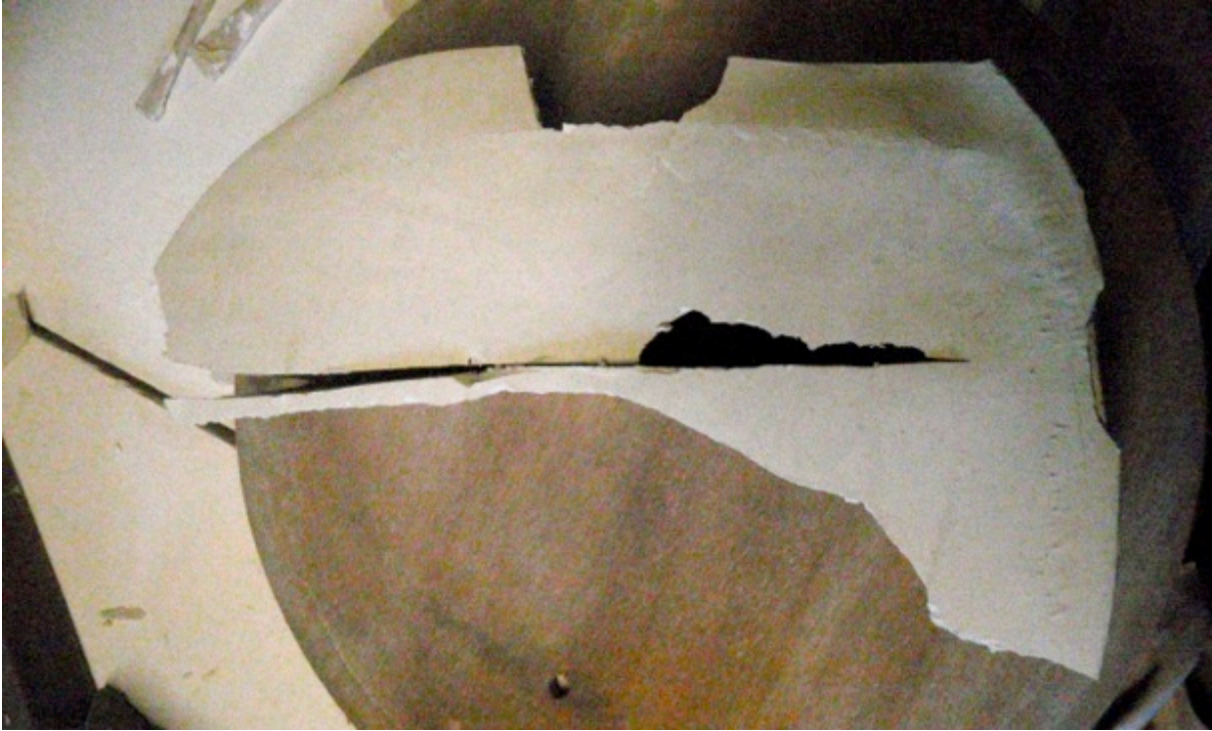
With the *Cobblestones*, the unplanned became the rule, and the *Cobblestones* are a collection of idiosyncrasies of glaze recipes, materials, firing protocols and kiln mapping. There is an editing of sorts prior to reaching the cobblestone stage, as the

glazes are first tested on tiles or shards, but each cobblestone remains a test, and the resulting ensemble is a celebration of the unplanned: glaze peels, crazes, pinholes, specks, flakes, blisters, bloats, crawls, dimples, streaks, over-fires, runs, drips – because they are fired on firebricks the *Cobblestones* escape fatal destruction when stuck, and can be easily unstuck and polished – the porcelain slumps, twists, cracks, warps, sometimes dunts and breaks (Fraser, 1986). There is no editing of the *Cobblestones*. They are all kept.

With the latest *Planes* series, the accidental occurs at various stages, as if it were now the core of the whole process, or as if the process itself has become the main driver for the work. Firstly, the *Planes* are made of slabs or remains of slabs that have somehow caught my eye. These slabs are fragile; they often evolve as bits break.



Plane broken at modelling stage



Plane broken at modelling stage

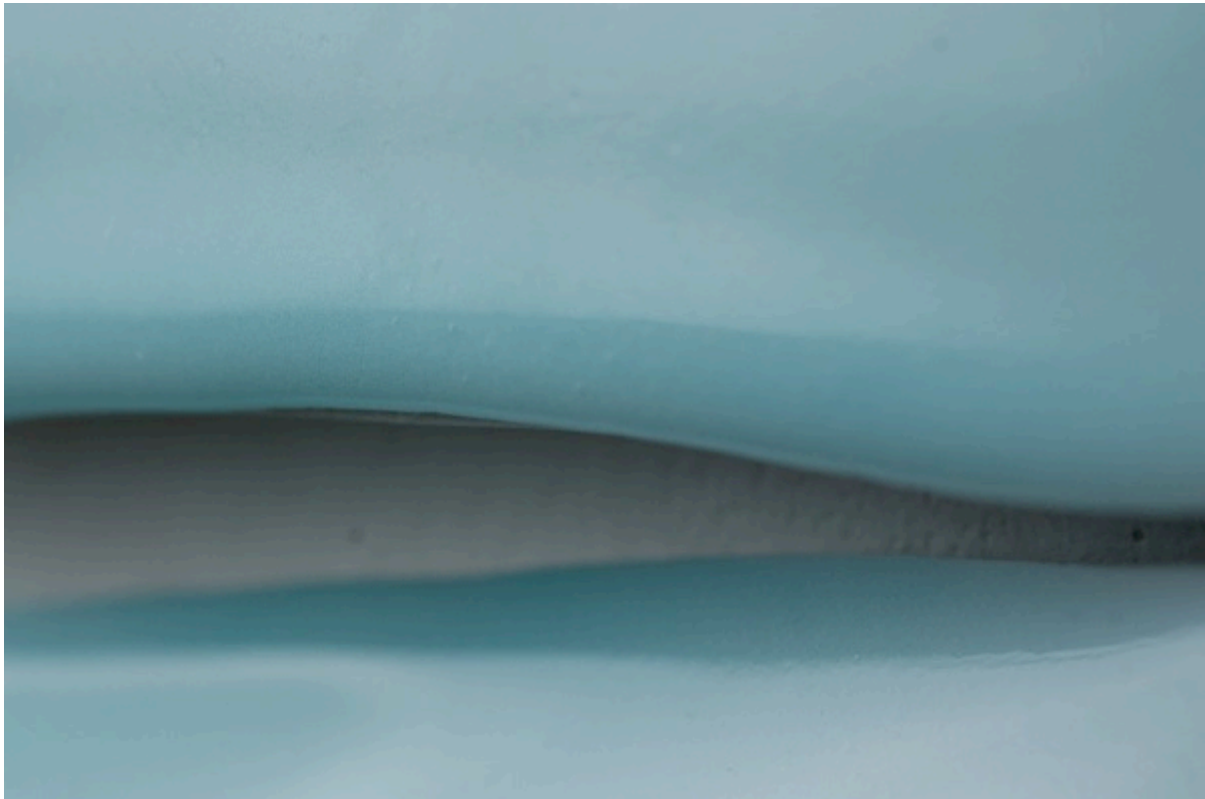
I am faced with a set of difficult questions, a constant state of interrogation and flux. Are these modelling accidents acceptable, or not? Once broken, is it the same piece? Is it a new piece? Can a piece evolve? Is there such a thing as the 'death' of the piece? If a piece has 'died', can its remains turn into another piece? Who decides? Is artistic licence legitimate? Does it collide with the concept of the intentionality of the maker? Does someone need to be responsible? The maker? Can the material be responsible? Is it chance? Is it bad luck? Is it morale? Is it opportunism? Does morale matter? Can the intention focus on just the process, disregarding the end result? As with the paintings of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock, the work was "discovered within the process of making the work. It was not prefigured but looked-for as a phenomenon within the process" (Smithson, 1953, p.44). Yet there is an obvious difference between the process paintings of Dubuffet and Pollock and my own practice: the process of the former seem to evolve through addition, whereas accidents in my process mainly retrieve: the break, the slit, the hole, all refer to absence. Other painters, such as Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri addressed absence in a similar way.

