

This book originates in the research project *Craft Thinking in the Arts*, directed by Sarah Weisman, founder of ClayLab, an experimental program integrated in the art education curriculum of the Campus for Design at the Trier University of Applied Sciences, and co-directed by Giulia Lamoni, collaborating member of Instituto de História da Arte at Nova University in Lisbon (IHA-NOVA FCSH / IN2PAST). Developed in 2022-2023, this one-year project was supported by the Campus for Design and the Strategiefond, University of Applied Sciences Trier, and IHA-NOVA FCSH/IN2PAST.

As reflected in this publication, the project included workshops at Claylab with Portuguese artists Flávia Vieira and Maja Escher, and a series of lectures by curator Lucia Pesapane and scholars Basia Sliwinska and Giulia Lamoni. Under the supervision of Sarah Weisman and with input from the above-mentioned activities, the students at ClayLab explored different possibilities to use clay as a material for their artistic practice. This book documents this collective work process, attempting to represent the dynamism, liveliness and commonality that characterized it.

CERAMIC SEAMS

THINKING
THROUGH
MAKING

CERAMIC SEAMS THINKING THROUGH MAKING





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Shaping collaborative futures

A conversation between Sarah Weisman
and Giulia Lamoni

GL Giulia Lamoni
SW Sarah Weisman

GL Can you tell me how you developed the idea for this project and how it relates to the ceramic workshop that you initiated at Trier Hochschule?

SW I think that I have to back track a bit. I was appointed as a professor at the University of Applied Sciences Trier in 2019, and when I arrived here the studio was only used as a drawing space where I found nothing but some rickety easels and drawing tables. I knew that the space was planned by the sculptor Thomas Duttonhoefer in the nineties, with real attention to the light and spatial requirements for sculpting, so it has been a pleasure building up the studio to its original purposes. The structure that I developed here at the atelier relates very much to my own research, spanning many years and evolving through different international residencies and studios. Part of my own work has always been to explore and use different techniques and materials in the regions I have been working in - thinking within the material. As modelling is the basis of my work, clays have always been very important, their regional diversity and cultural references and the related shaping of techniques has intrigued me as well. This has constantly had a repercussion on my artistic research, the multi-layered approach to this universal material – this prima materia –, which is available almost everywhere but with different meanings and artistic working methods. As these experiences with working methods, materials and processes mingle in my work, the thought arose to build up this thinking and practice laboratory - thinking through making - in which experiences can connect transnationally, both on the material level, like using different clays and tools, and in exchange with artists and researchers who work both locally and abroad. The aim is to create an international working environment in which extensive skills and artistic thinking are compared and linked together through collaborative processes. Thus, the ClayLab.

GL What about the students?

SW I wanted to find a way of transferring amassed clay related experiences to the students in the Trier studio, which is why I started to speak with my fellow researchers from my strongly nomadic past. I first met the New York based artist, Yoko Inoue, when we both had our studios in Paris in 2011. It was a great coincidence that when I got the position in Trier in 2019, she was appointed as a Special Research Affiliate by Kyoto Seika University's Traditional Industry Innovation Center, then a new research initiative that considered the new craft thinking very broadly - for cohabitation of nature, people and community, knowledge retention and translation.

SW On one of her stopovers between New York and Kyoto, Yoko and I were able to meet in Amsterdam to exchange ideas. I still remember the coffee place with tiny tables where we spoke about our future depending on “collaboration” and “collective thinking and process” in creation and about our work with clay. We met up with her Dutch friend Marianne Peijnenburg, based in Tilburg, an independent researcher who also teaches at the Rijks-akademie and was a former manager of the EKWC (European Ceramic Workcentre) for fourteen years. It was great to meet Marianne at EKWC, hearing about her ceramic research and knowledge during an informative tour of their studios. All these impressions later helped me to think about how to build up the studio in Trier! Additionally, the EKWC has this beautiful collaborative kitchen with tiny transparent fridges where we talked about our research fields and projects concerning craft thinking in the arts, mapping ceramic knowledge to preserve and transfer it to a younger generation and practical structures of transmission.

GL **This idea of connecting different artistic practices and developing collaborative work seems key to the way you envision the ClayLab. Can you tell me a bit more about it?**

SW This idea of transmission of thinking through making and connecting is at the very origin of the ClayLab. When the studio started to take shape the idea of interweaving international art practices related to ceramics emerged, and this was the moment when I called you, Giulia! I thought your research focusing on the relations between contemporary art and feminisms, artistic production and migratory processes would be perfect to develop this project together! When I told you about the idea of exploring the relations between artistic practice and ceramic craft, you immediately connected through subjects in your field. I was especially intrigued by your work on transnational perspectives of contemporary art and the history of the relations between artistic practices and experimental art education. Can you retrace how this developed then?

