THE CLAY

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Oslo National Academy of the Arts, November 2014: The ceramic department's workshop technician[1] was in the process of clearing up and moving some Euro pallets around. They were filled with dry, unfired leftover clay. He told me that the clay had been there for a long time, probably several years, and was undoubtedly full of various impurities. But he had kept it for recycling[2] to use in projects that didn't require pure clay. There were all kinds of clay in the pallets: red, yellow, brown, greyish to white, both fine and coarse qualities and between these there were also pure chunks of porcelain. Without its packaging and contents labels, it was completely unpredictable. There was no guarantee of, or information on, melting point, stability, shrinkage and other properties that are important when using the clay.

I asked the workshop technician if I could buy one of the pallets and he said I could just take it. I took the pallet up to my office. On the way over the doorstep, a scratch was made in the paint.

The office was in a phase of transformation. The upholstered office chair, the white writing desk and the computer equipment had been replaced with dirty, discarded materials. It was not exactly an office, nor was it a workshop. It was developing into a repository for material that had potential for future projects: leftover clay, discarded waste glaze,

metal and aluminium, paper and cardboard, wood mouldings and planks, plywood, fibreboard, glass and various pieces of cloth. Some things were stored for a short time; others, a little longer. Some things were returned to the place they were found because they were not useable.

In the dry clay and in the pallet's format, I saw some possibilities. But it was only when I started to work with the clay that my thoughts about it became more concrete, and only then could I begin to put words to these thoughts.

Excerpts from my notes in the start phase:

> – In some of the clay that is wrapped in plastic, it smells rotten. It has not dried completely, just become a hard lump, covered with speckled black and greenish mould. There must be fibres of paper or something similar mixed in with it. It smells bad. The dry stuff only smells of dry clay when I break it up with a hammer. It is dry dust, but it is not disgusting.
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> – The clay is weighed out in amounts determined by the roll of a dice. The system is not important. I just need some numbers which can be translated into quantities that I do not decide myself.
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> – I work in the kiln room, where I find a place in the corner behind the large gas kiln. The gas kilns are noisy, but it's ok, because when I break up the clay and stir it up with the drill, it

is also noisy. I use earmuffs most of the time anyway.

– The volume of clay is growing. I bought twenty new buckets with lids; they are already full. But now they can, after all, be stacked. I write the date and a number on the buckets, so I can keep track of the order in which they are mixed. Don't know if it's useful.

– I begin to find a work rhythm. It also allows me to think about other things while I work: first, the clay is smashed up with a hammer. Then it is moved into the ten-litre-buckets which are filled with water, and the clay dissolves in the water. The next day, I stir the liquid with the whisk attachment on the drill. Then it is sieved to remove lumps before it is poured into five-litre buckets. The consistency varies: thin cultured milk, thick yogurt. The clay is ready for use. On a large oven plate, a piece of fabric is laid, onto which the clay is applied layer by layer.

– I use a paint brush that is 7cm wide. I dip it in the liquid clay once and apply it; always from the same place and always brushing in the same direction - at an arm's length. The clay is thick where I start and thin towards the end ... It is now something completely different than expected.

– Today I was surprised: one night the clay had dried and the textile with the thin layer of clay had lifted 8 centimetres in an arched curve. I wanted to look at cracks, and there were so many disturbing forms. It was fascinating, but too intricate. This experiment needed to be put aside while I started over with a simplified point of departure.

– The fabric needs to be tighter than it is now, and the brush should be replaced with a paint roller. I find some pieces of wood to build a frame which the fabric can be nailed onto. The format becomes larger, and I have to work directly on the floor.

– In a logbook with tables, I keep track of information and record the date, the amount of clay and the names of photo files. It is convenient and it helps me to maintain the structure.

– I follow the cracking carefully. The thicker the slab, the faster the new wet layers dry. Thick cracks, thin cracking, straight and crooked. The wet layers buzz, I hear it when I am alone in the workshop.

– Every time I add a new layer, the same thing happens, but with very small changes. The details finally begin to emerge and can be compared.

–The pattern formation in the floating clay is like marbling. It must contain a lot of fine-grained porcelain. I think of the beach on the North Sea in Denmark, where the wind sorts the sand by weight. The dark sand grains are heavier than the light-coloured ones. How is it with the liquid clay, the pattern must have something to do with the particle structures?

