









Brigitte Jurack

***Pull Clay***







pull  
stroke  
push  
roll  
pinch  
squash  
poke  
scratch  
slap  
throw  
roll out  
fold  
bang  
kneel  
pull again  
tap  
squish  
blend  
flatten out  
indent  
burnish  
dip  
tap

tap again  
build up  
go round and round  
pull up again  
pinch together  
smooth it down  
keep it rough  
wet  
damp  
soft  
hard  
coarse  
sticky  
dry  
shiny  
matt  
flexible  
floppy  
responsive  
temperamental  
stable  
easy  
cold



*Every human being is an artist, a freedom being, called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures that shape and inform our lives.*

This famous phrase by German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) is exactly half a century old this year and has not lost any of its radical ambition. In 1973, the idea of reshaping the economy into a social organism that considered equity and wellbeing of all human beings, animals and the natural environment was making waves in my hometown Düsseldorf. At the time I was not even a teenager and yet it fundamentally influenced my understanding of creativity and society.

Every living person becomes a creator, namely a person that is and remains imaginative, that is and remains inspired and involved in shaping the world we live in – a world that is built through relationships between people and all living creatures including insects, plants, birds, fields, rivers, oceans and mountains, a world that might be the size of a dwelling, community, village, town, school, county, country or continent.

Observing children on the beach engrossed in building sandcastles, dams and water channels, it is easy to concur that building and having control and influence over the shape of things is innately human, and something we share with almost all other animals that build nests, burrows, shelters, dams, mounds and channels. Despite all our sandcastle building experience, only a few grow into builders, engineers, artists or architects. Nevertheless, making and shaping something by hand, for example a loaf of bread, or handling materials with our hands via peeling potatoes, whittling, sewing, dough making or gardening and handling others with our hands - child rearing, nursing, animal caring - is fundamental to being human and feeling part of the world. Transforming, shaping and reshaping are words used to describe active participation; having a sense of control, a voice, a say and a chance to make a mark and leave a legacy.



The clay used to make the objects depicted in this publication comes from a pottery supplier in Stoke-on-Trent. One of the good things about clay is that it is ubiquitous. It can be dug up, cleaned and refined in most parts of the world and it is plentiful. As it happens, in the region of Stoke-on-Trent the clay is mined from the Etrurian formation, Westphalian reddish mudstone formed 359-299 million years ago during the Carboniferous period. At that time, humid climate floras and swamps covered this part of central England. Meanwhile slightly further away in Cornwall, Kaolinite ('china clay') has been mined since the 1750s. These Kaolinite deposits were formed between the late Cretaceous and the early Paleogene about 100-45 million years ago; in earth age, much younger.

Each bag of clay used during my artist's residency at Belong Chester care village is filled with purified, cleaned and refined reddish mudstone that is 300 million years old. Each hand and each finger leaving a mark on and in the clay has literally been in touch with earth history.

Do we talk about it? Not in as many words. There is a sense of directness, an immediate response as the material reacts, malleable in its unfired state, glorified mud, tacit cultural roots back to the first pre-historic figurines, pots and vessels of early civilisations, ceramic water pipes, rooftiles, teapots and china of bygone centuries and present-day crockery.

The Grosvenor Museum in Chester holds a collection of Roman rooftiles, waterpipes and vessels amongst which the first clay workshops with people with dementia and those who support them took place, and where some of the ceramics illustrated in this publication are exhibited. The Grosvenor also holds a rarely displayed collection of fossils found in the Chester area, as old as the fresh clay from the Carboniferous period.

Imagine for a moment what the Chester basin looked like covered in swamps - humid and wet. Imagination, expression, time and the perception of time are the fundamental ingredients of any human endeavour. Adding an activity or occupation that enables the feeling of being-in-control and being social and equitable with others in this world are defining ingredients of culture. Cultural arts are well captured by Susanne K. Langer's classic characterisation (Langer, 1966) "the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feelings." These forms could be song, dance, sound, shapes, squeezed lumps of clay, poetry, laughter, laments, drama, painting, drawing, film, animation or new forms to come.

It is about the practice of creating perceptible forms that express our feelings. Glorious clay, we can roll you, pinch you, pull you, turn you, tap you, bang you, slap you, scrape you, drill you, pat you and shape you at our will into the forms we imagine, we see with our inner and outer eye, the shapes we have soaked in over years of looking and touching. The three-dimensional aspect of clay holds the potential of closely representing real-life objects (Sholt and Gavron, 2006) and working from three-dimensions and making something in three-dimensions is essentially simpler, much easier than painting or drawing.

As we pinch and pull you, dent and poke you (the clay), we are in control. In the touching we are in the moment. We push, you respond. In these ways, clay taps into the depths of human consciousness. The impulse to squeeze, roll and form clay is deeply ingrained and clay's plastic, malleable nature gave birth to the metaphor (Henley, 1991) that it possesses a life and body of its own. No words are needed, nor grammar or verbal reminiscing, and yet the clay facilitates the expression of emotions through touch. The gratification is immediate, the joy of accomplishing something, of being-in-time and in-space, of being with others and being active.



