Metaphors with Clay: Embodying the Maker in the Made

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# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Clay In My Hands</strong></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Topic</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Position</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims and Objectives</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clay In My Hands</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Clay in Mind</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embodiment</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embodied Practice, Embodied Object</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapeutic Practice</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerful Gesture</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Exhibition</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summaries</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. The Mothering of a Maker</strong></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother/Maker</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Three Themes
   Purpose
   Anger
   Anxiety
   Summary

4. Gesture as Abstracted Action
   Poke
   Squeeze
   Pull
   Cut
   Drop
   Summary

5. Internal Geography
   Lived Landscape
   Jug and Bowls
   Squeezes
   Drop-pots
   Waves
   Summary
List of Figures

1.1 Peter Voulkos working at Lake Lotawana, Kansas City, Missouri, circa 1984.

1.2 Peter Voulkos, 1994, Tsunami, wood-fired stoneware, 101.6 x 81.3 x 68.6 cm. Collection of Anna Adair Voulkos, Oakland.

1.3 Vilma Henkelman, circa 1994, Blue Sister, stoneware, 110 cm.

1.4 Wet pot by Jane Sawyer at Prue Venables and Jane Sawyer Ceramic Workshop, SASA, 10/04/06, Adelaide. Photograph by author.

1.5 Jane Sawyer, circa 2007, Pillow bowl, terracotta, dimensions unknown.

1.6 Louise Bourgeois, 1982, Femme Couteau, marble.

1.7 Louise Bourgeois, 1974, Destruction of the Father, plaster, latex, wood, fabric, 238 x 362 x 248.4 cms.


1.9 Lucio Fontana, 1959, Concetto spaziale / Attese (waiting), water based paint on canvas 102 x 125 cm. Private Collection, Italy.

1.10 Lucio Fontana, 1964, Concetto spaziale, oil on canvas, 82 x 65 cm.

1.11 Lucio Fontana, 1949, Arlecchino (harlequin), polychrome ceramic 54 x 31 x 21 cm. Private collection, Milan.


3.4 Sophia Phillips, 2008, *Untitled (squeeze)*, porcelain, 7 x 2.5 x 1.75 cms approx., photograph by Michael Kluvanek.

3.5 Sophia Phillips, 2008, *Untitled (squeezes)*, porcelain, dimensions variable, 7 x 2.5 x 1.75 cms approx., photograph by Michael Kluvanek.


Glossary

**Action**: describes the actual physical movement that can embody the sentiments of the overall gesture (Chapter Four).

**Affect**: used in its conventional medical sense, as ‘the external expression of emotion attached to ideas or mental representations of objects.’[^1]

**Analogy**: a comparison between things or ideas that share similarities.

‘**Art**’: format aims to indicate assumptions made about art in the western world, in particular the dichotomy of ‘conceptual’ or ‘high art’ and ‘practical/functional’ or ‘low art’ (craft).

**Art therapy**: a modality that focuses on the processes of making rather and the interpretation of artistic products. Associated with psychotherapy and psychiatry.

**Arts practice**: the practice of making, thinking about, and communicating through the made object.

**Convention**: the accepted definition, practices and attitudes of western culture that do not necessarily convey or acknowledge the (complex) reality.

‘**Craft**’: references the dichotomy mentioned in definition of ‘art’.

**Embodiment**: the physical expression of abstract ideas, feelings or experiences;

**Function-based**: term used to describe the functional/utilitarian basis of the jug and the bowls included in this thesis which are in actuality, conspicuously non functional.

**Gesture**: the broader sentiment or intention that initiates, or expresses itself through, action.

**Metaphor**: ‘understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.’[^2]

**Spiritual**: a level of being and sensing that concerns the inner self (or soul). Not used to imply religious belief or practices.

**Therapeutic practice**: the practice of making for the enjoyment, satisfaction and restorative aspects that does not involve an arts therapist, psychoanalysis, or psychiatric treatment.


Summary

This research has involved the charting of a personal and emotional landscape. Through an interpretation of my self, as an artist and human being, I aim to illuminate why and how clay has become such a potent material of metaphor in my practice. Though the investigation has been partially a personal one, research into some of the psychological and personal aspects of arts practice may reveal: (1) How arts practice can be a healing process, (2) Why clay is such a potent and enduring material in human civilisation, (3) How and why clay is such a suitable medium for the expression of emotion and experience. The resonance of emotional themes throughout the body of artwork is strengthened by an investigation of the therapeutic qualities of making, with a particular interest in the alternative methodology of art therapy. An investigation of the materiality of ceramics, clay, and the actual making process, reveals the embodiment of the maker in the work and the empowerment this offers to both artist and viewer. Although this research may appear at first to be speculative, a detailed analysis of the self in relation to philosophy, psychology, art therapy, and metaphor should testify to the importance of this research in the field of applied and theoretical visual arts practice.

The cyclic natures of making and of clay are two important aspects informing this research. Using the act of making as an echo of the process of creation, my work aims to explore the interdependence of ostensible opposites and the cyclic revolutions that propel the world, both interior and exterior. The abstract ambiguity of this art work references a greater force or dis/order of things, and the materiality and plasticity of clay. In my work I explore these connections directly, in relation to my experience as a maker and the metaphorical potential of clay. Emotional, psychological and social themes are integrated through the physical expression offered by clay. The power of gesture and the language of action are explored in this research using the spontaneity and curiosity of the making process.
I declare that: this thesis presents work carried out by myself and does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any university; to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and all substantive contributions by others to the work presented, including jointly authored publications, is clearly acknowledged.

Signed

Sophia Alice Phillips
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Chapter One

Clay In My Hands – An Introductory Chapter

This chapter serves both as an introduction, and a literature and artefact review. Analysing relevant texts and artefacts, I lay the foundations for more detailed discussion in subsequent chapters. Please note that in Chapters One, Five and the conclusion, the first person pronoun is used in preference to the third person pronoun, in order to affirm the subjective ownership of the experiences recorded in this research.

Analysis of Topic

Making meaning is what artists do. Often, when entering the internal space in which an artist conceives artworks, the exact outcome remains unknown, unacknowledged. Whether by accident or intention, the resulting product/s of an artist need not signal the end of the artistic process. Implicit in the work of artistic practice is the unknown viewer and the basic human urge to communicate in some form. Consciousness of potential audiences and their scrutiny may act as a barrier for expression during the making process, and yet part of the artistic process is the appraisal of one’s own work, whether in an informal or academic manner. An artist moves continually and simultaneously from being the involved creator to an entity that self-assesses his/her work. The movement from subject to object appears to continue for as long as an artwork exists, creating states of making and thinking about artwork that are entwined and interdependent. Perhaps inhabiting this space between subject and object is the most basic state of being a maker. The concurrent presence and absence of the artist is an integral point of reference in the body of artwork presented. Creating a language of gesture highlights the nuances of non-verbal communication and the desires and conflicts that occur in their expression; our shared needs and wishes, what it is simply to be, to live.

Through the embodied processes of making – particularly in clay – movements that may appear meaningless or arbitrary to outside observers are transformed into a form of
ritual, thus the language of the hands is translated from the physical or incidental, into the symbolic. From this symbolic and embodied space of making an artist can find a deeper, possibly spiritual form of nourishment and satisfaction. This sense of restoration an artist can feel towards his/her arts practice initiates the connection I make with ideas of self-nurture and, in this research, motherhood. In this exegesis I argue that making offers me a sense of inner nourishment through the conceptualisation of artists as mothers to their artwork (and themselves through the therapeutic qualities of arts practice). As a vehicle for expression, clay is a particularly useful material for the physical translation of emotional experience. The accumulation of knowledge and experience that results from this research may provide a better understanding of how philosophies of arts practice can be developed, including how the particular physical processes of making can affect and create artwork.

The rhythm and spontaneity found in repetitive processes has led me to attempt to express a sense of the making, as well as the made, in my work. It is my intention to reveal the mark of the hand and use it as a text to relay both the sensual experience of the work and the tacit knowledge that comes from developing any form of skill. This investigation can be directly related to the practice of living, and how physical and internal experiences are restored and revealed in the act of making.

Viewing the making process as a conceptual space has led me to consider how knowledge and experiences lodged in the hand or flesh are reflected upon and discussed in philosophical and cultural theory and how this in turn affects sensory perception and experience. This project has a focus on the processes of making, thus creating a different sense of the artwork where it may become a kind of play, rather than a technical achievement. By interpreting artwork from this alternate position, perception can transcend the boundaries of western dualism. These are boundaries that silently but firmly direct the exchanges that occur between artist, artwork, and viewer. An

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3 Major cultural theorists: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Elizabeth Grosz, Paul Rodaway and Yi-Fu Tuan. Only Grosz is discussed in depth throughout this exegesis because of the particular relevance of some of her writing, the ideas of the remaining theorists act as a premise for this research and the ideas that are developed.
expansion and exposure of the space between conventionally\textsuperscript{4} estranged opposites creates the potential for alternative interpretations of artwork, to both artist and viewer.

Subject Position
This research has developed from both subjective experience and theoretical analysis. I have taken from my personal experience of making as well as academic resources, topics including psychology, art therapy, feminist theory, phenomenology, and the work of other artists. However, my relationship with clay is the starting point for the entire exegesis and in order to establish the personal significance that I attribute to clay and wheel-throwing, a comprehensive discussion of subject position is necessary.

I come from a background of ceramics; for me that is simply playing with clay, something I have been doing for most of my life. Sometimes I hate working with clay; the way it flops and sags, the almost wilful nature of the material, and the way you must always be aware while making without being over vigilant or controlling. Other times, rare but worth waiting for, making with clay offers the most wonderful release and satisfying expression. In those moments, time passes without my noticing, and in terms of work I feel I am doing something productive, that is, there is a tangible result waiting at the end.

My first experience with a potter’s wheel was almost an accident. Through various circumstances at the age of eighteen, I was encouraged to watch a woman make a pot. As I watched, hypnotised by the spiralling clay, I felt I could watch her forever. A pot was coaxed from the clay; moving gradually upwards, from nowhere it seemed, the clay confidently adopting the spaces between her firm but gentle hands. A world of earth, and transformative fire opened itself up to me. When I actually tried to throw, I realised it was not as effortless as it appeared. My stubbornness made me persist, despite the edges of the wheel hub digging into my arms, the tiredness in the muscles of my wrists, and the grittiness of clay sandpapering the skin on my hands. As I continued to practice I found that time would pass by without my being aware of it, and the meditative

\textsuperscript{4} Convention: the accepted definition, practices and attitudes of western culture that do not necessarily convey or acknowledge the (complex) reality.
qualities of making became clearer to me as thoughts flowed through my head without censoring or judgement. I began to relate to clay as an extension of my flesh, and through this conception, I also related pots, clay, and the processes of making to certain aspects of life – for instance the concept of maker as mother which is discussed in detail in Chapter Two. In some pots I saw myself and my own experiences in an actual and symbolic form.