If the unplanned becomes the rule, are accidents still possible, or are they integrated within the overall focus on the process? When the first slit happened on one of the

flat planes, it was a real surprise, something that I had neither planned for nor expected. It was a real accident – and I must admit it was a disappointment. I had dreamt of a glazed surface that could lead the viewer to dream poetically about the material. I was left with slits.



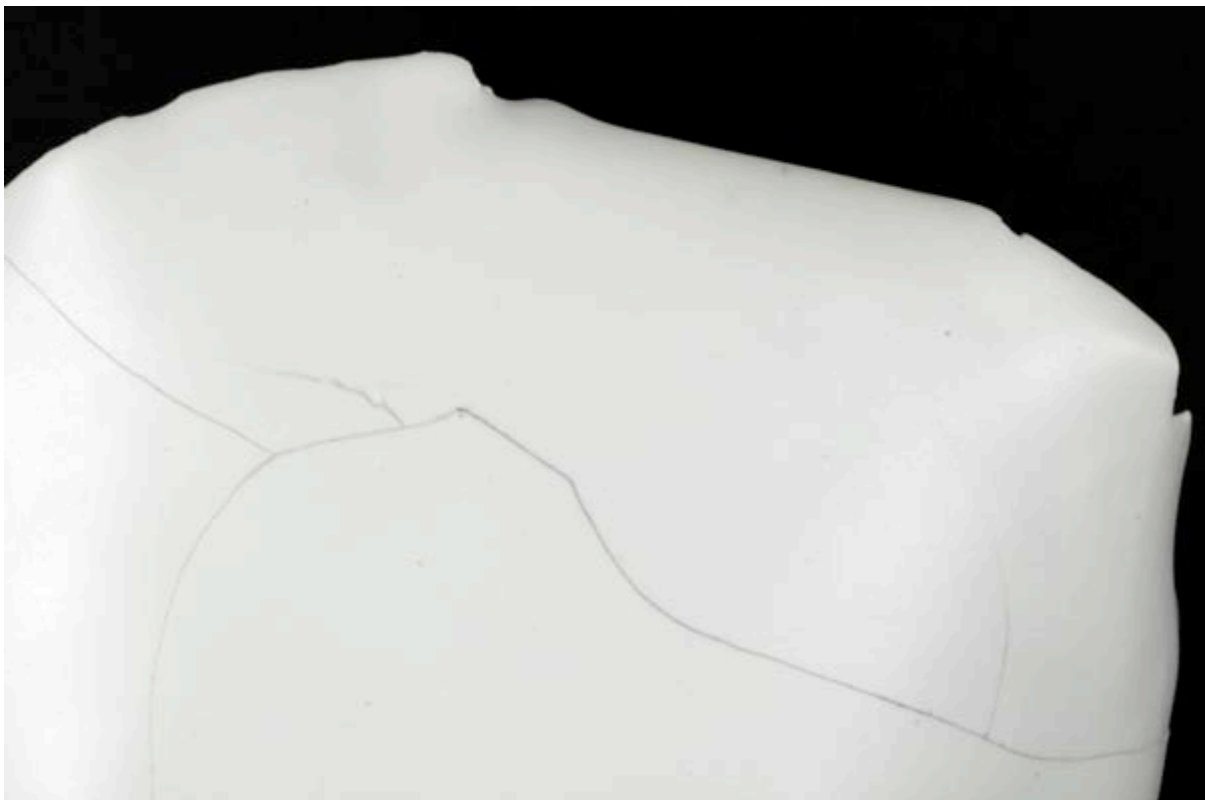
One of the first Planes, with slits



One of the first slits

I had hoped for substance. Here I was with a void. Where I had expected surface, I had a hole, an absence, nothing. The slits did not make sense immediately, but they did eventually: I will discuss them later in the research. In the pieces that followed, I accepted them fully. I looked for them, provoked them. Eventually, by deciding to make more of the flat pieces I also decided to make more slits. I never actually made them myself, but I knew they would occur. I could soon anticipate where and how the slits would happen, so that I started playing with the flow of the glaze and the effect of gravity on it, to let the glaze run into, over, or around them. Have the slits thus become only half-accidents? It is tempting to link the issue of control and reproducibility to its legitimacy as a craftwork, but this is certainly more problematic a legitimization in the case of an artwork. Moreover, some amazing glazes, in spite of their being documented, often escape control and reproducibility. Surprise is an important element of the poetics of glaze. Shimizu Uichi, whose fish-scale glaze was the prompt for this research work, wrote about the fish-scale glaze: “I was amazed by those new pieces, and though they were mine they were totally different from what I had anticipated. With this sort of things happening, I could not, would not, stop making ceramics” (Uichi, 1996, [unpaginated] [my translation]).

But how late can the surprise occur? When is the piece a finished piece? Painters often say a painting is never finished until it is finished, implying that a painting can always be corrected, amended. Instinctively, one could say that this is certainly not the case with ceramics, and the glazed ceramic is obviously completed once the kiln has been opened. True, accidents happen before this, in the previous stages of making: the pouring of the slab, the turning over of the slab, the modelling of the slab, the construction of the underlying structure, the biscuit firing (where the first cracks appear), the polishing (accident-prone), the glazing, and eventually the firing. It seems that it might stop at the point when a piece is ready for display. But is this really the case? In some of my glazes much more happens once this has occurred: cracks form, and I sometimes colour them at different stages of their appearance. Some pieces were accidentally broken later, when removing the excess glaze or while being stored or handled. Some were fixed. On two of them, the lines the repair created on the surface became part of the work.