Within a semi-structured 50-minute clay session, shapes and forms appear. A tremendous astonishment and gratification follows and, for a moment, feelings of mastery, of having brought something into existence, something that is an expression of individuality and uniqueness, emerge. In the safe space of the Creative Studio at Belong, the high level of non-verbal concentration in the making is palpable, as is the manipulation of the material through the muscle memory of hands. As one participant, aged 86, in a Canadian supported living residency said (Abramowitz, 2013) “When I go there [the weekly clay sessions] I’m working intensely every minute ... there is always the next step just there. The clay is leading the way.”

And once our clay is fired and made permanent as ceramic, the objects convey a sense of immortality, a tangible legacy of shaping earth.

Abramowitz, K. (2013), The Unstructured Use of Clay in Art Therapy with Older Adults, Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal, 26:1, 1-12.

Beuys, J. (1973) <https://www.artnet.com/artists/joseph-beuys/>, accessed 6.5.2023.

Henley, D. (1991), Facilitating the development of object relations through the use of clay in art therapy. American Journal of Art Therapy, 29, 69-76.

Langer, S.K. (1966), The cultural importance of the arts. Journal of Aesthetic Education, 1, 5-12.

Sholt, M., & Gavron, T. (2006), Therapeutic qualities of clay-work in art therapy and psychotherapy: A review. Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 23, 66-72.

Creating drinking vessels that mimic human features is common across many different ancient and modern cultures. Examples of these can be found in many collections and what is great about the anthropomorphic jugs and vessels made at Belong Chester is their comic element. The pleasure lies in the distortion of naturalism and reality, a licence to have a wicked bent and fantastic streak of the imagination.

The first Toby Jugs were created in 18th century Staffordshire and represented real and fictional characters with slightly or grotesquely caricatured features such as bulging beer bellies, ill-fitting hats or exaggerated facial features including large noses and wrinkled foreheads. The Toby Jug, traditionally glazed in bright shiny colours, is a recognisable image in British popular and political culture since the original 'Toby' came from folklore - Toby Fillpot was said to be a drunkard whose body became the clay in the ground and was then re-formed by a potter into the stout man represented in the jug (Love, 2021).





















What do Pinocchio and Punch have in common? They are both puppets with rather prominent noses and big personalities, both came to England from Italy and both are usually made of wood, papier-mâché or more recently out of rubber. The slightly heavier ceramic puppet heads are clear relatives of the jovial or wicked characters that feature in every great puppet play. Punch's first public performance in Covent Garden in London was recorded by Samuel Pepys in 1662 and Pinocchio, originally called Pulliciniello, a character from the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, is one of many characters that entertained mass audiences and royals alike.

Originally performed on streets, markets, fairs and in bespoke puppet theatres, today the widest range of audiences for puppets is reached through TV shows such as *Sesame Street*, *The Muppet Show* or *Spitting Image* and large scale puppet shows such as the Handspring Puppet Company's *Warhorse* (2009) or the French street theatre company Royal de Luxe's *Sea Odyssey: Giant Spectacular* (2014), seen in Liverpool.











































On the tidal sands of the Wirral and Dee estuary, a ribbon of empty razor shells, clams, cockles are a daily occurrence. Following stormy nights, starfish are hurled up and washed onto the beaches. Some of the smell and taste of the sea lingers in the Creative Studio on the days when the fresh seabass, clams, shrimps, mussels and a single picture of a starfish in the middle of the table provide the cues and inspiration for the seafood and starfish plates.

In the 16th century the French Huguenot potter Bernard Palissy, a hydraulic engineer and land surveyor by trade, made a name for himself by creating ornate, realistic looking three-dimensional ceramic plates and platters heaving with creatures that represent and mimic the wildlife of his home in the Saintonge marshes, including fish, crustaceans, reptiles, snails, ferns and flowers. Palissy often combined plaster moulds with hand-modelling techniques and his lead-based glazes in shades of green, grey, blue, brown and red give his work a rustic look. I can see how the making of the moulds and the close observation of the waterways, marshes and the ground below the waterline enabled him to consider fossils as remains of once living organisms, making him one of the first Europeans to enunciate a theory consistent with today's understanding of the origins of fossils.

















































Passing a freshly ploughed field in Staffordshire, the furrows, with their moist and ripped-open red soil, glisten in the spring sun. At a particular angle, the furrows look like waves, shapeshifting and rippling as if constantly moving. And indeed they do, albeit through external forces like wind, rain and farm machinery and internally through a myriad of microbes and other organisms, oxides, salts, lime, sand and the growing seeds of the future crops. Our shapes appear likewise in flux, a becoming or unfolding; some landscape-like and some creature-like, they embody the immediacy of touch.













Illustrations of Chester show that where now the racecourse is located, Romans would have moored their boats. Now the Dee estuary has silted in, becoming the largest protected wetland in the Northwest of England, land use and tidal flows have changed over the centuries. Considering rising sea levels due to Climate change, it is easy to see how water could reclaim the drained former salt marshes below the Helsby sandstone cliff. It may well be that in 1000 years the sea will once again reach the now landlocked Chester.