The cycles that occur in life remind me of the various cycles inherent to pottery, where dry clay may be revived with water and kneaded until it is workable once again, or where a little tragedy like a smashed pot can become something new instead of something broken. There is a simple joy of making a mark on the three dimensional world of sight, sound, and touch, discovering what will actually happen instead of what we expect, or dread. I recapture these impulses with clay in my hands.

My interest in arts practice comes from a curiosity that is embodied in my pots. I often find myself wondering - not necessarily what the intentions of an artwork are - but why make at all? The physical act of making has often led me down very different paths from my original intention, and it is only later with a little distance that I can see what actually happened. This diversion from conscious intention is what I love about clay and making, as well as what can frustrate me immensely. Yet frustration keeps me going.

The following quotation from artist Gabriel Orozco is one I relate to closely in my practice:

You have to like imperfection, rehearsing imperfection. There’s something very powerful about disappointment - something creative always emerges later. It’s essential to learn to be freely imperfect.5

The most interesting pots I have seen exploit the material: a ‘liquid skin’ that encases the interior space and simultaneously forms the exterior, pots that use so-called imperfections (such as cracks, uneven rims, inconsistencies in the surface and so on) to designate each as an individual among many. To modify clay too much can often remove those tendencies I enjoy so much. This attitude of acceptance and discovery

5 Gabriel Orozco and Angeline Scherf, Gabriel Orozco: Trabajo (Koln: Verflag Der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 1992), back cover.
that I have found in the practice of ceramics is one that has been absorbed in my personal life, and as such I am not only grateful for the chance introduction to this area of making, I feel a deep affection for the practice of pottery and my material, clay.

Aims and Objectives
The main aim of this project is to broaden my understanding of my relationship with clay, thus establishing (1) how arts practice can be a healing process, (2) why clay is such a suitable medium for physical expression, (3) the ability of action and gesture to abstract emotion, and (4) how this has been embodied in my work. It is argued that the unique physical qualities of clay, its role in the development of cultures and its ability to accept the impressions and expressions of the human body make it a material that can express and heal conflicts of the artist.

Ceramic vessels have an extensive history of use, with specific forms associated with different aesthetics and function, in this research I develop my own reading of the forms of the bowl and jug which are viewed as embodiments of my own experiences, as well as those that are shared amongst many. Alongside function-based works I have produced a ‘sculptural’ and wheel-thrown body of work which abstracts gestures and analogies considered during the making process. To balance this practicable aspect, theoretical research on ideas of embodiment in the making process will be taken into the analysis - these include the therapeutic qualities of making, non-verbal communication, and different perspectives of perception.

Crafting a language of the hands and sense of touch provides an alternative to common approaches of communication, which can be as exclusive as they are enlightening. Applying touch as an alternative form of expression transcends views characteristic of a dualistic mode of thinking which, by implication devalues the body:

In this kind of knowing what is known is lodged in the hand and exercised as skill, it thus does not correspond with knowledge as we understand it as reflection or description.6

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A haptic accumulation of knowledge tends to resist explanation and definition. This thesis as a whole attempts to provide a glimpse into the psychological and physical processes that result in artwork and arts practice.

Taking into account the physicality of processes in ceramics, it seems to me a natural progression that work made by hand should be experienced by hand, thus I invite those engaging with my artwork to touch it. An active interaction between object, maker and viewer moves beyond conventions of the art object being untouchable and idolised, and makes a direct physical connection between the artist and the viewer. This integration of the viewer’s entire experience of the exhibition - tactile, physical and thought-full—may implicitly emphasise the power of individual and shared experience, the gap between and the space filled.

Methodology

The methodology of this project addresses alternatives to conventional views of objects and their construction. Recent writing and thinking in the field of craft theory provides a valuable resource in qualitative analysis of practice which I hope to emulate. Tony Fry, who has written extensively on the topic, defines craft practice as ‘the mode being, and being with, the being of making and the made.’

This viewpoint describes a conceptual space that engages with the action and time behind artworks. It is important to note that this approach does not present an exclusive set of boundaries. Fry’s words are specific enough to be more suitable for some artists/craftspeople than others; simultaneously they are flexible enough to accommodate past historical or traditional practices and contemporary work.

The importance of connection between maker and material cannot be overstated in the practice of my work, and that of countless ceramicists (and artists). As an arts writer who has explored the role of gender in ceramics practice, Moira Vincentelli states: ‘many potters seem to suggest that they are shaped and constructed by their work just as

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7 ibid., 254.
much as they may construct the piece themselves.\textsuperscript{8} From this point of view my work references itself in a cyclic manner; objects produced have their own influence on consequent works, and so on. As a methodology, action research lends itself to my practice, encouraging the development and refinement of a tactile language of the handmade clay form. Just as powerfully, the theory that lies behind my conceptual framework plays an integral part in the development of physical works. Concepts and metaphors come to rest in my thoughts while I am making, and affect my direction through interpretation and criticism.

Action research engenders powerful learning for participants through combining research with reflection on practice. The development of self-understanding is important in action research … because of the extent to which the analysis of data and the interpretive process of developing meanings involves the self as a research instrument.\textsuperscript{9}

Another cyclically constructed methodology that is used in this research comes from the field of art therapy. Like action research methodology, art therapy addresses the process of creativity itself as well as the research process. The following description of the making process in the area of arts therapy is easily adapted to the format of this project. Although these stages are described sequentially, authors Vassiliki Karkou and Patricia Sanderson argue that these phases of creativity can occur in any order, cycle and go back and forth freely but tend to progress in the order quoted below.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Preparation}. Familiarisation with artistic activities and collection of information and materials are often explored in this first stage of the process. Direction, purpose and meaning are important aspects for starting the creative process.

\textit{Incubation}. This stage is more difficult, mainly because it involves not only working, but also not working (e.g. resting), and dealing with both what is known and the frustration of the unknown or undiscovered.

\textit{Illumination}. Illumination is that part of the creative process when something new and meaningful is generated. Something, that although perhaps not complete, is

\textsuperscript{8} Moira Vincentelli, \textit{Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels} (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 238.


\textsuperscript{10} Vassiliki Karkou and Patricia Sanderson, \textit{Arts Therapies: A Research-Based Map of the Field} (Cornwall: Elsevier Churchill Livingstone, 2006), 91.
satisfying and fulfilling. It is the ‘aha’ moment, the time of inspiration and enlightenment.

Verification. This is the final stage, during which the final clarifications and modifications are applied to what has been created.\textsuperscript{11}

Within my research I have identified four specific phases which cycle as described in both the phases of art therapy mentioned above, and action research. Inherent in the processes of ceramics there are cycles, a method of creating which offers a framework in which a maker can reside, and in many ways must follow,\textsuperscript{12} but these physical processes also translate into an internal process of research.

There is a connection and synergy in the process of kneading the clay and engaging with it manually, where it can be conceptualised as the maker’s flesh, an addition to the body of the maker. As the wet clay is removed from the wheel, or the hand, an object that is part of, but physically distant from its maker, is born. To engage with this form once it leaves the wheel or hand is engaging with flesh on a different level. If throwing and sculpting shapes with clay is viewed as the forming of another body, altering it once removed from the rudimentary making process is like making marks on the body or using a limb as a tool, altering its physical and metaphorical course in life.

1. Play/Making
In the initial stages of making, I am free to play, experiment and explore the limits of material with no specific results expected, rather I see what occurs without trying to dictate. During the exploration of certain forms and ideas my mood is changeable, and with these changes of mood, different results arise to be considered and potentially refined during the later stages of the research development.

2. Distance/Firing
The process of firing my work was often not just a physical transformation of the clay; the literal distance created by placing pots into the enclosure of the kiln separates me

\textsuperscript{11} ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} I.e. kneading or preparing the clay, forming it into desired shape, allowing it to dry, transformation through firing. Deviating from these basic processes often results in broken or ruined pots, for instance, not allowing the clay to dry before firing may result in the explosion of pots.
from the raw clay figuratively also. I become committed to a resilient and concrete form with an integrity that can only be broken, not reformed as raw clay can be. A new object is formed during this transformation by fire; work is considered differently when removed from the kiln, its new form is renegotiated in my mind and considered.

The physical transfer of work that occurred during this period of research also offered an interesting perspective. I had to remove my work, unfired, from my studio and transfer it to another studio to be fired. The simple change in light, placement, and destination both during the trip outdoors and then into another studio often gave me a altered view of my work, that affected its direction, and final presentation. As a result of this transfer I was able to see my work in a different light and gain the distance an artist seems to require in order to begin to progress creatively.

3. Writing
Writing is primarily a tool for the development of my work, and with alterations, much of my reflection has been incorporated into this exegesis. The less structured and academically focussed writing has also been included in Chapters Four and Five (in footnotes) to illuminate the many dimensions of actions and gestures, as well as my personal motivations to make certain shapes and use specific materials.

During this stage the writing process is a deeper and more self aware kind of reflection outside of the actual making process. Because I am not directly engaging with the clay, the distance initiated during the separation from my work whilst firing develops further. Opportunities to refine and develop certain concepts and formal qualities suggest themselves in the act of writing and reflecting.

There is often quite some time between the reflective process of writing and beginning to go back to the clay to refine. In fact writing and making are Two things I do not do at the same time, each needs my full attention. Importantly, the distance created by these breaks between reflection and making offer me a better understanding of my intentions and the steps I must take to execute them in clay. Additionally, the formal
reflection exemplified in this exegesis becomes less confusing, more directed and productive.

4. Refinement
This stage of research takes numerous forms, all requiring a certain amount of distance that is initiated previously during the firing, and then reflection of writing. By discussing work with others, listening to the pots without forcing meaning onto them, and experimenting with different configurations in the personal space of my studio I am able to envision where my work could go conceptually as well as formally. The writing I have previously done is often a guide and catalyst for this phase of refinement.

When the reflection of creative writing has come to a rest further making ensues wherein the concepts I have identified are refined within the limits of the framework I have recognised. I experiment again with different configurations of concept and gesture, which, whether this project is finished or not, leads me back to the first stage of my making process - the play and exploration of material and concepts. Thus the cycle begins again and continues. Even at this point of presentation, the concepts I am dealing with will continue to cycle, thus my research remains unfinished in many ways, a certain amount of resolution along with ambiguity is intended to demonstrate the impossibility of entire resolution. What is produced during this particular project will continue to waver between opposed ideas and develop further.

The flexibility of these combined methodologies allows an in-depth investigation to take place that explores paradoxes of experience without being confined by methodological structure. Using this flexible methodology and the qualities of clay, I aim to bring to the surface the underlying nuances of non-verbal communication in arts practice and artworks. The importance of gesture in this investigation cannot be overstated. As a form of communication the bodily movements involved in the making process become a way to loosen the lines of communication between the internal and the external. Things come out freely, loosely, unselfconsciously, that are wonderful and amusing, giving the maker a sense of wellbeing, enjoyment and self discovery; the potential for enjoyment in the processes of making are obvious, what is perhaps more
complex and fascinating, is how experiences that are evoked or embodied in artwork are changeable in their affect\(^{13}\), like memories that waver between joy and sadness. I think gesture is able to capture the nuances of these experiences and through its use and exploration in this research, become a kind of therapeutic practice.