Slab, porcelain and glaze, 2010, 36 x 32 x 14 cm – the plane was broken after the firing and glued back together

But a similar attempt to repair failed with other pieces, as the breaks did not seem to become part of the work. These were breaks that seemed to remain exterior to the work, which did not integrate with it.

Transitional space and failure

The concept of transitional space has surfaced on several occasions in this research. Early on, when developing a classification of glazes, my artistic interest in an ambivalent solid liquidity, as expressed in the processes of running and drips, has led me to raise the hypothesis that glaze could function as a transitional space as defined by Winnicott. With *Edge*, I developed the former hypothesis to tackle the issue of play in my work, and pointed to the transitional character of the installation itself.

Building on the significance of failures and accidents in glazes, I would like to further develop the concept of glaze as transitional space. What is at stake in my artistic use of glaze is precisely the transition from the illusion of power and control to the experience of objectivity through failure. The process of glaze is a separation. From an illusory, magical union with the world, I eventually accommodate otherness and objectivity.

For Winnicott, the infant experiences omnipotence, the illusion of magical control (over the mother's breast). The process of disillusionment (the termination of breastfeeding) is the discovery of objectivity and separation, and of lack of magical control. This process of illusion-disillusionment is triggered by what Winnicott describes as the 'maternal failure of the good-enough mother': "The good-enough mother, as I have stated, starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure" (Winnicott, 1971, p.10). This 'failure' of the mother is her gradual pulling back from the child. This process – if carefully and gradually orchestrated as weaning and not mere termination – helps the child cope with the disillusion through the creation of

transitional objects or spaces. The transitional space is a neutral area of experience, which links the self with the world in ways that are not challenged.

Ceramics and the process of glaze can offer a transitional space such as this, an intermediate area of experience belonging to the realm of illusion, and which represents a transition from a state of being merged and in magical control to a state of being in relation to something outside and separate.

Eventually the successful process of illusion-disillusionment amounts to making fulfilment from failure.

Lévi-Strauss's jealous potter demonstrates precisely that what is at stake in the process of ceramics is a looming separation.

Jealousy can be defined either as a feeling emanating from the desire to hold on to something or someone that is being taken away from you or as the desire for something or someone you do not possess. We can say, then, that jealousy tends to support or create a state of conjunction whenever there is a state or threat of disjunction (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p.173).

Jean Girel, a contemporary ceramist, writes: "Firing is always a separation" (Girel, 2004, p.63, [my translation]).

It is as if the process of creating ceramics concentrates both the most direct form of expression, modelling the clay (there is no space between the hand and its imprint on the material) and the most distant, the process of firing (which includes the process of glaze). Through the immediacy and directness of modelling the clay, the ceramist experiences the illusion of omnipotence and magical control. What follows is a gradual process of disillusionment, an intermediate area between primary creativity and objective perception. But the process of glaze itself provides the ceramist initially with some illusion of control and domination: after all, s/he is turning stones into liquid. But the variables are many and complex: the transfer from a test tile to another, bigger, form, or from one form to another, often brings the first disappointments and frustrations. Slight variations in materials due to a change of supplier – or worse, of the mining seam itself – can have tremendous consequences

for the finished glazes. Materials which are identical in chemical formula can be very different in their nature, and their effect on the finished glaze differs dramatically. Further factors can have tremendous consequences too: how the kiln is set, how kilns differ from one another (not to mention the obvious difference of the fuel used), the weather and its effect on kiln's draught – and, of course, the human factor, itself a very rich source of mistakes and surprises.

These challenges that the firing and the process of glaze impose upon the very possibility of control can be fought against: they are what Lévi-Strauss's jealous potters try in vain to oppose. This is the reason for what Foster describes as the forceful conservatism and reluctance to innovation and change of potter families in Mexico.

In China, during the reign of Xianzong (1465-1487) the Chenghua emperor's approach to the production of imperial porcelain goods has been described as both extravagant and ruinously expensive. Under his rule, Chinese imperial porcelain was viewed as 'perfect porcelain': "the extent of quality control was such that imperfect imperial porcelains were deliberately smashed [...] While such high standards ensured the production of flawless porcelains, they drained the treasury and the next emperor inherited a legacy of depleted funds" (Scott, 1995, p.6).

But what is the alternative to jealousy, conservatism, financial ruin? And if the difficulty of control is eventually admitted, does it imply blind acceptance, renunciation, passivity, fatalism, lack of demand, self- or object-indulgence and the impossibility of progress, whether scientific, technical or even artistic? Is it mere opportunism and deception? Winnicott stated: "Should an adult make claims on us for our acceptance of the objectivity of his subjective phenomena we discern or diagnose madness" (Winnicott, 1971, p.18). Now, should an adult (the glaze practitioner) make claims on us for our acceptance of the subjectivity of an objective phenomenon (the glaze) we discern or diagnose deception and fraud? This is an important point: there is a paradox at the root of the transitional phenomena. But this paradox (and the acceptance of this paradox) is key to the theory itself.

The essential feature in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena (according to my presentation of the subject) is the paradox, and the acceptance of the paradox: the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object. I tried to draw attention to this aspect of transitional phenomena by claiming that in the rules of the game we all know that we will never challenge the baby to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it? (Winnicott, 1971, p.89)

The transitional phenomenon bears some risks but it is important not to mistake its very nature as itself a danger, and the fact that glaze is ultimately not mine, and that it remains exterior and a natural occurrence does not make it less suited to being an object of artistic practice but it certainly makes it all the more challenging.

In some ways, 'transitional' can be a misleading word, as it implies that it is only a moment between two stages. However, its reality is probably far more complex and fluctuating. It is more akin to a never-ending process than to a completed evolution. It is a process which vacillates between subjectivity and objectivity, illusion and withdrawal, fusion and separation, its completion and its start. And Winnicott insists that "the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that the relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.)" (Winnicott, 1971, p.18). This state of flux opens the possibility of play. Play, according to one of its meanings, defines a free or unimpeded motion (as of a part of a machine). It is precisely because the terms are not set that play can occur.

The process of glaze, as a transitional area between subjectivity and objectivity, the made and the born, art and material, control and accident, allows play this central role. But if one of the elements becomes dominant it prevents the very possibility of play, and its grace, its poetic character, is precisely the tension and the difficult balance between the two.

Failure is one of the elements of the process of illusion/disillusionment. Its role is key in triggering the transitional phenomenon and play. But 'failure' is hardly an end in itself. It is instrumental, and as such it needs to be carefully orchestrated not to fail the child irreparably, and overwhelm it (or the artist) and with this the possibilities of both play and flux. "If illusion-disillusionment has gone astray the infant cannot get to so normal a thing as weaning, nor to a reaction weaning, and it is then absurd to refer to weaning at all. The mere termination of breastfeeding is not a weaning" (Winnicott, 1971, p.13).