GL **I can see that the interviewer is becoming the interviewee! It is an interesting reversal! I was very happy when you invited me, first of all because I thought that this could be a fantastic opportunity to reconnect and work together again. Secondly, it was because the relationships between craft and contemporary art have interested me very much in the last few years, both from the perspective of curatorial work and from that of art historical writing. Although I wrote on the textile work of artists like Ghada Amer and Tracey Emin many years ago, I think that visiting the studio of Venezuelan artist Lucia Pizzani in London in 2017 has been a key moment for me – one that stimulated my desire to engage with ceramics from a feminist and decolonial standpoint. And it is no coincidence that in this book I propose a text about Lucia’s ceramic sculpture. In the context of this project, we decided together, very early on, that it should have both a practical dimension and a more historical and theoretical one, the two being interconnected and crosspollinating each other. Thus we invited two artists based in Portugal, whose work we both appreciate very much – Flávia Vieira, who wrote her PhD dissertation, in Brasil, on contemporary art and craft, and Maja Escher, who has personal ties with Germany –, to do art workshops with students at the ClayLab in Trier. We also invited, as guest lecturers, Lucia Pesapane, who co-curated the international exhibition “Ceramics: Art and Ceramics from Rodin to Schütte” in 2015-16, and feminist scholar Basia Sliwinska. Lucia had been a colleague of mine at the Musée national d’art moderne – Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2009, where we both worked on the show elles@centrepompidou. Basia is now a Researcher at the Art History Institute at Nova University in Lisbon, where she is developing very innovative work on feminisms, activism and ethics of care. Rita Ferrão, one of the main special-**

GL **ists of modernist ceramics in Portugal, and also a member of the Art History Institute at Nova University, took part in the conversation that followed one of these lectures, and kindly agreed to participate in this publication with a text. Finally, the artist Yoko Inoue, whose dialogue with you is – as you mentioned – at the heart of this project, proposed a reflection map for this book. Going back to the multifaceted structure of this project, do you think that collaboration played a decisive role in its conception, from the start?**

SW Yes, that was also part of this project, how collaborative processes emerge – our future lies very much in collaborative thinking. This collaborative approach in practice was also reflected, for example, in the workshop in the ClayLab, initiated by Maja Escher, where students collected materials from different regions during the year and used them to construct a Shelter in the studio in Trier, which was an emphatic image – everyone under one self-built roof! Questions about collaborative processes and migratory backgrounds and visibility in artistic practice were raised.

GL **Could you tell me more about how the two workshops in the studio, led by Maja and Flávia, unfolded and why it was important to you that the students meet and establish dialogues with these artists?**

SW As I gained knowledge through different places and encounters, I wanted to make it possible for the students to experience these collaborative practical and conceptual transfer possibilities on site at the ClayLab. Maja Escher, for example, brought various earths that she had collected in a quarry in Portugal for her work into the studio and explained her methodology with these materials.

GL **This seems to reflect the importance of the situatedness of materials and crafts practices, and their different histories. What about Flávia’s approach and her relationship with Brazil and Brazilian art?**

SW I spoke with Flavia – she works in Portugal and São Paulo – about how differently the subject of craft thinking in the arts is reflected upon in Europe and, for example, in Brazil, and how it materializes in practice. Collaborations – and also the straightforward taking up of craft – is integrated into the research there, in her opinion, in a more unbiased way. In Europe, we have historically created a separation between craft and art that is sometimes very difficult to bridge over. Flavia has also referred to cooperation using traditional color processes and here the students also took up collaborative working methods in the workshop in relation to narration and material.

GL **What about the work of Yoko Inoue?**

SW Yoko is a multidisciplinary artist whose work includes sculpture, installation, collaborative socially engaged art projects, and public intervention performance art. She explores themes of assimilation and cultural identity, often using ceramics as a symbol and transforming them. Recently she told me about a project at the CHCI Global Humanities Institute round table in Senegal about craft as a method – crafting decoloniality – in which she wanted to unveil the ‘ecology of the Global South’ by ‘translating’ craft practices as a visual artist.