With an accommodating structure, the restorative and personal aspects of arts practice are explored using metaphor as well as theoretical analysis. Both critical and creative writing articulate the interactions that occur between artist, material, artwork, and the exterior world. These two different modes of communication present a marked contrast – through this comparison, I aim to emphasise the ambivalence with which I view my arts practice and the different perspectives that present themselves. The combination of creative and critical writing echoes the state of the maker as an inhabitant of the space between subject and object. This project rests upon the assumption of paradox, ambivalence and ambiguity in emotion and experience; the marriage of these different approaches to communication is a direct example of the conflicting experiences I aim to portray in this thesis as an entirety. In many respects this research is based in an area ‘in between’; a focus on the creative process can generate different levels of significance within artwork. Using multiple layers of meaning, this exegesis exposes some of the tensions and contradictions that exist in this particular arts practice, as well as those that others can relate to, such as experiences of the maternal and the body.

**Clay In My Hands**

The field of ceramics has countless associations including histories rich with the conceptual, technical, and practical achievements of material culture. These aspects of ceramics are an underlying influence both for my own practice and its interpretation. Convention suggests there is a gap between functional ‘craft’ and conceptual ‘art’ but in practice, particularly in an area such as ceramics, there is a large overlap of creative influences and objectives. The delineation between ‘art’ and ‘craft’ is extremely problematic leading to heated discussions within the visual arts and crafts community. Subsequently, the deeper concerns surrounding ‘craft’, ‘art’ and functionality have been put aside.

\(^{13}\) See Glossary p v.
For the purposes of this exegesis I have made the following assumptions: (1) ‘art’, ‘craft’, and visual arts are of the same essence, and are best described as forms of making or the general term ‘arts practice’; (2) the terms artist and maker are interchangeable; (3) there is significant tension and blurring of boundaries between ‘art’ and ‘craft’ and the issue of functionality in ceramics, particularly pottery. These assumptions allow me to explore my practice in relation to this conflict in the field of contemporary ceramics without being overcome by the wealth of discussion there is about functionality in contemporary craft, and the shared territories of ‘art’ and ‘craft’.

The qualities of clay are a very important part of the content and direction of this research. Clay possesses a malleability, versatility and flexibility without which the expressive and gestural content of this work would not have been possible. The durability of fired ceramic and its varied use in civilisation allows the ceramic object to be imbued with the essence of its maker and all the hands that have navigated its contours. A key concern of this thesis as an entirety is how and why an object can become embodied with the tactile knowledge, experience and emotions of its maker.

As a consequence of the physicality of processes and natural tendencies of the material, clay can act as a carrier of marks made by the body thus becoming a mimetic point or record of experience. There is an almost inherent gestural and sculptural aspect to clay that appeals to the hand; it is a material inclined to accept impressions of the body. These qualities have enticed me to deliberately alter wheel-thrown forms. Concepts and gestures developed during the act of making spontaneously inform the abstract work I make and I am often drawn to do things that are proscribed in functional work. A certain element of this fascination with the forbidden sensual aspects of ceramics and clay relates to my own impulsiveness/compulsiveness when engaging with deliberate modification of the surface and form. Intentionally pushing a pot to collapse has frequently proved just as informative a learning process as accepted methods of pottery. This is also a successful way to avoid an overly developed feeling of preciousness with individual pieces of work, and consequently to progress creatively. The acceptance of

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mistakes whilst working in ceramics is an attitude that can facilitate the practice of patience and humility in numerous forms of communication and creativity.

The conceptual basis of this project is very much tied to the physical act of throwing on a potter’s wheel and the tactile relationship between clay and hand, both in practice and in the development of a theorised approach to the processes of making. Although the end products in this project are ceramic, it is important to note that this investigation of alternative theoretical aspects of practice may encompass a broad range of creative practice.

With Clay In Mind

Numerous ceramic artists have influenced the direction and content of this project, particularly their approaches to the medium of clay and to wheel throwing. The Three artists discussed here, Jane Sawyer, Vilma Henkelman and Peter Voulkos, have formed their work predominantly (if not entirely) on a potter’s wheel. A discussion of these artists’ work introduces the power of expression through the medium of clay and the exploitation of clay’s malleability, flesh-like tones and consistency in their work.

Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) has had an enormous influence in the field of ceramics, moving the medium of clay, tied to its potential for utility, into the art world at large at a time when ceramics was the poor cousin of sculpture. In his lifetime Voulkos was an artist who was prepared to challenge the status quo and for this he was a recipient of appreciation as well as consternation. Voulkos’ exploration of gesture, movement, and abstract expressionism in the form, decoration and process of making ceramics laid the way for experimental ceramics, particularly wheel-formed ceramics, during the nineteen fifties, sixties, seventies and onwards (see figures 1.1, 1.2). This discussion of his work and connection to the making process in particular will help set the backdrop for the investigation of the gestural, sensual, and embodied aspects of making with clay in my practice. Like Voulkos I test the boundaries, let loose with spontaneity, make


16 ibid., 46.
mistakes and learn to love them. However the initial gestures and even violence used during my research was examined internally, and the formal and emotional refinement of these sentiments and experiences, refined. My work is sparser and more focussed on the abstraction of gesture and emotion captured in an object as opposed to the direct translations of process as art.

Voulkos’ ceramics are monumental in size, primal, heaving, and have a presence of timelessness and vitality. He created some forms by throwing several different shapes on the wheel, then joining them roughly, rapidly and expressively. Although the sculptural aspect of construction plays a large part in forming the final product, Voulkos maintained that the process of throwing was the foundation of his artwork.\footnote{ibid., 47.}

The actual physical act is of the greatest importance to him and cannot be detached from the meaning of the image itself. The hand moves, feeling is transmitted, in the now quick, now light, now violent or probing action of the artist’s hand, a gesture makes feeling intelligible.\footnote{Karen Tsujimoto, ‘Peter Voulkos: The wood-fired work’, in Rose Slivka and Karen Tsujimoto, \textit{The Art of Peter Voulkos} (New York: Kodasha International, 1995), 98, 114.}

Using the expressivity of the making process Voulkos engaged with the clay in such a way as to transmit the energy with which he approached making and indeed life.\footnote{Rose Slivka and Karen Tsujimoto, \textit{The Art of Peter Voulkos} (New York: Kodasha International, 1995), 13, 115.} Through gesture, process as art, and captured movement Voulkos’ work portrays several layers of meaning.
Voulkos’ work challenges the pot and vessel as staples of function as well as the historical conventions of pottery and its relation to the ‘fine arts’. His experimentation with size and volume also removes wheel-thrown ceramics from a domestic scale and into a monumental one that challenges conventions and expectation (see figure 1.3). This rearrangement of the vessel creates artwork that integrates the underlying presence of function and tradition, as well as something beyond that; something that slashes into what is intact, what is safe. When thinking about Voulkos’ work the disruption is what strikes me the most. It is not just expressive, his work contains a rebellion that is angry, destructive and through the work’s monumental size, almost frightening.

Despite the knowledge that Voulkos was apparently an extremely charming man, I am also reminded that he battled drug addiction and alcoholism and I wonder if for all his purported charm and skill, he was not himself, very troubled internally. Maybe slapping clay together, shocking people, stepping on and hitting his creations made him feel he could conquer one world, that frustrations and pain could be transferred onto clay and deposited in the fire. I imagine his peace when throwing, the calm and measured moves, compared to the frenetic activity of constructing his final pieces from

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thrown forms, the incongruity is striking. Like the ambivalent affect of much of my work, this makes more sense of the man – to me his nature is revealed and lived in his work. I see someone pitted against himself, torn between being one thing and another. In many ways, the struggle every person faces at some point, or daily. Opposites coexist in the same entity. Sometimes they slide across one another, other times they grind.

Figure 1.2
Peter Voulkos, 1994, Tsunami, wood fired stoneware.

Embracing action and gesture, Peter Voulkos’ work provides an excellent example for my examination of different approaches to the nature of clay as a material. What I take from Voulkos work is an attempt at freeness of expression of emotion and experience. I would like to think it is with the same enjoyment that I approach my work that Voulkos did - when experimenting I am at play, free.

The expressive, ‘rough-and-ready’ quality of Voulkos’ oeuvre can also be seen in the work of Dutch artist Vilma Henkelman which relates to many of the main concerns of this research. Not only is Henkelman’s work deeply sensual in its making, she engages
with the process of throwing with an intensity and lack of self-consciousness that is
disarming and engaging. Some of Henkelman’s work has involved making the largest
pots she can muster which are then altered and rearranged using a variety of tools
including spades, pieces of wood, and her own body. The vessels are re-made as the
artist replaces and rearranges pieces of clay that have been obliterated or knocked away
from the body of the pot (see figure 1.4). Mending the battered clay-flesh of her pots,
Henkelman assumes the role of creator and destroyer without a clear distinction
between the two apparently incompatible positions. Work such as this explores the
spontaneity of making, the power of ownership and gesture (both metaphorical and
actual), and provides an excellent example of how makers may become embodied in
their own work through a distinctly physical expression.

The forceful alteration, even destruction, performed in Henkelman’s practice can be a
source of discomfort for some, leaving the viewer feeling a kind of sadness for her
beaten pots. And as writer Moira Vincentelli quite rightly points out in a discussion
of Henkelman’s work: ‘Violence is always disturbing but it is especially so when
perpetrated by a female because it contravenes gender stereotypes’. Yet Henkelman
offers a kind of redemption for her pots and perhaps herself as well; like haphazard
patches, the seams and rough joins of her re-made pots give character to her work, a
sense of being, of having been.

Another feature of Vilma Henkelman’s work is her conception of the making process.
Henkelman experiences the clay ‘as a direct entrance to the womb of mother earth’, a
description that, in essence, is very similar to the conceptual and metaphoric basis
of this research. Whilst connecting to her own ‘mother earth’ when she makes,
Henkelman becomes a creator in her own right – a kind of mother to her battered pots.