Flat slab 'Pacman', porcelain and glaze, 2011, 34 x 24 x 3 cm

In the latest of the flat pieces, the slits – a clear symbol of separation and disjunction – have never been designed, drawn or made. They just occur. They first appear as very thin dunts which look like hair cracks, after the pieces have been biscuit-fired. Yet these lines do not always mean they will turn into slits. So I began to play with them by tilting the shelves on which they would be glaze fired, hoping for wonders. What the play between glaze, slits and gravity eventually entails is always uncertain. For me the slits are an element of play before they are a symbol of separation. Among the slit pieces, some broke completely. I also broke a number of them while handling them. I tried to recompose some of these by sticking them together on an acrylic base. When they are not lines but slits there is no possibility for a drawing. They remain mere slits. And when the slit is a break, that is when the play ended with one element completely superseding the other, I am afraid the piece loses its poetic tension. It ceases to be a transitional space. It is resolved and unambiguous.

If movement, flux, ambiguity and irresolution is a key element of the poetic, it would be illusory (and contradictory) to call it a resolved matter. It never is. At the very moment when the poetic seems to be reached it always escapes and dissolves, just as Orpheus, in gazing back at Eurydice, made her disappear.

In the final *Planes* (series 6, entitled 'Re-assembled' but they could also be called 'Separated') all the works are composed of several pieces. Mostly this is because the original work broke into several elements, but one of the pieces was originally conceived as 2 elements. I believe all the pieces show, however, what I have called poetic tension, but it is difficult (or dishonest) to understand that tension as merely a balance between control and accident. Accident has taken over. Moreover, the slits were not only an accidental material occurrence, as I did break some of the pieces by way of 'clumsiness'. Even the slits in earlier pieces, which had been quite authentically material-driven, became partly artist-driven once I decided to risk a similar piece with dunts again. The desire to play is an important element behind those slits, but it is difficult to admit that I attempted to play in the clumsy accidents I produced while handling the pieces.

That those pieces are less ambiguous because they are properly broken, 'separated', does not necessarily mean they have lost any poetic dimension.

Psychoanalysis could probably help to find some meaning in even so trivial a parapraxis as the breaking of an object. "Dropping, knocking over and breaking objects are acts which seem to be used very often to express unconscious trains of thought, as analysis can occasionally demonstrate [...] (Freud, 1901, p.227). Trauma, grief, loss, attachment, separation are some of the likely findings. Freud's insight here is that the difference between unconscious experience and conscious life is made most evident in trauma, when we see the unknown depth of the self through a mistake, a wound, an error. The latter are feared not only because they are simply different from accepted conventions, but because they are a portal into that other logic of the unconscious, into the deep.

But psychological depth alone is not a guarantee of a poetic dimension of some kind.

So where does the poetic dimension remain?

Can unambiguous failure also lead to the poetic?

The poetics of failure

For some – poets, artists, and theoreticians – failure is inherent in the poetic. Poetry is viewed as a desperate attempt, and it is doomed to failing.

The poet Arthur Rimbaud stopped writing poetry at the age of 20 and chose silence in spite of the tremendous recognition his poems brought. But in a letter to his friend Delahaye in 1875 Rimbaud writes one of his last poems:

'Dream'
We are hungry in the barracks
It's true...
Emanation, explosions,
A genius: I am the gruère!
Lefebvre : Keller!
The genius : I am the Brie!
The soldiers are cutting on their bread:
That's life!
The genius – I am the Roquefort!
It will be the death of us!...
I am the gruère
And the Brie... etc.

Waltz

They have come to join us, Lefebvre and I, etc.

(Rimbaud, 1875, cited by Santi, 2007, p. 99-100 [my translation])

At the peak of his art, with the eruption of the soldiers' barracks and cheeses, the fall, the irony, the dissonance, Rimbaud seems to celebrate the death of poetry, and "he renounces with a horrible violence the claims of poetry" (Bonnefoy, 1964, cited by Santi, 2007, p.100 [my translation]). Eventually Rimbaud will forever remain silent, but his silence, too, is a form of protest.

The 'apoems' of Henri Pichette similarly include a questioning of poetry. The 'a' of the 'apoem' indicates a privative nature. According to Pichette (Pichette, 1947), 'apoetry' calls for a new handling of poetic material through writing described as 'barbarian-rhetoric' to produce works in prose or verses, that firstly, do not conform to the established rules and objectives of poetry (for Pichette this implies 'manipulated' or 'installed'); secondly, that are written against the rules of established schools or movements, as the works the latter produce are predictable, stereotyped and mundane as a result of a system that stifles creativity, and thirdly, which demand from their author the greatest freedom of expression and a refusal to compromise. Pichette's questioning was not Rimbaud's silence, and even if he first demonstrated the failure of a certain type of poetry, his own was not merely negative and desperate but suggested a positive and hopeful attitude.

POETS

Is it because the verb
Calls you at the edge of dawn
And highlights your weaknesses,
That you are called cranks?
If your duty is still heresy,
May you be corrected
And understood. There was an intention,
As you are truly feeling cold
For the poor devils thrown in the midst of winter
Of this century
And warm
For those beautiful souls who understand
Eternal damnation

(Pichette, 1962, [my translation])

A similar attitude was espoused by the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, who, in a forceful challenge to the dominant position of the poetry of fellow Chilean Pablo Neruda, proposed an anti-poetry. It was an attempt to change the dominant form of poetry from being purely decorative and ornamental to embracing both the experience of the quotidian and colloquial language.

But while opposing and criticising the lyrical and sentimental tradition in poetry as a dead end, Parra also emphasizes the very limitations and failures of his own poetic and anti-poetic endeavours:

[...]

My poetry may well lead nowhere:

“The laughter in this book is false!” my

detractors will argue,

“Its tears artificial!”

“Instead of sighing on these pages, one

yawns”

“He stamps his feet like an infant”

“The author expresses himself by means of

sneezes”

Agreed: I invite you to burn your ships,

Like the Phoenicians, I am trying to make my

own alphabet.

“Why bother the public then?” my friendly

readers will ask themselves:

“If the author himself begins by criticizing

his writings,

What can we expect from them?”

Watch out, I’m not criticizing anything

Or, better yet, I’m exalting my point of view,

I’m proud of my limitations

[...]

(Parra, 1954, cited and translated by Grossman, 1975, p.49-50)

Failure is not merely a criticism aimed at other forms of poetry but is quite possibly at the very heart of the poetic endeavour.

For another French poet, Georges Bataille, poetry is the will of 'the Impossible', and its justification lies in its failing to ever attain it:

The overwhelming strength of poetry is situated outside the fine moments it reaches: compared to its failure poetry crawls. [...] [the movement of poetry] reaches completion in its opposite: in a sentiment of the impotence of poetry. Poetry which is not hoisted up to the powerlessness of poetry remains the emptiness of poetry (beautiful poetry) (Bataille, 1945, p.216).