Following an art competition run by Belong Chester care village, Year 1 pupils from Belgrave Primary School in Chester took part in a one-day clay workshop. During the day, pupils learned about some of the fossils found in Chester, imagined the area of their school submerged in the ocean, heaving with exotic fish. Working from freshly caught fish, clamps and shrimps bought at the fishmongers, each pupil created a fish from observing, touching and smelling the catch on the table. The session fused art, history, geography, and climate change, referencing the Grosvenor Museum's fossil collection.

























The curved shapes, full rich colours, smooth, velvety or hairy skin of fruit and vegetables, the subtle sweet smell, the seeds and leaves, the little spikes of cacti and gooseberries, perishable when harvested or cut, are captured in all their opulence in our glazed ceramic. There is a paradox at play in this naturalistic trickery as the clay, a material in itself derived from the Etrurian formation, is shaped into forms that mimic nature. In the mid-18th century, ceramic vessels naturalistically modelled and painted as vegetables and animals were very fashionable. The trend probably originated in France or Germany and was soon taken up in England; tureens looked like cauliflowers, chicken, bundles of asparagus, green and red cabbage, melons and smaller vessels looked like lemons, pineapples or pears. Pottery factories employed artists and artisans to innovate and dazzle with lifelike three-dimensional representations of fruit, vegetables, game and poultry.

Inspired by Rococo, the Wedgewood Company produced distinctive cauliflower teapots around 1760 and other naturalistically moulded earthenware representing fruits and vegetables. Much older sculptural representations of food can be found in the Egyptian section of the British Museum or in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. All manner of foods were carved in stone and wood or formed out of clay and stucco and placed in the chambers of the pyramids, warranting an endless supply of food for the journey from one life to the next.



































There is always time at the beginning or end of a session to squeeze the clay into a little mouse. I call them kiln mice, since they can always find a little bit of space even on the fullest kiln shelf. We live with these tiny fellows with their nervous noses, they run around, underneath the floorboards of our garden sheds and houses. Besides mice, we imagined visiting the zoo in Chester, modelling a lion and a parrot.























Aesop's fable, *The Crow and the Pitcher* (Perry Index, 390), relates to ancient observations of the behaviour of crows and ravens, now confirmed by recent scientific studies that birds belonging to the corvid family demonstrate goal-directed behaviour that is indicative of a complex brain, can process causal knowledge and can learn to use tools and adapt behaviours.

Working from observations using jugs and taxidermic crows from the Grosvenor collection, the ceramic panels created with a darker range of glazes feature the scene of Aesop's fable and embody the implicit message 'where there is a will, there is a way', especially in tumultuous and difficult times.

In 15th century Florence Luca della Robbia founded the famous Della Robbia family ceramic workshop which specialised in large scale coloured ceramic reliefs, often rotund, depicting religious scenes surrounded by ornamental floral borders. Luca invented the tin glazed, terracotta statues and reliefs that glow in their bright blues, yellows, greens and shades of white. In the 19th century a small pottery workshop in Birkenhead, guided by the principles of the Arts & Crafts movement that advocated the uses of local labour and local material such as the red clay found in nearby Moreton, revived the skills, techniques and styles of the original Della Robbia workshop.

Founded in 1894 by Harold Rathbone, the Della Robbia Pottery, Birkenhead, produced brightly coloured architectural and decorative ceramics using lustrous lead glazes and relief modelling techniques. The product range included ornate fireplace surrounds showing allegorical scenes interwoven with plants and animals and bespoke panels for churches, civic centres and private homes.





















Ceramic fish on pages 52-29 created by Year 1 pupils at Belgrave Primary School, Chester. All other ceramics created by Janice, Barbara, Barbara, Gene, June, Stanley, Gabby, Bill, Sally, Judy, Doreen, Sheila, Shirli, Ian, Margaret, Chris, Norman and Pat at Belong Chester care village and Marion, Ron, Angela, Jim, Denys, Sandra, Diane and June from the Grosvenor group.

Sleeve photo by Katie Buchanan (2022), Belgrave Primary School, Chester. All other photos by Brigitte Jurack.

Thanks to all colleagues and family supporters at Belong Chester care village, The Nursery in Belong Chester, Grosvenor Museum, Chester, and to Tabitha Moses and Laura Yates at the Bluecoat. Additional thanks to Diane Shufflebottom and Rudi Morris (Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University Ceramic Technicians) for kiln firing support, Maeve Thompson and Yvonne Mullaney (BA Fine Art, MMU) for glazing support and Isabelle Weaver-Jones (BA Fine Art with Graphic Design, Chester University) for workshop support. Design by Alan Dunn.

Published in Great Britain in 2023 by the Bluecoat, School Lane, Liverpool L1 3BX.  
[thebluecoat.org.uk](http://thebluecoat.org.uk)

ISBN 978-1-9164015-4-9

*Where the Arts Belong* is generously supported by The Rayne Foundation.