21 Vilma Henkelman in Moira Vincentelli, ‘Embodyments: Women’s Ceramic Traditions and the Work
Council, University of Northumbria, 1999), 127.
22 ibid.
23 ibid.
24 ibid.
Like Henkelman and Voulkos, Jane Sawyer is another ceramic artist who feels a deep connection with clay. Sawyer’s work is more gentle than that of Henkelman and Voulkos, and although she does alter her work in unconventional ways, her work functions in a domestic context. An integration of the dual concerns of function and concept in Sawyer’s work makes for an interesting comparison to the expressive, roughened appearance of Henkelman and Voulkos’ work. Based in Melbourne, Sawyer is a potter whose conceptual interests are similar to my own. Not only is the forming process of throwing shared, Sawyer’s practice investigates many of the same concerns as my own, for instance: the embodiment of the maker in the made, the softness and fluidity of clay as a carrier of the human mark, and an interest in the deeper reasons why artists choose to make.
Using freely formed vessels with soft curves and throwing lines, Sawyer’s work is pared back yet generous in proportions and appearance. Sawyer’s work references the process and intent of its making, as well as the pot’s potential as a functional vessel. Rich with the subtle depth of lightly applied creamy white slip over the deepened orange red of terracotta, Sawyer makes her mark without a heavy hand, transforming spontaneous and confident gestures into decoration - or one might say, a declaration - of quiet confidence and facility. Sawyer’s work has been compared to a kind of dance by writers Shane and Jane Kent, who describe her vessels as ‘… spontaneous, loosely choreographed dances … the result of a delicate relationship of interdependence between clay, wheel and self where causality is blurred’. On closer inspection the loosely applied unctuous slip reveals the cycles of the wheel, the flowing lines tracing the journey of the hand, brush and pot. These lines and the soft and flowing qualities of the pots themselves embody fluidity. Finished with a glossy clear glaze, Sawyer’s pots give a sense of wetness and life, a

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fascination Sawyer relates to her upbringing alongside the Murray River in Victoria.\textsuperscript{26} The process of throwing itself also involves a lot of water and wetness and it is perhaps the look of a wet pot just off the wheel that Sawyer’s glossy clear glaze attempts to emulate, capturing a fleeting moment in tangible form (see figures 1.4 and 1.5).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{pillow_bowl}
\caption{Jane Sawyer, circa 2007, \textit{Pillow bowl}, terracotta.}
\end{figure}

For Sawyer the objects she makes become a communication in themselves between her and her viewer, completing a cycle or dance of life.\textsuperscript{27} She writes in reference to her own practice:

\begin{quote}
… I look first to the past …

to the Buddhist sensibility of my Japanese teachers

who spoke of a pot having character of personality;

to my Australian teacher who spoke of clay and the wheel as significant others

… then to metaphors …
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} Jane Sawyer, ‘Artist talk’ during \textit{Jane Sawyer and Prue Venables Ceramic Workshop}, South Australian School of Art, October 4 -5, 2006, Adelaide.

clay as flesh
responding to touch
reflecting touch

objects as bodies
 to engage with
to hold, mouth, caress

making as love
a quest for fulfilment
eternally and unavoidably tied to the unknown

… then to cultural theory …
the centrality of the unconscious
the caress – seeking the unknown slippage,
revealing through movement
sensual perception and mind/body interrelations
 fluidity and raw wetness … 28

The questioning of relations between maker and made, evident in Sawyer’s work and words, provide a notable example for this project’s attempt to identify the restorative and enlightening qualities of arts practice.

Each of these potters has engaged with clay in a way appreciated by others; they have also interacted with clay on a basic, yet deeply felt and personal level. The embodiment of gesture and process in each of these oeuvres has been applied in different ways, all of which focus on the malleable and versatile characteristics of clay as a material. Through a lived, sensual, and bodily perception of these qualities these artists have developed different forms of gestural expression. The following discussion of the fluid boundaries and interactions of perception will introduce the concept of embodiment and elucidate the connection between embodiment, perception, and the therapeutic qualities of making as related to metaphor, process, and clay.

**Perception**

Perception is unavoidably directed and influenced by personal histories and physical peculiarities. In addition to the perspective of the individual, experiences of perception

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may be linked, through the exterior world and places and objects, to a shared or common experience of a group of individuals. According to Yi-Fu Tuan:

Human beings not only discern geometric patterns in nature and create abstract spaces in the mind, they also try to embody their feelings, images and thoughts in tangible material. Place is a kind of object. Places and objects define space, giving it a geometric personality. Objects and places are centres of value. They attract and repel in finely shaded degrees. To attend to their reality even momentarily is to acknowledge their reality and value.²⁹

This quote is an affirmation of the beliefs and ideas that inspire my arts practice and was a point of departure for this research project. Writer Paul Rodaway has discussed perception in a way that is useful to this research, developing an argument for what he calls ‘sensuous geographies’ - an integration of space, place, and perception:

‘…perception - as a combination of sensation and cognition - is inclusive of both passive encounter with environmental stimuli and active exploration of that environment, as the body moves through space and time interacting with a world’.³⁰

Rodaway's theories incur a blurring of boundaries and objectives that relates closely to ideas I am exploring in my research. The simultaneous experience of passivity and activity in the act of perception is also echoed in the act of reflection that accompanies perception. An integration of distance and proximity allows memory and experience to permeate perception. As a form of embodied subjectivity, this is a core of my work. It is my aim to elaborate on the ideas of Rodaway and Tuan, and use my work as ‘sensuous geographies’ that describe different layers of experience and attachment.

**Embodiment**

As a result of an introduction to feminist theory I became aware of René Descartes’ idea of a mind/body split. This led me to consider my hands and intention as a ‘mind’ of making, and clay as a ‘body’. As I likened mind/body relations to those developed in making, and other experiences, I discovered that this view of being was inadequate.

²⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 15.
Descartes’ vision of the mind/body separation is a concept this research aims to confound, thus developing alternative ways of reflecting upon embodied experience.

My view of clay as a part of my flesh and as a conduit between the internal and external led me to the writing of Elizabeth Grosz and her writing about the ‘flesh’. Grosz discusses the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and other philosophers in her book *Volatile Bodies*:

[Merleau-Ponty] explores the interrelations of inside and outside, the subject and object, one sense and another in a common flesh – which he describes as the ‘crisscrossing’ of the seer and the visible, the toucher and the touched, the indeterminacy of the ‘boundaries’ of each of the senses, their inherent transposability, their refusal to submit to the exigencies of clear-cut separation or logical identity.31

The ‘crisscrossing’ Merleau-Ponty speaks about implies a shared ‘flesh’, a mutuality of awareness. In relation to my work this idea may go beyond the practice of making, and into the exposition of work. A shared experience of the world relates to the effects artworks have on a person’s relation to space, their own physicality and their thoughts; an inclusive and shared experience that is simultaneously individual. Merleau-Ponty’s idea of ‘flesh’ is a starting point from which the internal and emotional discussion of my own experiences with clay, the making and the made begins.

**Embodied Practice, Embodied Object**

Touch is a constant and profound exchange between people and the objects we encounter.32 Contemporary craft theorists maintain that some kind of spiritual nourishment or satisfaction can be acquired from the handmade in our lives. However in a disposable culture, taking the time to handle any object with much reverence or concentration is becoming an imposition to some people. Yet it would appear that many people and makers receive a great deal of satisfaction in making, viewing, touching, and handling made objects.

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In a collation of articles about the body politics involved with the applied arts, respected artist and writer Julian Stair notes that:

It would seem that craft … can be seen as a fundamental means of reinforcing our sense of self. If body and hand gestures are regarded as precursors of verbal language, then what are craft objects but material gestures of the body, operating as externalised, pre-linguistic expressions that through haptic engagement reinforce the very source they spring from.  

Though this quotation originally referred to the craft object in particular, under the assumptions I have made about arts practice (subsection Clay In My Hands) these ideas may be applied to many forms of handmade artwork. It is important to note that the haptic engagement between artist, viewer, material, and object are central to this argument, thus the handmade objects that are used or engaged with are the ‘externalised, pre-linguistic expressions’. This quotation reaffirms my argument that clay and the objects formed using clay are an embodiment of knowledge that is enriching and strengthens a sense of self and being in both maker and viewer.

**Therapeutic Practice**

On and off I have been playing with clay all my life. Making has been a reverential act in which I have been able to depart from consciousness of self and the distractions of the exterior world. The focus and concentration of what superficially appears to be a simple act, has often provided a safe place in which to process thoughts. More than this, making is an act of becoming that eludes the outward-facing physical and mental presence we associate with everyday reality; a reverie that is simultaneously calming and cathartic. The meditative properties of making are not unrecognised by the medical and arts community, however for me the act of making has become an ongoing and lifelong treatment.

Numerous artists describe the restorative aspects of making. The processes experienced by an artist/craftsperson are internal as well as external, remaining an implicit force embodied in an artwork and which I find compelling even without a complete explanation. The imagery and concepts different artists conjure can be unconscious or

extremely self-conscious but the desire to share, or perhaps cast like seeds, is the most interesting question for me. When viewing artwork, the most basic question (within and outside the arts or academic community) is what the artist’s intention is, and how work affects and reflects the viewer personally.

From my perspective, artists - or indeed anyone - would not create without at least some aspects of the making process serving them spiritually. As a professional artist (that is to say, someone who views their profession as being an ‘artist’ as opposed to someone who practices making more occasionally) there is no guarantee that one’s work will be exhibited to the greater public, appreciated, or recorded, but this does not mean arts practice is a worthless pursuit without such recognitions. In this respect some writing and theory about the practice of art therapy is relevant to my research. Although the work of art therapy participants is often reviewed and analysed in a psychotherapeutic context, the ultimate purpose of making is to communicate non-verbally, to provide a conduit to verbal communication and importantly, to enjoy meditative action. The made object becomes a bridge between the physical and the internal complexities of individuals. This simultaneous separation and connection between an object and its maker can be a useful tool when feelings and experiences are too painful, threatening, or unspeakable.34

As a medium, clay can be handled in several different ways and is able to accept the expression and aggression of gesture and action – it is malleable, generally inexpensive, robust, and reusable. These fundamental qualities make clay all the more suitable for unaffected physical and mental expressivity. In this research I examine the aspects of self-nurture that can be developed using clay, and relate them to the need for comfort and love that is, at its deepest root, human.

Art therapy is a relatively recent practice based on the ideas of psychotherapists including Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis.35 Carl Jung viewed creativity and


35 Vassiliki Karkou and Patricia Sanderson, Arts Therapies: A Research-Based Map of the Field (Cornwall: Elsevier Churchill Livingstone, 2006), 154.
imagination as remedial aspects of the human psyche, and posed that these qualities of human experience could reveal aspects of the ‘shadow’ self: ‘… the primitive side of the self that is generally unacceptable to the individual concerned and hence is experienced as either inferior or uncontrollable …’, which he considered responsible for many pathological behaviours. Jung also proposed that through the recognition and exploration of the ‘shadow’ self a person may gain the self-knowledge to understand and prevent maladaptive coping mechanisms: ‘To be conscious of it involves recognising the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential rule for any kind of self-knowledge’.

In their publication *Arts Therapies: A Research-Based Map of the Field*, Vassiliki Karkou and Patricia Sanderson discuss art therapy within the following parameters:

- A wide definition for the word ‘arts’ is retained.
- Attention shifts from the artistic product to the process of art making.
- Engagement in the arts develops on a preverbal level.
- Every art modality involves the person as a whole, including sensori-motor, perceptual, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual aspects.
- The arts have a healing or therapeutic potential.

In my research, the word ‘therapy’ and other related terms are placed within an altered context. This may allow these terms to expand from their traditionally clinical context into a more inclusive and less threatening artistic space - something closer to ‘beneficial practice’, rather than a cure for dysfunction. The fact that outside approval is not requisite to the motivation of many artists indicates that a form of internal recognition and satisfaction develops in the course of artistic practice. Therefore it could be argued that a kind of therapy is practiced independently by artists and makers during the creative process. This particular approach to the making process addresses the self, arts practice and the value of art and making in society.