Poetry is necessarily inhabited by failure. Bataille calls for, and practises, a poetry which seems broken and failing. There are remnants of verses and poetic structures, but only as traces or ruins. Paradoxically Bataille's poetic emerges from its own failures and is strengthened by the contrast between the disillusioned memory of its successes and the obviousness of its shortcomings. Bataille strives to commingle the poetic and that which denies it, to find a poetry whose heights always bear in them the promise of the fall (Santi, 2007). Through the violence (and laughter) that inhabits his poems, Bataille creates a dynamic of refusal, which he first summed up under the concept (and book title) of *The Hatred of Poetry*: "Poetry is outside the law. Yet to accept poetry changes it into its opposite, mediating an acceptance [...] Poetry is whatever one may do, a negation of itself" (Bataille, 1945, p.216-217). For Bataille, poetry is a perpetual movement of dissent, and as such it does not, and cannot, reach completion, or any form of stasis (among which might be acceptance) without negating itself. Later, Bataille changed the naming of his concept and book from *The Hatred of Poetry* to *The Impossible*. It is the impossibility of poetry which inhabits Bataille's poetry, and endows it with its poetic dimension. Poetry seems lost for him, but it is its presence as an obsessive absence, trying to safeguard it respectfully and disrespectfully, which calls it again into being. (Santi, 2007) ... or not! "I approach poetry: but only to miss it" (Bataille, 1947, p.218).

'I throw myself among the dead'

The night is my nudity
the stars are my teeth
I throw myself among the dead
dressed in white sunlight

Death dwells in my heart
like a little widow
she sobs she is a coward
I'm afraid
I could vomit

The widow laughs to the skies
and rips the birds to pieces

At my death
the horse teeth of the stars
whinny with laughter I death

blank death
moist grave
one-armed sun
the death-toothed gravedigger
effaces me
the raven-winged angel

cries

glory to thee

I am the emptiness of caskets
and the absence of myself
in the whole universe

the horns of joy
trumpet madly
and the sun's bull's-eye
explodes

death's thunder
fills the universe

too much joy
turns back the fingernails.

I imagine
in the infinite depth
the deserted expanse
different from the sky that I see
no longer containing
those glittering points of light
but sheets of flame
greater than a sky
dazzling like the daybreak

formless abstraction striated with fractures
heap of inanities
of things forgotten
here the subject I
there the object universe littered with dead notions
where I throw out the rubbish

the impotent gestures
the gasps
the shrill cock-crows of ideas

o manufactured nothingness
in the factory of infinite vanity
like a trunk of false teeth

I leaning on the trunk
I feel
my desire to vomit desire
o collapse
ecstasy from which I fall
[...]

(Bataille, 1947, p.209-213, translated Hurley, 1991, p.147-153)

Throughout this research I believe my work and the practice of glaze demonstrate common elements with the poetics of Bataille's 'Impossible'.

Obviously, the works in the *Planes* series partake of a similar logic as that of 'failing poetry', as their cuts and slits recall precisely what can not be attained with glaze: glaze is elusive, unattainable. It can be dreamed of, but it can hardly ever be projected. And if it is sometimes approached, it will eventually escape and fail any attempt to reproduce it.

Edge, too, is very Bataillean. *Edge* was a refusal to follow what seemed the easy route to poetic beauty that the *Enclosed Objects* showed. I wasn't satisfied with them. Beauty alone was making me sick. Thinking about making more of the *Enclosed Objects* I felt nauseous, quite physically so. I wished to venture into the unknown and uncertainty through laughter and play and tried to keep up with the demands of the poetic. Did I approach it? Surely I missed it, as the poetry of *Edge* is precisely the refusal of poetry.

Equally, the *Cobblestones* entail a strong element of dissent. They were initially conceived as a form of protest against what I perceived as the domination of an unyielding concern for form in contemporary British ceramic practice. In opposing it these Parisian cobblestones were trying to make new claims for the formless (as in beyond the form) and interiority (which is not content), and eventually they were set up as a barricade. This call for the formless echoed Bataille's now notorious article:

Formless: A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself quashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit (Bataille, 1929, cited by Bois, 1997, p.5).

As Georges Didi-Huberman, commenting on Bataille's call for the formless, importantly emphasises: "the call for the formless did not mean a call for non-forms, but to tackle a work on forms [...]: an opening, a slit, a splitting process" (Didi-Huberman, 1995, p.21 [my translation]). Here again it is a form of dialectics. Following Bataille further, Didi-Huberman sees in the concept of beauty the expression of one of man's basic contradictions: on the one hand, the will to last, maintaining the form and shape of the being, on the other the excess of desire, tearing forms apart beyond their own corporeal integrity, engulfing them into the slit (Didi-Huberman, 1999, p.96). In my work, the first slits would appear only later, in the *Planes* series, but many of the cobblestones share with the later slits the important dimensions of the accidental, the unknown and possibly the hallmark of failure. By so doing maybe they, too, have approached a form of the Bataillean poetic.

Similarly, Winnicott acknowledges the constructive role of formlessness in the creative development of the self and he calls for the opportunity for formless experience as key to the therapeutic procedure:

The searching can come only from desultory formless functioning, or perhaps from rudimentary playing, as if in a neutral zone. It is only here, in this unintegrated state of the personality, that that which we describe as creative can appear. This, if reflected back, but only if reflected back, becomes part of the organized individual personality, and eventually this in summation makes the individual to be, to be found; and eventually enables himself or herself to postulate the existence of the self (Winnicott, 1971, p.64).

In spite of its essential violence, radicalism and negativity, Bataille's concept of the hatred and failure of poetry entails a dynamic and positive element, a form of dialectics. Poetry fails poetry itself. Poetry betrays poetry. But at the core of this impassioned denunciation poetry exists, even if only as flux of ever-recurring failure.

The nature of the Bataillean poetic – the 'Impossible' – is movement and failure, and this form of dialectic is in keeping with an important characteristic of the transitional space I pointed to earlier in this chapter: it is never completed, and failure is a key element of this dynamic which it helps to trigger and reinitiate.



Cobblestones, Jerwood Makers Open, London, 2011

The void

“The void left by the devastation of poetry is within us the measure of a refusal” (Bataille, 1945, p. 217).

“We must somewhat slightly and superficially pour the world and slide through it, and not force it”, wrote Montaigne (Montaigne, 1595 cited in Richard, 1955, p.12). Maurice Blanchot, commenting on this quotation from Montaigne, suggested that literature [art] should evade depth (Richard, 1955, p.12), and today the quest for depth in art is still viewed with great caution. Contemporary art practice is often provocatively superficial. Is it right to be? Certainly the quest for depth can be a pretext for nostalgia, an opportunity for gratuitousness, a haven for complacency or escape (Richard, 1955) but also regression and all forms of solipsism and self-indulgence. Certainly irony, humour, lightness, on the one hand, and rationalism and a scientific approach, on the other, allow for a necessary distance and critical thinking that will prevent the temptation of mysticism with which depth is so often associated. Yet it is hard to believe we can now do away with depth.