GL **This project approaches craft through the lens of contemporary art. As you said, the two have been historically separated in Western culture, a separation that has often translated into a hierarchical relationship. Nevertheless, whereas some contemporary artists produce their own works in ceramics, others prefer to collaborate with highly specialized ceramists. In fact, the possibilities are manifold and strongly dependent on the working methods of each artist, as well as on the cultural, historical and political contexts of production. Would you like to comment on this?**

- SW Today, traditional techniques have different significances depending on the culture, and approaches differ greatly in terms of how craft is seen in art and how artists integrate it in relation to their working methods. Especially in the field of ceramic materials, this is very multifaceted, since a high degree of technique and knowledge is often required here.
- In many cases, artists then join the workshops of ceramists, a prominent example being the artist residency program of the Manufacture de Sevres, another being the EKWC or collaboratively organized artists' workshops such as those of the BBK (Berufsverband Bildender Künstler) Berlin.
- This is also exemplified by the interview of Lucia Pesapane in which the ceramist Venera Finocchiaro describes how the collaboration between her and Niki de Saint Phalle for the realization of the project in Tuscany took place.
- GL **You mentioned Lucia's interview with Venera Finocchiaro and the way it unearths the specific working methods used in creating Niki de Saint Phalle's Tarot Garden. Other texts in this book explore the work of women artists and ceramists. One could say that the preoccupation with gender relations in the field of art and craft are an underlying current traversing this book and the project itself.**
- SW As you mentioned, the collaborative and also the gender approach are reflected in the texts of both Basia and Rita. It is about life paths and obstacles that form a decision for certain materials and techniques. In many cases, working methods and innovative techniques and approaches are also overlooked for various reasons. What was, in your view, the reasoning behind building a focus on some of these questions in this project, as well as how migratory transits can inform material and artistic production?
- GL **I think that this book gathers many voices and many ways of making – a diversity that is key to this project. Somehow, nevertheless, all these contributions show an interest in discussing and supporting the modern and contemporary practice of women in the fields of art and craft – and those working in-between them. This concern is at times associated with the question of situatedness – as in the work of Maja and Flávia, who explore specific craft traditions and their histories –, with migration and negotiating one's place in-between cultures – as in Rita's discussion of the work of Hansi Stael, or in my exploration of Lucia Pizzani's ceramic pieces –, or in shaping one's agency in a patriarchal system that oppresses women – as in Basia's analysis of Karina Marusinska's practice. Another thread connecting these contributions is of course the use of clay, and, as Basia puts it “ceramic matter matters.” I would like to get back to your work, this time as a sculptor. Can you tell me about your relationship with ceramic?**
- SW I came to ceramic materials and processes through bronze casting.
- After my studies, I initiated a collaborative foundry with colleagues in Greece. Through building different kilns there we also had the possibility of directly firing works in clay. This process made it possible to inscribe thoughts directly into the material without the need for transitory plaster and wax.
- Starting my sculptural work with Charles Auffret and Arlette Ginioux at the EnsAD in Paris, I came into contact with the Independent Sculpture Movement. They are both successors of the movement, which spans several generations from Rodin to Bourdelle to Giacometti and Germaine Richier. The process of modelling is a common element among the artists of this movement. This immediate and reflective work in the material clay - a thinking through making - and the passing on of practice-based knowledge is very much anchored in the Independent Sculpture Movement. It is passed on from hand to hand above all through collaborative studio practices.
- Bourdelle, for example, worked in Rodin's studio as a practician and there experienced this immense knowledge in practice before he himself em-

- SW ployed sculptors in his international studio in the Avenue de Maine.
- Germaine Richier was one of the last of his collaborators there, and she has experienced this transmission of studio practice, thinking and poetic construction in the material and poetic development of form through direct modelling in clay, which she herself then continuously passed on to her students, even in exile in Switzerland.
- When I was appointed as lecturer to the Weißensee University of Applied Sciences, the students immediately wanted to model life-size sculptures. In teaching them, the memory of how practice-based knowledge had been passed on to me about working with poetic geometries was then very present. It is important to pass on thinking through making, which is related so much to artistic practices and thinking, from hand to hand, otherwise it simply disappears.
- This directness of the modelling process is also reflected in the complex surfaces of the sculptures. In order to widen the field of research for the students, the ClayLab was expanded to include a GlazeLab for experimenting with ceramic surfaces. This is creating additional interdisciplinary research opportunities.
- GL **We have explored many possibilities of reflections here. Perhaps, to conclude – or better to temporarily suspend this conversation –, could you tell me why this book is called Ceramic Seams?**
- SW This also came through making. It was a spontaneous invention in the studio while using the slab technique, a ceramic building technique in which you kind of fuse ceramic slaps together, making seams. I loved that image of building different layers together, representing very well the idea of ceramics as an expanded field that articulates and dialogues with other fields and knowledges. Throughout the project we referred to that image as interstices that connect techniques and matter and thoughts or multiple layers reflecting the complexity of communication, where things can fold together or also simply co-exist as an imagery of thinking and therefore building possible spaces. Thoughts mingled through matter and making. In the studio, the joints of the floor tiles are still stained with traces of this special red tone of the clay from Portugal that was used during the workshop, the experience living on physically as well as in the minds of the participants.