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36 ibid., 13.
The interest in the practice of art as an adjunct to therapy was initiated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when psychiatrists and psychologists began using images created by mentally disturbed patients as a means for analysis and indicator of their mental state.\footnote{39} In its earlier days, from the turn of the nineteenth century and onwards into the twentieth century, art therapy was focussed on the analysis and interpretation of visual symbols.\footnote{40} However it has expanded to become an active therapy focussed on the physical process of making with an emphasis on the patient’s (rather than therapist’s) interpretation of images.\footnote{41}

Within the discipline of psychology there are various definitions of the term ‘therapy’. According to one of the most accepted definitions, therapy is ‘the treatment of disease or disorders, as by some remedial, rehabilitating, or curative process’. Alternatively, therapy may be seen as ‘a curative power or quality’ or ‘any act, hobby, task, program, etc., that relieves tension’.\footnote{42} These latter definitions can be related much more comfortably to arts practice, and in particular, the parameters of this project.

The principles and theories of art therapy offer an expanded perspective of how the arts enrich life as part of a professional domain, as well as more individual-based private practice. With this in mind, it is also important to note that it is the prerogative of each artist to define the nature of his or her practice. In the experiences documented and explored here, my arts practice is a therapeutic process. This project’s focus on mothering and nurture also connects with therapeutic interest in the ‘inner child’. Clients of art therapy are sometimes encouraged to access and heal their inner child in relation to past experiences and to the quality of the present.\footnote{43} When encouraged to recreate characteristics of their parents and their perceived shortcomings as well as a contrasting image of the ‘ideal’ parent in Two or Three dimensional form, participants

\footnote{39} Judith Rubin, \textit{Art Therapy: An Introduction} (Philadelphia: Brunner Mazel, 1999), 90-93.
\footnote{40} ibid.
\footnote{41} ibid., 63.
\footnote{43} Patricia Sherwood, \textit{The Healing Art of Clay Therapy} (Melbourne: Acer Press, 2004), 26-27.
of art therapy can, it is argued, discover how to become surrogate mothers and fathers to themselves.\textsuperscript{44}

Judith Rubin, an established art therapist with over forty years experience, defines art therapy as a practice that involves assessment and treatment in accordance to conventional psychology and psychiatry.\textsuperscript{45} She believes that making artworks for leisure, inside or outside psychiatric institutions, cannot necessarily be defined as ‘art therapy’, but rather as ‘therapeutic’.\textsuperscript{46} Rubin’s definition seems to be the most appropriate to the current research and I will use the term ‘therapeutic’, rather than ‘art therapy’ in relation to arts practice. Products of artistic experimentation can enable makers to discover and verbalize a personal language of symbols and images without structured therapy sessions. This can be a significant source of empowerment and offers an opportunity to explore territory that a person may not be able or willing to share in another way.\textsuperscript{47} Made objects become bridges between people as physical entities and their internal complexity.

These non-verbal expressive languages, when applied to clay work, produce a therapy that is penetrating, profound and transformative. Clay’s particular strength is its power to penetrate into the layers of astrality\textsuperscript{48}, where the imprints of experiences of aversion and desire are held, and bring them to the surface where they may be viewed with concreteness.\textsuperscript{49}

Because of the physicality and overt nature of a made object, inner experiences such as shame, guilt, or anger lose their unspoken (and silencing) power; made objects become outlets for the expression and resolution of issues. The maker may revisit, re-interpret and resolve those experiences an object holds. Likewise, an object can be physically

\textsuperscript{44} ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Judith Rubin, \textit{Artful Therapy} (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 63.
\textsuperscript{46} ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Patricia Sherwood, \textit{The Healing Art of Clay Therapy} (Melbourne: Acer Press, 2004), 7.
\textsuperscript{48} ibid., 20. Sherwood describes astrality as follows: ‘This is the aspect of the human being that provides the gateway to experience through the senses and that provides the storehouse of experience both pleasurable and painful. Many of our defence mechanisms merge out of our struggle to survive and avoid pain on the astral level … These pockets of astral experience often run the person’s life through the unconscious … Here the imprints of human experience resonate … astrality is not some kind of fixed container but rather an inner dynamic, mobile, developing, flowing relationship between the outer world, mediated by the senses through the physical body, and the most intimate realms of inner consciousness’.
\textsuperscript{49} Patricia Sherwood, \textit{The Healing Art of Clay Therapy} (Melbourne: Acer Press, 2004), 26-27.
and mentally put away for later contemplation which is far preferable than the suppression of the emotions and experiences the object describes. Thus, it is through the creation of a tangible object, experience can be given an actual form.

It appears that many emotional problems are caused by the suppression of uncomfortable or upsetting experiences. Avoidance of personal issues can exacerbate the alternate and less palatable side of human behaviour and urges. This is evident in Carl Jung’s ideas of the ‘shadow’, and his opinion that it is the suppression of this side of personality that results in pathological human behaviour. The physicality of making allows the body as a whole to interact directly with the chosen media, linking the intangible thought processes of experiences and emotions to a physical result. Indeed, the processes of making can establish a deeper reciprocal and accepting relationship between repressed issues and the person exploring them. In relation to my project, I form vessels and sculptures that are containers of emotion and memory, and through this deposition, communicate freely without the need for words.

The practice of art therapy is mostly performed in hospitals and mental health facilities, however, over time, approaches and attitudes in art therapy have moved away from a traditional psychoanalytic approach. I argue that art therapy has developed into a subjective, flexible, and action-based process with less emphasis on psychotherapeutic interpretations and objectivity. According to Helen Landgarten, a highly respected art therapist who also practices as an artist, art therapy is an adaptable, dynamic, and open process which can be used in many different contexts with different outcomes:

The truth of the matter is that art therapy is not a discipline it’s … a modality. Art therapy is a way of getting there. It operates as a modality because you can adapt it to any theory.

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Rather than viewing art therapy as a name for a set process, it is much more usefully viewed as verb or action that forgoes verbal language in preference for expressivity and inclusivity. Art therapy does not present an argument for itself; it just does what it does. This is a move away from art therapy being viewed as a form of psychoanalysis, which focuses on the therapist’s understanding. Instead it may be viewed as a practice that involves the maker, the made, and personal insight, not just a formal therapeutic relationship. Interpretations are left to the maker to identify and resolve. The change from detached psychoanalysis to dynamic self-analysis, insight, and self-nurture has been evident in the different texts encountered in this project.

Louise Bourgeois (born 1911) is one of the main artists to influence and inform this research, particularly during my exploration of art therapy and therapeutic practice. This artist’s ability to document her practice via the medium of writing as well as artwork has allowed those outside her practice to discover the intimacies of her creative practice. Recurring themes throughout her oeuvre also support the major argument of this thesis overall; an artist receives psychological benefit from artistic practice because the subject and content of arts practice are reflections of the artist’s psyche and personal history. Louise Bourgeois is an artist whose identity and emotions are embodied in what she makes, her written reflections making this all the more evident. Bourgeois’ writing recurs throughout this exegesis in order to complement and strengthen my psychological and subjective analysis of arts practice.

Figure 1. 6
Louise Bourgeois’ practice has been a continual investigation of her past and how certain events have affected her personal life and behaviour. Bourgeois’ mother and father and her conceptions of these archetypal figures are the most resounding subjects of her work. Through the tensions that exist in these roles (in particular her own experience of them) Bourgeois explores female sexuality as it has been formed in her adolescence and her conceptions of the maternal and paternal. Her artwork is an area in which she is able to express those ideas and rework the discomforts of her past. Using various media, the artist has transposed the uncomfortable, frightening, and disturbing into material forms, some of which are formally beautiful yet have psychological edge (see figures 1.6, 1.7, 1.8).

Figure 1.7

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Other works of Bourgeois’ make use of unconventional materials (for her time) such as latex, a material that is both attractive and repulsive in its familiarity and similarity to human skin. The abject is definitely a feature that defines Bourgeois’ work in that she explores those hidden desires that many people might prefer to keep hidden, in discomfiting and challenging materials. Louise Bourgeois is an incredible inspiration to me; her unflinching revelation and exploration of her self, the courage to be herself without apology, and the generosity of spirit this ultimately shows. Louise Bourgeois has re-worked her past into a varied and well-received arts practice of over sixty years. Through the medium of text, as well as an extensive body of work, Bourgeois has opened a window to her soul, exposing herself and her history to scrutiny and empathy. The artists’ identity is inseparable from her work, and it is through arts practice that she has conceived and defined her identity as a woman, mother, wife, and human being. ‘For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture’. 55 This particular quote inspires me greatly. With my own estimation of clay as an addition to my own flesh, and ideas of the maker as a ‘mother’ to artworks I emulate Bourgeois’ search for her self, bodily as well as psychologically, in art practice. Additionally Bourgeois’ exploration of ideas of the feminine, archetypes of mother and father, and the integration of apparently opposed ideas and experiences mirror many of my own concerns. Louise Bourgeois’ established and applauded career attests to the potential success – personal and professional – of an open exploration of the self, experience, and emotional expression through making and the made.

Metaphor plays an important role in this discussion of embodied experience. By extending metaphor into the experiences of making, this conventionally literary phenomenon can form lived relationships between the maker and the made. Metaphor is generally known as part of descriptive, symbolic, and poetic language, however it is argued by some linguists that metaphor is present in human thought processes and consequently, experienced beyond words. Because of the embodied nature of human experience, thought processes can affect perception, be enacted, and experienced in daily life; thus metaphor is not just a part of language it is a part of our conceptual understanding of the world. This understanding underpins behaviour, experiences, and perception, and so it can be argued that metaphor/s are also present and lived in social interactions and relationships. I argue that metaphors, as conceptual mechanisms, are experienced in making processes and the interactions between myself, my artwork, and clay. Arts practice is a way of being in which metaphors are formed and explored in a

57 ibid, 4, 232-236.
lived context.\textsuperscript{58} When viewed as a personal ritual, making is a process that enables me to develop a metaphorical relationship between my self, making, and the exterior world.\textsuperscript{59} This project, an investigation of the ‘metaphors I make by’, may offer self-understanding through this interpretation of the breadth and effect of these personal metaphors.\textsuperscript{60}

A seminal text on the topic, \textit{Metaphors We Live By}, written by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson makes a detailed analysis of the lived characteristics of metaphor, and discusses some of the metaphors that are experienced in life as well as language. Lakoff and Johnson argue that ‘the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.’\textsuperscript{61} In this exegesis I discuss the metaphor of mother as maker in Chapter Two, where I argue that this metaphor is not just a conceptual understanding, but a physical and embodied relationship that is experienced in the making process and the rapport between maker, material, and the made. In Chapters Three and Four, I explore the emotional, physical, and symbolic gravity of gesture as an embodiment of metaphor, experience, and emotion.

In relation to the language of pottery, Lakoff and Johnson describe metaphors such as ‘foot of a mountain’ or ‘foot of a pot’ as ‘idiosyncratic metaphorical expressions’ that cannot be lived or dynamic as other metaphors can (like ‘argument is war’ for instance).\textsuperscript{62} The authors pose that this kind of metaphor is isolated and does not interact with other metaphors in language or life.\textsuperscript{63} I firmly disagree with this assessment of ‘idiosyncratic’ metaphors such as the ‘shoulder’, ‘belly’, and ‘lip’ of a pot. These descriptors of the ceramic vessel have affected my view of the process and results of making on a potter’s wheel. Using this research I aim to demonstrate how metaphors with pots, clay, and the maker inform and enrich arts practice.