It is depth, and depth alone, which will allow surface, which will be a base for a relationship, the happy flow between different consciousnesses, the free spreading of surfaces, the pairing of forms, the true contact [...] For all poets try to travel through depth and emerge delivered and fraternal. One way or another, all throw themselves into what has no name, the impossible, into death, and later, or at the same time, emerge alive. A paradoxical experience and yet one remade and succeeded in every day, which links [art] to the impossibility of [art] and links the being to an active intimacy with the void (Richard, 1955, p.12, [my translation]).

In ceramics, the void is a key component in the form of all vessels. As Martin Heidegger wrote, about a jug – though it could be any sort of container or vessel – “The empty space, this nothing of the jug is what the jug is as the holding jug. And if the holding is done by the jug’s void, then the potter shapes the void” (Heidegger, 1950, p.169). While carving and modelling generally strive to fashion what is solid, by its very nature the vessel has to deal with the void, which both informs it and gives it

much of its life. Carving and modelling are inverted vessels. In architectural ceramics, the vessel and the void are also often present: a clay slab, a panel, or a wall whose two ends meet, becomes a vessel as well. The vessel seems to be a permanent feature of much ceramic work, as it is almost a technical constraint in allowing clay to dry evenly.

Furthermore, Heidegger also sees the jug's 'jug' character in the exchange and the gift. "The gift gathers what belongs to giving: the twofold containing, the container, the void and the outpouring as donation" (ibid. p.173-174). Here the void implies the interval and inter-relationship. Vessels are the vehicle of exchange. They are pieces designed for giving and receiving. They transcend time, culture and society.

Before embarking on this research, as a ceramicist I was committed to investigating the aesthetics of the vessel. The vessel is a traditional and important concern within ceramics. The void is one of its distinctive features. But is the void identical in all vessels? What is the void in my vessels? Most forms I had been making were a variation of the disc form, with vertical walls never exceeding a few centimetres: hollow, topless drums. The void of a bowl might extend in a cone-like shape to the space around. The extension of the void of a drum is different, and does not so much relate to the outside space as to the space beyond it and within it. The void of a drum is both a space of interiority (the space contained within its walls) and a space beyond (the space beyond its base).



Drums, porcelain and glaze, 2003



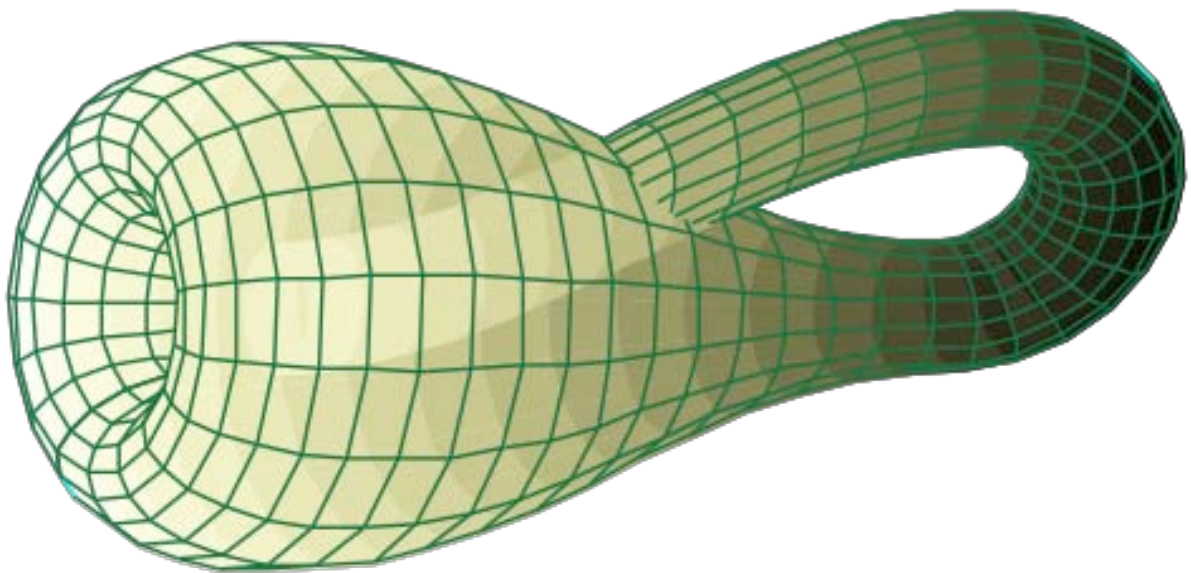
Large crumpled drum, porcelain and glaze, 2005, 43 x 12 cm

In the first series of *Illusory Objects*, I developed vessels with a concern for the perception and illusion of the inner space. Some of these forms raised the question of the inner void by changing the position and/or shape of the inside of the vessels. To this end I altered the inside, or void, of the vessel, filling it to various extents. However, the filling is not a solid negating the void, but a way to alter it and question the way we perceive it, and the contrast between reality and illusion.

By filling the void of the vessels, I created an interior space and emphasized what eventually became an important element of the research: the concern for interiority.

The concern for interiority is a defining feature of the poetic.

But the concern for interiority is also entailed and rooted in the vessel. The void of the vessel is its interiority. In *The Jealous Potter* Lévi-Strauss eventually demonstrates that the ceramic vessel partakes in a dialectic of internality and externality, content and container, and Lévi-Strauss points out that the myths of American Indians that deal with the creation of pottery are all akin to Klein's bottle.



Klein's bottle (source: Wikipedia)

In pointing to this dialectic of internality and externality, subjectivity and objectivity, Lévi-Strauss corroborates the connection I established between the process of glaze and Winnicott's transitional space.

I may have abandoned the aesthetic of the vessel in this research, but what I believe is one of its most essential features, a concern for interiority, has never left my work and it has remained an underlying concern throughout.

Following the work on the illusory drums, I moved away from the potter's wheel to investigate the technique of building with slabs. Among this first series of slab-objects, the quadrangles retained an important feature from the earlier drum forms, as the visible base of some of the pieces was often higher than its actual base. Moreover, I first resorted to a system of underlying walls to sustain these false bases and I became intrigued and drawn in by the way they showed subtly under the surface. In the tall pieces, where the base was not visible, I developed a similar system of underlying wall structure, which was meant to show through with subtlety under the glazed surface.

The *Enclosed Objects* that followed are a development of this first attempt. In these, however, the void seems to have completely disappeared. But I believe the void remains a possibility. The pieces are ambiguous. They seem they as if they might be solid, but the structure underneath probably hints at the void without which it would be very hard to have any kind of movement or dynamic. The void is not seen but it is understood. If it is not void, it suggests some sort of content distinct from that which the forms are made of and which endows them with the status of a container. The model for the *Cobblestones* is one of these *Enclosed Pieces*. It, too, seems solid, probably even more confusingly so: the glaze is a mineral and it covers what seems to be a stone. But the ridge on the upper face hints at an underlying activity, suggesting some sort of void, or at least some plasticity.