Siershahn, Germany, September 2016. We[3] have been walking on a gravel road for a quarter of an hour. Now we are standing at the edge of a staircase-like excavation area. Dust swirls up in light clouds when a gust of wind comes. Christine Röel speaks loudly to drown out the noise of the machine. She works as an engineer for the company Goerg & Schneider, the company that excavates clay from the area. Today she has welcomed us to tell us about production methods at the mine. She has worked for the company since the late 80's, and before this, she was educated as a ceramicist. From the way she explains things to us and answers our questions, you can tell that she has both practical experience and theoretical knowledge.

[…] If you open a mine, the first thing you do is take samples; you drill into the earth as deep as possible in about twenty different places to be sure that this clay is worth taking out of the earth. […] If you have opened a mine, you already know a lot, but not everything. There is always something we don´t recognize or know from before. […] And then you see all

> the colours, if it is white, it is not certain that this is really white clay… it can also be quartz […] take parts of the white material and make an analysis in the laboratory. If there is quartz in our clay it is a natural quartz which is inside the clay itself, but we do not use any quartz inside our compositions. […] If it's quartz it is not plastic at all, and we cannot use it for the ceramic industry…[4]

Back in Oslo. At the Academy, I always enter through the delivery entrance where I often see pallets of plastic wrapped materials. A few weeks after the trip to Siershahn there was a pallet in front of the gate which had come from the company Goerg & Schneider. They had sent a half ton of clay, packed in transparent 10-kilo plastic bags. I stopped at the pallet because I saw the company name on the packaging. Otherwise the grey, plastic clay didn't interest me much. It was industrial grade, first-class clay with a known history, with packaging and contents label: completely predictable. The label contained information on melting point and other properties. This clay was the opposite of what I was intuitively interested in when I, two years earlier, found the pallet with the dry, discarded clay.

I had attempted to define why the clay leftovers were interesting for the project, but the reasons were so numerous and sprawling that I had given up trying to get an overview, relying instead on my gut feeling and from that, I produced the arguments. Afterwards, towards the end of the project, some of the reasons are not so difficult to put into words.

The leftovers were not just any old scraps of clay. They were leftovers from the institution where I was employed to work on a development project for a long period of time. I had packed up my own studio into a storage container and «moved in» to the institution. I wanted this situation to influence my project and be visible, in relation to the processes, the materials and the results. I wanted to enter into a dialogue with the institution and look for a way in. When I found the pallet, it was literally a reason to dig into the institution's history.

I also saw a parallel to how the raw materials lie chaotically in the earth's crust before they are dug up, cleaned and refined. Due to the pallet's compilation of dissimilar clay types (porcelain, stoneware, terracotta, raku, blue clay), it also provided an absurd association: if I were to find a similar concentration of variants in nature, I would have had to dig up a huge area of land.

Another thing that appealed to me was that the clay leftovers had an industrial history. They were remnants of industry products which had now begun to resemble nature by virtue of the fact that the original industrial order had begun to be naturally chaotic. I wanted to decide how the clay leftovers should go through a "new industrialization" based on my own systems.

The pallet's frame held the loose masses together. It reminded me of my block diagrams in my notebooks from the geology lectures I attended during this period.[5] These diagrams were predominantly of boxes, charts and lines. They were consistent throughout and logical - the section, the

cross-section of, for example, a landscape. What delimitation was relevant? How much information is appropriate? Not too much, not too little. The pallet's format gave me the first concrete limitation. Through it, I could start asking questions about scale and size.

Somehow, the leftover clay became my stratigraphic[6] study of the Academy's ceramics department.

[1] Knut Natvik is a ceramicist and workshop technician at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. Throughout the fellowship project, he has contributed with both practical and academic guidance.

[2] Dried clay can be made plastic by adding water. This process can be repeated over and over again.

[3] Staff at the ceramics department at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts: Kjell Rylander, Knut Natvik, Irene Nordli, Anja Backe, Marit Tingleff and I.

[4] The text excerpt is a transcript of a conversation from video footage from Christine Röel's guided tour.

[5] In spring, 2015, I attended lectures from the GEO 1020 curriculum at Oslo University: «The course gives an introduction to geology. Emphasis is placed on geological processes and materials as well as understanding geological maps. The course covers all physical, chemical and biological changes at all levels of significance for the Earth's inner structure and external forms.» https://www.uio.no/studies/emner/matnat/geofag/nedlagteemner/GEO1020 / # course-content

[6] Stratigraphy, geology: a discipline that deals with stratification, deposition, character, age and distribution primarily of sediments and sedimentary rocks, but also other layered rocks.

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