\textsuperscript{58} ibid, 235-236.
\textsuperscript{59} ibid, 233-234.
\textsuperscript{60} ibid., 232-233.
\textsuperscript{61} ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{62} ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{63} ibid., 54-55.
The bodily metaphors used to describe pottery are connected to the base metaphor of ‘the pot as a person or body’ and thus it can be said that metaphorically a pot is, like the human body, a container of experience. In my arts practice these apparently isolated metaphors used to describe the attributes of a pot have interrelated to form a dynamic conceptual framework. Without the language of pottery, I doubt such strong and lasting metaphors – such as clay as flesh and pots as bodies/children - would have developed in my relationship with clay. Additionally, it could be argued that the anthropomorphism that is occurring when pots are described using bodily terms like ‘lip’ indicates a special relationship between humans, the body, the vessel, and the pot.

The metaphors I discuss have contributed significantly to the conceptual content and direction of my arts practice, and as this exegesis will show, these metaphors are lived through art work and my engagement with clay; they resonate with other ideas such as the psychological, physical and symbolic associations I have made with clay – all of which are discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. The mother as maker, pots as bodies, and clay as flesh - these metaphors are enacted in the embodied processes and results of my arts practice.

**Powerful Gesture**

Numerous artists incorporate gesture in their artworks. Here, I discuss the works of Lucio Fontana, an artist who explored gesture and expressivity in his practice in a way that was revolutionary in his time and continues to be appreciated to this day. Fontana’s oeuvre is of particular relevance to this research because of his use of clay and other media in his expression of gesture and the life-long psychological and aesthetic concerns that colour his work. Focussing on this one artist, I highlight the use of gesture for the purpose of individual expression. A more general overview of this topic would be of limited use considering the personal and subjective aspects of gesture and clay that are being developed.

Fontana used both gesture and action in his artwork and, through experimentation, refused to conform to artistic conventions. Regarded as a highly influential and progressive artist of the post-war period, Fontana defied conventions in both painting
and sculpture. His ability to challenge the status quo and his interest in exploring different spaces of perception and the human urge to make a mark is relevant to my own exploration of gesture.\textsuperscript{65} Fontana’s most well-known contributions to the recent history of the visual arts are the ‘cut’ and the ‘hole’.\textsuperscript{66} Through his investigations of the canvas surface and the actions of painting and making, Fontana exposed and explored the physical and psychological space beyond the art object yet created by the art object and artist.\textsuperscript{67}

The famous hole and cut were not just gashes punched through a canvas, but a way of making the viewer look beyond the physical fact of the painting, to what Fontana called ‘free space’. This is as much a philosophical concept as a visual one … The space created by the hole or the slash stands for the idea of a space without physical boundaries.\textsuperscript{68}

A ‘space without physical boundaries’ is one in which the art object wavers between different facets of perception, acting as a medium for the expression of gesture. Fontana’s work with the cut and the hole is pared back, abstract and introspective, as if the artwork and the artist were looking into and just outside themselves, simultaneously occupying Two spaces that are ostensibly separate.

\textsuperscript{66} ibid., 45-47.
\textsuperscript{67} ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{68} ibid.
Fontana’s interest in the cut and the hole relates to my investigation of gesture and the ability of physical marks to become abstract, symbolic and potently ambiguous (see figures 1.9 and 1.10). ‘Holes for Fontana were craters of emotion and lust, not just formal devices for the exploration of space.’ The literal and figurative rupturing of boundaries that occurs in Fontana’s work featuring the cut and the hole creates new and multi-layered possibilities for meaning in the processes of making and experiencing art objects. These possibilities are explored in this research and it is through the abstracted action within the ‘cut’ and the ‘hole’ that Lucio Fontana’s work is an especially relevant influence and example.

It has been suggested that Fontana’s work with the cut and hole stems from his training in marble carving as a young man:

Fontana’s canvases with holes and cuts may seem to be as far as it is possible to get from the block of marble, but the marks they bear have their origins in the marks made by the most basic techniques of direct carving. The hole derives from the ‘punch’ or the small hollows made by the drill, the cut from the long groove of the ‘mason’s stroke’. One way of looking at the white slash paintings of the 1960s is to see them as a subversive riposte to the arduous toile promised by the blocks of Carrara marble in Wildt’s studio.70

This translation of the actions and rituals of the making process into a conceptual and physical space is congruent with my own aims. Fontana’s cut and hole began as gestures ‘against an overwrought aesthetic’ and relate to the artist’s frustrations with the confines of the status quo as well as an exploration of space. 71 This, too, is

71 ibid., 18, 21.

reflective of the ambivalent emotions attached to the physical expression of gesture evident in my artwork.

Before discovering the potent abstract action of the hole and the cut, Fontana worked in ceramics among other mediums. Most of Fontana’s work in clay is formally very different from his better known works on canvas, and although he did produce symmetrical, thrown forms which were punctured by the artist’s hand, these can be viewed as continuations of his concept of the ‘cut’ and the ‘hole’. His sculptural ceramics are often rough and look as though they might have been torn from the earth in one piece (see figures 1.11, 1.12). These are not polished sculptures; they are glazed haphazardly and variable in colour, their surface abrasive. The clay is rough and torn like craggy rock, covered in protrusions that might snag any soft flesh brushing over them.

The kinetic expressivity Fontana exhibits in the medium of clay emphasises the making process and the movement of hands. However, the frenetic and unpretentious marks also help Fontana to represent form as well as emotion in his subjects. His ceramics are bearers of the artist’s mark as well as representations of emotion and experience. As if just turned into stone, such vital, almost frenzied, movement is stilled in Fontana’s figures, creating a tension, an apparent breaking point in which artist, object and viewer are situated - waiting. It has been argued that this tense and ‘convulsive quality’ relates to Fontana’s childhood experiences of earthquakes in Italy, as well as the historical background of the looming Second World War during his adulthood. There is a sense of the primal human and earthly experience in his ceramics; those shifts of matter that sway human life as well as the cycles of life, death, and destruction.

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73 ibid.
Fontana’s works in bronze - originally formed in clay, are excellent examples of his exploration of gesture and movement of the making process, in particular the works titled *Natura* (see figure 1.12). In these minimal and primal forms Fontana leaves layered handprints and impressions that create a sense of the *felt* making process. These traces of making and the organic formality of the object create a sense of movement and life that is transmitted through the patterned surface. As a part of the physical process of making as well as the significance of the object as a conveyer of meaning and experience, these traces of action are important references in this research.
The gaping hole in the spherical form of *Natura* transforms a sculptural vessel into a kind of primal, earthy womb which could be in the process of giving birth or disintegration. The hole was formed using a long stick, which was moved, as if the artist were stirring liquid in a pot.\(^\text{74}\) The revolutions of Fontana’s stick are reflected in the crusted, worn surface; this hole is both an invasion of form as well as definition of it. It could be argued that Fontana’s interest in the ability of clay to capture movement and gestures made by the artist allowed him to move beyond the representational into the abstract, paring down the content of his work so that gesture alone speaks volumes. This is particularly evident in one work in particular, one of many works titled *Concetto spaziale* or ‘spatial concept’ (see figure 1.13).

\(^{74}\) ibid., 34.
This work is a clay tablet that has been prodded forming many holes, like belly buttons dotted across the expanse, and incised using simple clay tools. This artwork references the process of making directly yet simultaneously and, despite its simplicity, it is a valid investigation of space. Through its exposure of process this artwork allows the viewer and artist to progress beyond the physical fact of the object and into gestural, conceptual, and spatial aspects of the artwork. Fontana’s work, whether the rough and expressive ceramics or the quieted focus of his cuts, is an introspective exploration of
space. This encompasses the gaping rifts of deconstruction, the moments before and after expressive action, and how an artwork can capture and realign those internal and external spaces being encountered through arts practice.

**Summary**

This introduction to my conceptual and theoretical framework has outlined ideas regarding embodiment, subjective perception, the therapeutic aspects of making, and the qualities of clay that encourage their exploration. The ability of clay to act as a material of expression and significant metaphorical potential has been established, through the discussion of my own practice as well as that of other artists’, and is a key component of the project. The rituals and physical processes of making can be a source of self-nurture through the expression and resolution of emotion. My personal view of clay as an addition to my flesh and the maker as mother combines with ideas of Tuan, Rodaway, Merleau-Ponty and Grosz to demonstrate how the blurring of ostensibly opposed feelings, concepts and experiences is not only inevitable, but a core component of the processes of perception and embodiment.

Furthermore, it is proposed that the embodied aspects of making and the expressive and robust qualities of clay encourage the expression of emotion and experience through gesture in particular. This is argued in the remainder of this exegesis through a discussion of the artist’s movement between symbolic, emotional, and physical modes of expression with clay. Using different concepts of art therapy and psychology this exegesis explores arts practice from personal, theoretical, and conceptual points of view. With metaphor in mind I aim to illustrate the embodied aspects of making and the made in my engagement with the making process and analysis of the personal relationship between myself and clay.

**The Exhibition**

This brief description of the exhibition presented provides concise information for the reader regarding the making processes undertaken. It is important to introduce the making methods I have used and the basic appearance of the artwork on display because they will be referred to in Chapters Two and Three, before a full analysis of the
emotional and symbolic characteristics of the artwork is made in Chapter Four and Five. Images of individual works and detail shots have been integrated into the text where appropriate. Because all the art works are untitled in this exhibition, I refer to each of the works using the informal names I call them, to avoid confusion. The five groups of work are *Drop-pots, Squeezes, The Spine, Jug and Bowls* and *Waves.*

*Drop-pots* are altered terracotta forms that start as basic spherical shapes which are dropped whilst the clay is still wet. The spherical shape sags into itself; the upper walls are drawn into the interior of the form and the lower parts are compacted and slumped. This process of making originated from frustration when I would drop unsatisfactory pots on the ground. This action progressed from a spontaneous and experimental making process into a more resolved and controlled way of making. Despite the conscious intention that developed during the making process, tension still remains when forming them, there is a resignation of control, and an expression of emotion. These forms investigate the limits of curiosity and destructiveness in the making process and beyond.

The organically abstract appearances of the *Drop-pots* mean that these forms can operate symbolically over many levels, forming a layered impression that aims to reference the internal and external body and organisms as well as the emotional and symbolic content of this particular making process. I have arranged the *Drop-pots* as a large group with some pots stacked on top of each other. This builds a spatial interaction that refers to the physical and formal relationships between the pots, as well as the possible human relationships, emotions, and experiences that this presentation can allude to. Choosing this way of grouping the pots aims to make a strong statement about the changeable ambivalence of family relationships. The comfort of soft flowing touchable forms together with the wide hungry and sharp edged mouths of the pots and ragged interior open bases oppose each other, but no particular sentiment overrules another. The isolation of the pots from each other intentionally emphasises the formal and symbolic modes of expression being explored in these objects.
Squeezes are small pieces of porcelain that have been squeezed in my fist in an attempt to articulate my own anxiety about the making process and portray the procrastination that can accompany an artist’s production of artworks. These forms have been collected in a pile and placed next to and on a wooden chair. In this heap, Squeezes have the abstracted appearance of organic refuse such as bones, seedpods, and stones. There is a bleakness to this artwork, abandoned on the floor the Squeezes express anxiety, conflict, and ambivalence.