But the issue of content and container raises some difficulties with *Edge* and the domestic objects. The initial concept seemed somehow similar to the whole process of enclosed and underlying structures. After carefully choosing a 'found object', I covered it and concealed it with clay. The resulting object would then be moulded

and multiples cast. Surprisingly to me, what emerged from the domestic objects seems at odds with the traditional concerns of the vessel, and they do not seem to partake of this dialectic of interiority and exteriority.

What are they, then? I believe that what differentiates the domestic objects from the previous series of work is that they do not cease to be the objects they try to conceal. They are strangely sculptural, and seem to be inhabited by the objects they have been made with, as if they were still inside. They are like a shell, a cast from Pompeii. The possibility of the void, of interiority, is denied. The glaze seems strangely superficial, a decorative element of sorts, a coat or a layer over a support. The glaze has become a barrier, not a gate. It does not allow permeability or penetration. Access to interiority is denied.

With the domestic objects it becomes clear that the glaze alone is not what permits a journey into the glaze. The support is key in partaking of the dialectic of interiority and exteriority, content and container. This dialectic is obviously at work in the vessel, but in my research I wish to create and investigate new forms through which this can be achieved.

I believe this was one of my objectives when developing the last series of objects: the *Planes*, which followed *Edge* and the domestic objects in the final year of my research.

I decided to embrace the level of the plane, yet not depriving it of substance, depth volume and interiority. The plane was a starting point. Soon I endowed it with an existence in space: I created volume by playing with the position of the plane to create spatial depth by adding a third dimension: bending it, curving it, folding it, tilting it, wrapping it, or joining it with another plane and also by using a technique of imprints and concealed elements underneath. Not only did the plane tackle the issue of volume, but the base and the underlying structure were other important elements of volume creation: I created a base. The base was similar to an enclosed form, except that it wasn't closed. I had first imagined these *Planes* would sit on a shelf, close to the wall with the open element of the base facing the wall. Importantly, this first series of pieces was not made with a view to them becoming wall pieces.

This structure has remained a feature of the *Planes* throughout. It is a support, a setting, a prop, but it goes beyond being a mere practicality and it relates crucially to the plane it supports. It shows under the surface and on some pieces, and the base merges at times with the slab sheet to create an enclosed volume on one side while leaving the other side a floating plane. The works alternate between painting and ceramic vessel, plane and volume. Vessel paintings?

Equally ambiguous and indecisive is the position of these pieces in space. Firstly, they were not initially meant to be wall pieces. This only became a possibility afterwards. Retrospectively I devised a system of displaying these pieces off the wall, as well: the fired porcelain was drilled and a picture-hanging wire attached through it. The hanging system was included at the making stage from only the third series of *Planes* onwards. Some of the pieces, especially the flat ones, certainly seem like wall pieces but many can still be displayed both vertically and horizontally.



Slab 'Wing', porcelain, glaze, epoxy glue and putty, 2011, 15 x 11 x 13 cm - The plane is sticking out



Slab 'Wing', porcelain, glaze, epoxy glue and putty, 2011, 15 x 11 x 13 cm - Part of the plane sticks out, part of the plane is merged to create a volume



Slab, porcelain and glaze, 2011, 17 x 13 x 6 cm

This ambiguity, this duality is an important element of the *Planes* series. It seems that depth is to be found on the surface: expressing externality. But in these pieces depth remains inseparable from the volume and the substance of internality. In some of these pieces, the base has been removed after firing.



Empty Pillow', porcelain and glaze, 2011, 33 x 25 x 9 cm

If the absence of the base renders the object quite mysterious, it is because what should be there is not, as if it had become invisible. Yet it is present, even only as an imprint.

The ceramic vessel's dialectic of exteriority and interiority is at play. Again. It never ceases to be operational. It is never resolved: dialectic in the making.

Surface and depth. Plane and volume. Void and substance.

CONCLUSION

I love ceramic glaze. It touches me, moves me and fascinates me and I often forget myself in its contemplation, becoming one with the glaze, getting lost in it.

Once I even changed my life because of a ceramic glaze.

It was fifteen years ago, on a midsummer afternoon, in Paris. It was hot outside and the streets of the city were deserted. I encountered a haven of shade and freshness in an art gallery and found myself surrounded by pots, glazed ceramics. The artist exhibiting was Shimizu Uichi, a Japanese Living National Treasure. The Gallery was L'Espace Mitsukoshi Etoile, a gallery dedicated to Japanese art.

I strolled through the show. A vessel, a large bowl with a very simple and straight conical shape, caught my eye. It was covered with a pale blue glaze. The glaze was crackled. It could very well have been a defect. The crackle was peculiar but I could not really say why. It seemed to me that the bowl had no end, as if the glaze was an opening into something beyond the mere surface of the vessel. It was striking, and for what seemed to me rather a long moment I lost myself in contemplation of the glaze. I felt as if my mind had been travelling through the glaze. Was it floating? Was it falling? I cannot tell. When leaving the gallery, I was not sure what it was what I had just experienced: probably an aesthetic and artistic shock. This encounter changed me forever and I would never be the same again. Most importantly to me then was the fact that I did not know a lot about ceramics as an art form, let alone this particular Japanese artist. Nevertheless I could relate directly and personally to his art and I did not look at it with the ears only or through the magister of an institution. Yet the encounter seemed real and evident. It made it all the more important and significant.

Three years later, in 1999, I started an apprenticeship and in 2006 I entered the Royal College of Art to embark on a PhD whose starting point was that very glaze I had encountered that hot summer afternoon. In 2006 I knew that this glaze was called 'fish-scale', and was aware of the way this crazing behaviour provoked an impression of depth. I did not yet know how to reproduce it, however. I believed that it was technical expertise I was after.

I soon found it difficult, however, to bring my love of glaze down to the level of mere skills, and it became apparent that my research into glaze also encompassed a more essential yearning. What I was after was an immersive experience into the glaze, or at least the illusion of that immersion, or fusion. Here lay exactly one of the great initial difficulties and challenges of this research, as this illusion may be the result of either exerting the greatest external control over oneself – as in a *trompe l'oeil*, a formalist deception – or of “tolerating a temporary loss of sense of self, a temporary giving up of the discriminating ego, which stands apart and tries to see things objectively and rationally and without emotional colouring” (Milner, 1952, p.97). Differentiating between those two forms of the illusory and accepting this ‘getting lost’ as an element of practice and research was a founding moment of the thesis and probably also one of its findings under what became the hypothesis of ‘the poetic’ and the concomitant emergence of ‘poetic depth’.