The Spine is a separate work composed of individual Squeezes. In this work, Squeezes are drilled with holes and threaded onto a length of wire. The thread has been hung from above and trails onto the floor to form a curled pile of unthreaded Squeezes with holes in them, as well as intact Squeezes. This artwork references similar sentiments as the individual Squeezes but adds a possible sense of purpose to the apparently useless forms. The Spine offers a new dimension, literally and figuratively, to the strange and ambivalent labour of the Squeezes. As related to the methodological phases I have identified in my work, the Spine eventuated after writing about and considering the scope of the Squeezes as objects in themselves and their potential as building blocks for something greater – which is an important reason for its inclusion in the exhibition which is discussed in more detail in following chapters.

Jug and Bowls is presented on a simple table, which alludes to the domestic and home environment, and to the relationships that occur around the family dinner table. These forms have been altered using the impressions of my hand to express the sentiments that action and gesture communicate. These abstracted interpretations of the familiar utilitarian forms refer to the desires attached to my own experiences of family and mothering, as well as that of others. The smoothed outer surface of these forms aims to emphasise the impression left by gesture and focus the viewer’s attention on these marks as part of the form, rather than distractions or distortions. By presenting these forms in an intentional state of conflict and ambivalence, the interactions of the body, domesticity, home, families and nurture can be explored in symbolic and emotional terms.
The *Waves* are presented on the gallery floor. These simple forms are created by cutting straight through the clay wall of basic cylindrical pots and removing the thrown slab of clay from the pot’s base. These slabs are then shaped in a spontaneous and exploratory way. The alterations I make to these slabs create ribbon-like forms that undulate, giving them an appearance of stilled life and organicism. The act of slicing the slab open is investigative; it is an act that demystifies and confounds a conventional vessel relationship between interior and exterior. I have preserved and emphasised the lines that the fingers leave on the clay’s surface (throwing lines) in order to expose process and explore the text of the hand that the slab carries and preserves. Grouped together the *Waves* have the appearance of leaf litter, undulations of desert sand or ripples of rock that have been detached from their surroundings and abandoned on the floor. These forms reference an internal, external and symbolic landscape through their abstraction and simplicity.

Each of these artworks has been arranged to interact and flow freely to other works, with the aim of creating a kind of emotional or internal landscape. The continual use of multiples refers to the spatial arrangement of natural landscape, the body, the components of families, and the strong history of production and working in multiples that ceramics carries. With this concise description of the exhibition the reader should be able to understand the works referred to in the exegesis, and the basic intention of the exhibited artwork.

**Chapter Summaries**

In the following chapters, I explore my own practice in relation to key themes. Chapter Two focuses on the theme of mothering in the making process. A vital aspect of the maker-in-the-made is the potential of using ideas of the maternal, motherhood and self-nurture as metaphors for the act of creating something on a physical as well as conceptual level in arts practice. It is also a premise of this thesis as an entirety that just as motherhood can be a challenging experience sometimes fraught with tension, anxiety and even resentment, so can being an artist.
In Chapter Three I explore significant emotions that can be identified in the making and affect of an object. Throughout the process of investigation Three emotional themes have resurfaced time and time again, asserting their presence, both explicitly and implicitly. This chapter explores emotions that are ambiguous, conflicting and interrelated which are explored using gesture and the language of the hands. Leading on from this point, Chapter Four investigates the metaphorical potential of the gestures ‘Poke’, ‘Squeeze’, ‘Pull’, ‘Cut’ and ‘Drop’ and their possible interpretation inside and outside the artist’s studio. Each gesture described will be examined as an expression of self, artist, and humanity. As a project that focuses on the subjective experience of making, an exploration of the personal significance is pivotal to my work. This chapter includes creative (rather than critical or theoretical) writing, using this genre to explore the significance of gestures in the making process and beyond.

In the fifth chapter I consider the internal geography in which I make. Like the ‘sensuous geographies’ of Paul Rodaway - an integration of space, place, and perception - this space is a combination of my personal perception and exploration, and those experiences in conscious and unconscious memory. This chapter examines possible readings of the exhibited artwork from a personal and symbolic point of view, thus tying the interrelated themes of previous chapters together. Finally, I draw together these themes in a conclusion and propose possible topics for further investigation.
Chapter Two

The Mothering of a Maker

In this exegesis aspects of mothering and creation in artwork are central to the making and writing process. The idea of the artist as mother in processes of making overarches all other issues in this project. Rather than an overview of mothering as a lived experience this chapter focuses on the concepts this particular project has explored through the analysis of the personal and spiritual aspects of clay and making. This metaphor makes the therapeutic benefits of making more comprehensible in this arts practice.

Arts practice can be a form of self-nurture, as well as a physical and mental space of solace. Like the relationship between mother and child, there are moments of ambivalence and frustration, as well as joy and attachment. Discussing this metaphor and its potential presence in the making process lays the foundations for the following explorations of gesture and the physical and psychological engagement of maker with the made.

As mentioned in Chapter One, in this project metaphor is viewed as a conceptual mechanism that is lived; a set of interrelated linkages between the self and clay, involving thought processes, as well as behaviour, personal interaction, and lived experience. This investigation into the embodiment of communication within the processes of making establishes a space which can be inhabited by arts practice, artists, and the wider world into which artwork is delivered. Ultimately this correlation between life, making, and motherhood demonstrates how our physical selves can restore, heal, and reveal our internal selves and the complexities of existence.
Mother/Maker

Arts practice can offer reassurance to the inner self throughout the processes of making, conceiving, and exhibiting artwork. When viewed as a source of sanctuary, making is an act which encloses and protects, yet it is also an act of reaching out and giving. Like the development of a child, from being physically dependant on his or her mother, to exploring the exterior world, arts practice is a way of transforming the intangible to the tangible through the investigation of concept, and an engagement with material. From conceptual beginnings based on imagination and creativity, the physical development of an art object occurs. In this exegesis, the embedded presence of the artist in his/her work and its development is likened to the growth of a child in the womb, and onwards as it is exposed to the outside world.

In this chapter, and elsewhere in this research, the word ‘motherhood’ - as opposed to ‘parenthood’- is used to capture the direct and continuing bodily connection of mother to child, which is not necessarily encapsulated by the term ‘parent’. Because artwork is more or less inanimate, this metaphor is used in the sense of a mother relating to her child or child to mother, rather than an active and reciprocal human relationship. This metaphor does not aim to exclude or devalue male experiences of the making process, rather it describes the subjective relationship between one potter and her pots. The metaphor can only be applicable when viewed as a one-way relationship; finished artwork is inanimate in its physical state, thus it is the response of the artist to material, and the journey of its making, that are active, changeable, and relatable to states of ambivalence, attachment, detachment, and belonging.

Artists are often protective of their work, not only in its physical form, but also the thought and time invested in their practice. Though this protectiveness is not universal by any means, there is often a look of longing and apprehension in the eyes of the artist as a piece of work is handled or scrutinised by someone other than themselves, particularly when it is in a careless or distracted manner. This watchfulness can also be observed in the eyes of a new mother when her infant is taken away or held by someone who is not entirely trusted or known. As a reflection of its creator, a child or artwork can be both a source of vulnerability and strength, offering affection and joy, as well as
insecurity and frustration. In both instances there is a physical attachment and imprint that is not easily defined by words. Perhaps the word ‘instinctive’ describes the subconscious and physical understanding of mother and child, and the artist and artwork. The hands of the mother and artist are deft with experience as they handle their creations; contours are touched with an easy familiarity and care that comes from knowing something inside out.

It is possible for potters to view their pots as their offspring, a part of their being, their flesh. This is a feeling that can grow as an engagement with material is developed over time. Made objects reflect the artist’s self in ways that are not necessarily comfortable, and may at once be fulfilling and draining. In the same way that a mother’s feelings for a child can be mixed, for instance during post-partum depression or the frustrations of motherhood, artworks may also inspire a sense of repulsion and discomfort, as well as affection and attraction. As mother to her pots, a potter may not necessarily view each pot as an isolated individual – each pot comes from the same source, and as such they can be viewed as family. This tendency could originate partly from the logistics of the process of pottery, based on repetition and production, as well as the artist’s personal background.75

This urge to present work as groups of interrelated forms alludes to the nature of families, and the relation of motherhood to the artist’s conception of arts practice and her artwork. There is no question that these pots should be exhibited as a group, that is where they belong. As singular pots they lose their history, their meaning, they become orphaned and abandoned. As a family group, they cling together, talk to one another. The relationships between pots as families mirrors the sway of personal relationships and their affect on internal and external life. In the same way that families rearrange themselves, growing and altering their relationships over time, grouped works in this exhibition are a powerful indicator and model of creation, family, and the larger components of society that families construct.

75 I am the youngest of seven children in a close knit family.
**Mother’s Object**

The relationship between mother and child is usually our first of many relationships, and is arguably our most important.\(^76\) The quality of this relationship can often determine our future relations with other people and objects, and to the experience of life.\(^77\) The perceptions of personal development that underpin object-relations theory offer an interpretation of the bonds formed during infancy and childhood, and relate to the base concepts this work investigates. Object relations theory proposes that psychological development is affected and directed by the relationships we form with objects\(^78\) which can be defined as ‘… inner representations of a real or phantasised person or aspects of a person that either satisfy or frustrate individual needs’.\(^79\) The attachment of an individual to his or her mother as an object, initially as an extension of the self, and later as something other than the self, is a fundamental part of early experiences and development.\(^80\) In the context of this project and the emotions it covers, the attachment of infant to mother and mother to infant as *objects* is pertinent. A dialogue between arts practice, the creative urge, and the desire to communicate develops understanding of the how, what, where, and why of artistic interaction, in particular an artist’s interactions with the qualities of clay. In the act of making, pots are objects that can fulfil, frustrate, and perplex. By investigating the psychological aspects behind this attachment between maker and the made, the motivation of this practice in particular can be exposed and explored, and applied to the experience of others.

The identities of a mother and her child are physically and psychologically linked. Artists, their work, and their practice may be similarly regarded. An artist’s work often reflects his or her progressions through life, and the experiences or views that have

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\(^77\) ibid., xv.

\(^78\) Vassiliki Karkou and Patricia Sanderson, *Arts Therapies: A Research-Based Map of the Field* (Cornwall: Elsevier Churchill Livingstone, 2006), 13, 84.

\(^79\) ibid, 13.

developed during or as a result of this passage. This is certainly the case in the arts practice under scrutiny here. For example, the work of Louise Bourgeois, described in Chapter One, reveals her inner conflicts and life experiences. Describing her art practice, she writes:

My name is Louise Josepbine Bourgeois. I was born 24 December 1911, in Paris. All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood.\(^81\)

The oeuvre of Louise Bourgeois offers a fine example of recurring emotional themes in arts practice. What is particularly useful about Bourgeois’ work is her interest in writing and her ability to articulate her feelings about making, exposing personal insights along the way. Bourgeois’ work offers a vital outlet for the exploration of her past; more pertinently, the psychological elements of making and the subject matter of her artwork supports the overall thesis being developed here.