Throughout the research, the comparisons I have offered with the practice and theories of the literary poetic have helped to define and conceptualize some key elements of my practice of glaze and to better understand this elusive ‘poetic depth’:

- ‘Poetic tension’ is a paradoxical and conflicting process between authority – the ability to control – and subjectivity, on the one hand, and factors of dissent, questioning the very possibility of authorship, on the other: among these are the unconscious and the materiality of the glaze.
- The concern for interiority of maker, viewer and work is a dialectic of internality and externality at the centre of ceramic practice.
- Play has been an important development of my practice of glaze and I further established parallels with the literary poetic in a shared aspiration for subversion, dissent and laughter.
- The concept of the formless, present in both my practice and in poetry as a formal indistinctness of material imagination and as an aspiration for the difficult emergence of the new.
- Failure is the essence of a certain form of poetry, which Georges Bataille summed up as the ‘Impossible’. It is also a key aspect of the practice of

ceramics rooted in its difficulty and its elusiveness: an essence of flux. It can be opposed by the 'jealous potter' (Lévi-Strauss), accepted and possibly, too, incorporated as a further element of play whose irresolution or unlikely balance can create yet another dimension of the poetic.

- Flux is a necessary element of glazes but it also summarizes the dynamics and dialectics of the Bataillean 'Impossible' and the playful poetic.

The hypothesis of the poetic has been both a lens and a mirror through which I have been able to define and reflect my own practice of glaze.

A further finding of this research is the discovery of my practice of glaze as a transitional phenomenon.

In this thesis, I have developed several examples of the way in which my practice of glaze could be seen as akin to a transitional space as defined by Donald Winnicott and Marion Milner. It shares with it many important features and concerns:

- The paradox of the 'found' as creation.
- The dialectics of subjectivity and objectivity, interiority and exteriority, fusion and differentiation.
- The process of illusion-disillusionment.
- Its development into play.
- Failure as a driving force for changes.
- The formless as an operative concept for my practice and a prerequisite for creativity and play.
- Its dynamics: a never-completed status, a dialectics of sorts.

In many respects, this second group of findings echoes and parallels most of the first ones relating to the poetic.

Eventually, all three strands: my practice of glaze, the literary poetic and the transitional phenomenon intertwine, cross-fertilize and develop in parallel. Together, they have helped articulate the concepts and the artistic vocabulary through which

the poetic and the transitional phenomenon have become operative categories of aesthetics, artistic practice, and of research processes.

There is another important element of Winnicott's theory which I have, however, only briefly touched upon in my research, but which is key to the concept of the transitional phenomenon: the good-enough mother. According to Winnicott, the very possibility of the transitional phenomenon is to be found in the role of the mother. Winnicott writes:

There is no possibility whatever for an infant to proceed from the pleasure principle to the reality principle or towards and beyond primary identification (see Freud, 1923), unless there is a good-enough mother. The good-enough 'mother' (not necessarily the infant's own mother) is one who makes active adaptation to the infant's needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration. [...] The good-enough mother, as I have stated, starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure (Winnicott, 1971, p.10).

Later on in his writings, Winnicott replaced the good-enough mother with a good-enough facilitating environment, and Winnicott hoped that "psychoanalysts will be able to use the theory of transitional phenomena in order to describe the way in which good-enough environmental provision at the very earliest stages makes it possible for the individual to cope with the immense shock of loss of omnipotence" (Winnicott, 1971, p.71).

As a conclusion, I would like to address the issue of a good-enough facilitating environment in the case of the practice of glaze. I believe it has important consequences for the development and the teaching of glaze as an art practice and it is all the more crucial as this art practice seems endangered, and on the brink of disappearing altogether.

This research, and before it my practice, are in many ways indebted to such a facilitating environment. The teaching of my master Jean Girel during my apprenticeship, the access to the Kolding Glaze Library, the writings of Nigel Wood on Chinese glazes, the published notes of L.Auclair (Jean Carriès' glaze technician), the glazes shared with me by fellow glaze-practitioners, especially Sam Bakewell and Takeshi Yasuda, the technical astuteness and experience of Keith Fraser... all these elements contributed to creating this facilitating environment which was so important for the research. In many ways it countered the spectre of the jealous potter, whose glaze recipes and knowledge are kept secret. But as Winnicott pointed out in the case of motherhood, it is equally important for the practice of glaze (as an art form) that within this environment one does not seek perfection, either technically or morally.

Technical perfection and focus risk turning the glaze into a mere instrument, a means to an end, and in its subjugation depriving it of the possibility of becoming a transitional space and eventually an art form. There is no possibility for play where unilateral domination rules. Moreover, as technical perfection is hardly successful in the case of glazes, its inability to hold its promises will eventually bring glaze into disrepute or oblivion. Therefore it is key to stress the importance of process over outcomes and invent artistic practices where research can also become an element of the result, or the result itself.

Equally debatable is the risk of seeking perfection in morality. Ceramics and the practice of glaze frequently seem to give rise to proselytising apostles of a new ethics verging on morality. Calling for depth always entails the risk of mysticism (Richard, 1955):

In England, Bernard Leach developed the aesthetic canon of the honest pot, and in France Frère Daniel de Montmollin promoted an asceticism of controlling natural chaos: "the practice of pottery will be a reminder, if need be, that the game is of a spiritual level when those forces facing natural movement, material and energy achieve progressively their highest command" (Montmollin, 1964, p.108). That these two great potters have striven for a form of perfection and have also somehow attained it in their practice is indisputable. That this becomes a lecture of sorts, a set of rules, an ethics and morality is a tremendous risk for the practice of glaze, just as

the ambition of the perfect mother is a risk for the development of the child. The perfect mother leaves no space for the child to develop independently. Only the absence and the void left by the failing mother allow for the occurrence of transitional phenomena.

Perfection, or the ambition for perfection, are suffocating because of their exclusivity and prescriptive character. They are erected as a moral code and an imperative. Frère Daniel de Montmollin wrote *The Ceramic Poem*, in which the ethics of glaze practice seem to have been engraved in stone as a kind of 'holy trinity': "A potter's life is made of three alliances, alliance with nature, alliance with oneself, alliance with others" (Montmollin, 1964, [my translation]). Today, it is difficult to believe an equivalent to Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* or to Nicanor Parra's *Poems and Anti-Poems* as manifestos of an avant-garde are necessary (or even possible) to overthrow this paradigm of glaze practice. It would be eventually just as peremptory and ideological an act. This research is in no way a manifesto. My call for imperfection does not imply that glaze, as an art practice, should only value the over-fired and the split, as I so often do in my own work. Certainly not! This would be far too prescriptive! The over-fired and the split are just another possibility for the practice of glaze. But it is important to recognize that the vitality of an artistic practice thrives on variety and friction, not on rules erected as a model. What art form could thrive on norms? In any creative discipline rules are there to be eventually defied and overthrown.

Moreover, the vitality of the poetic lies precisely in a dynamic triggered by failure and the impossibility of this ever being attained, not in a pose imbued with lyricism, certainty and morality. Poetry always entails a hatred of poetry.

Good-enough.

May this research be understood as an act of poetic rebellion which values process over result, doubts over certainties, movement over fixity and material disobedience over subordination to ideas (Didi-Huberman, 1995, p.22).

I am throwing the first cobblestones of glaze.

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