Throughout her working life Louise Bourgeois has constantly engaged with her memories of childhood, which to her has never lost its magic, mystery and drama.\(^82\) One of the most powerful recurring themes is her relationship with her parents. Her governess, Sadie, was ostensibly in the family home to teach the family English, but was in truth having a ten year relationship with her father – an affair that was not spoken about, and was tolerated by her mother.\(^83\) This domestic betrayal made a deep and lasting impression on Bourgeois and her artwork.\(^84\) Themes of abandonment, vulnerability, isolation, domesticity, and the maternal resound in her practice:

I carry my psychoanalysis within the work. Everyday I work out all that bothers me. All my complaints. This way there’s always a component of anger in beauty.\(^85\)

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\(^{82}\) ibid.

\(^{83}\) ibid., 244, 245, 227, 283.


It could be argued that the exposure that occurs in her artwork is a rebellion against a past of secrecy and the unspoken. The rage she felt towards her father and her mother’s silent acceptance has been translated into artwork that investigates the psychological attachments of certain materials and symbols as well as the twists and turns of sexuality and the maternal.

In interviews about her practice Bourgeois states that artists are born not made, that it is up to the individual whether they accept this ‘gift’. The gift, Bourgeois suggests, is the ability to use making as a kind of ‘sedative’ in the reconciliation of past experiences in the present. According to Herkenhoff, Schwartzman and Storr (2003):

Bourgeois suffered terrible damage as a result of the stress she experienced in the sexually immature years of her childhood and early adolescence. The obsessional return to those traumatic times, and the hope-against-hope that damage can be retroactively undone or patched has been the driving force behind everything she has made.

Using a variety of media, Louise Bourgeois has relentlessly explored her past and exposed her deepest cuts to those who wish to view them. Bourgeois’ life experiences have not only been the subject matter informing her art practice, the act of making and practicing as an artist has offered her the outlet to make sense of familial conflicts that have affected her life. In this way her work relates the expression of inner life in the act of making to restorative aspects of arts practice discussed in this exegesis.

An artist’s entire life experience affects the conceptual underpinning of his or her practice; the motivation to make cannot be pinpointed to one particular feature of an artist’s personality or history. Thus the beginnings of life, in artwork and conception, are enclosed in the complexity of one person’s experience. This is experience informed by a life that is lived, by those changeable histories that unfold from time to time when someone has the shine of memory in their eye. The interpretation and expression of the events or views of life occurs through artwork and it is in this capacity that arts practice

86 ibid., 214.
87 ibid., 265.
88 ibid., 40.
can be seen as healing, not only through the indication of one’s mental state but also as a resolution and exploration of experiences that have made their mark on our psyche.

**Creation in Clay**

Another important factor of this research is the cultural and historical associations between clay and creation. As a major component of the earth’s surface, clay has been involved in the utilitarian and ceremonial development of civilisations, and often features in creation beliefs. It is a powerful generator of experience and understanding.

Hollow, fired clay forms have been produced for thirty thousand years and, according to Garth Clark, ‘This historical context is crucial for it is the basis on which to argue the universal aesthetic and symbolic power of pottery.’

Interestingly, numerous creation myths involve clay as a material of formation; in fact clay is the most commonly chosen material from which humans are made in such myths. It is clear that clay has a symbolic, metaphorical and aesthetic power that is worth summarising in this discussion. For instance, from the monotheistic religions, the name ‘Adam’ (and its other variants) means, at its root, not only ‘man’ but also ‘red earth’.

In the ancient Greek creation myth of Prometheus, clay is used to make the human form. The underlying narrative of this myth is that Prometheus and Epimetheus - which can be translated as ‘fore-thinker’ and ‘after-thought’ respectively - created humans and animals out of clay given to them by Zeus, and thus the existence of mortal life began on earth.

In a Chinese myth, the goddess Nu-kua is credited with the creation of humans using yellow clay. Nu-kua begins her creation of humans by fashioning each human figure individually, but after tiring of this labour, she pulls a rope through some mud. Those humans formed with the muddied rope were the peasants, and those

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92 ibid.


formed individually, the upper class. In Inuit religious thought, a creature called Tulungusaq is shown clay by the Swallow which he uses to form vegetation and later, humans and animals. In Egyptian mythology, it is the duty of Khnum the ‘potter-god’, to create humans on his potter’s wheel. Finally, the archetype of the mother-earth relates clay to creation, mothering, and nurture, and is a deeply-held association cultivated by past matriarchal cultures and religions. This association also connects the material of the earth to maternal creation and mythology.

These examples are not exhaustive, however it is evident that clay is a strikingly common material in myths of human creation. Mythology offers a metaphorical and symbolic mode of understanding and communication, providing some relief from chaos and the mysteries of human life. As expressions of the human unconscious, mythology is a way in which to explore the symbolic nature of the human perception:

- Myth is a primordial language natural to … psychic processes, and no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery. Such processes are concerned with the primordial images, and these are best and most succinctly reproduced by figurative language.

It is important to note that mythology can also express and explore the shadow side of humanity, enabling humans to process and perhaps resolve the distasteful, frightening, and primal elements of human behaviour.

It is argued here that clay is an especially suitable material for symbolic and spiritual development, creativity, and healing expression. With a surface that can be smoothed and stroked into a kind of flesh, and with the ability to accept and retain the marks of the human body, clay is a receptacle, literally and metaphorically, of creation, life, and memory. The use of ceramics in the domestic sphere also provides an intimate physical interaction between the hand, human and object in a loaded personal space of nurture. Where the ceramic object functions as a receptacle of food and nourishment, another dimension of nurturing is added. Even the language associated with the thrown ceramic

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95 ibid., 441.
96 ibid., 42-43.
vessel – the foot, shoulder and belly - metaphorically links the inanimate to the human. The curves and droops of clay and its openness to impression initiates a discussion of the body and the tensions that exist within nurture and making which is fully realised in the following chapters.

**Centering**

All thrown pots originate from the process of centering; metaphorically, the process of centering evokes the bodily processes of life-giving. As skill develops, centering becomes a kind of reverent physical and mental ritual that introduces the hand to clay and the maker to the making process. In short, the clay is coaxed into the central void created by cupped hands. To begin the process, the clay on the wheel is pulled up to a vaguely cylindrical form, and pushed down into a flattened half-sphere or cylinder many times, in order to homogenise the material. To create an internal space - the beginning of the interior - fingers or thumbs are pushed slowly down into the centre of the clay mound, and slowly pulled apart to form the beginning of the interior. From this point of potential, any shape can be formed.

Centering is a tactile process, a conversation of sensation and response; so much so, it can be done with a minimum of visual scrutiny. With head down, eyes closed, and senses focussed on the wet sliding sensation, the potter taps into a central force. The swirling lines and movement of the clay is hypnotic, as the contours of the clay dance on one pivot. The potter’s eyes do not try to keep up with the spin of the wheel, but rather let the scene pass by, like flickering glimpses of landscape from a car window.

The Dutch potter Vilma Henkelman offers a description of the process of throwing and its personal meaning to her that embraces and cultivates metaphors of the symbolic potential of clay and the process of centering:

In the throwing process while turning the wheel I experience the clay as a direct entrance to the womb of mother earth. It is a kind of moving meditation. Through the living clay, centric - turning in my hands, I open up her entrance and let the clay become an upright shaft. The sensuality of wet thrown clay is enormous!
Wet clay is fertile. While I am working I am continually connected with the cosmic female energy … In the beginning there was Clay, in the end it is Beauty.98

The act of centering is a beginning to the act of creation - it is a ritual that calms the mind and re-introduces the motions of throwing to the hands. As Mary Caroline Richards has potently evoked in her writing, it is a physical connection to the clay, and a connection to the spirit, the life and potentiality of clay.

Centering: the act which precedes all others on the potter’s wheel. The bringing of the clay into a spinning, unwobbling pivot, which will then be free to take innumerable shapes as potter and clay press against each other. The firm, tender, sensitive pressure which yields as much as it asserts … Sometimes the skin seems to be the best listener, as it prickles and thrills, say to a sound or a silence; the fantasy, the imagination: how it bursts into inner pictures as it listens and then responds by pressing its language, its forms, into the listening clay …99

The process that ‘precedes all others’ is a part of throwing on a potter’s wheel that must be mastered in order to form stable pots. It is a feeling of balance of force that is never forgotten, and once understood, relatively easily achieved. Self consciousness is often a distraction from the gestures the body already knows within its fibres. Directed by haptic knowledge, centering - along with other parts of the ceramic process - becomes ingrained in the hands and body, as well as the unconscious mind.

The process of centering can be likened to the discovery of one’s personal centre as well as creation, as Mary Caroline Richards discusses at length in her book, Centering. The process of finding creative potential develops in an earthen womb, the beginning of a vessel, the piece of us that is one and the same, infinite yet elemental. The void inside this clay-womb, which gives birth to each and every pot, must be the quiet calm; it is a pulsing point of stillness. This is the place we put ourselves when absorbed into the activity called ‘centering’, the calm. The centre is generous, all encompassing. The centre is the mother and the child, the oneness, a gift and reception, the conception of our inner and outer worlds, in all their reciprocity, difference and interaction.

Summary

This chapter has laid the foundations for the following discussion of the sensual and emotional aspects of artistic creation. By conceptualising process and artworks in this manner – mother as maker, pots as offspring, the formation of families in the making, clay as a flesh of creation, and the initial process of wheel throwing as a kind of ‘moving meditation’ - the abstract and the conceptual unite and re-emerge as a considered viewpoint which combines personal experience with experiences common to human kind. These experiences are elusive, they need abstractions like myth and metaphor to realise their full value as common points of human understanding and knowledge. Here, the therapeutic aspects of making and the cultivation of self-knowledge have been linked by using the metaphor of a well-understood figure of comfort. However, the metaphorical links between mother and artist extend beyond fulfilment and satisfaction to ambivalence and conflict. These conflicts of emotion and experience, as part of the maker’s psyche and the artwork’s affect, will be discussed in detail in Chapters Three and Four.
Chapter Three

Three Themes

Punctuating this project are three emotional themes which have emerged as a result of the making process:

- purpose (i.e. the making of the useful)
- anger (i.e. the realisation and rejection of the useless)
- anxiety (i.e. the mourning and acceptance of uselessness)

Although these emotional dimensions are interrelated, their delineation allows the viewer and artist to identify more precisely where one emotion ends and another begins. Perhaps more importantly, a closer inspection of these themes offers a glimpse into the space between conflicted feelings. As is the case in much of this project, overlap and ambiguity between these emotions is an important factor. For instance, from the perspective of the artist, purpose encompasses aspects of functionality in relation to ceramics and the vessel, it additionally addresses the function of the artist and arts practice in society and a person’s sense of purpose in daily life. These insecurities and their manifestation in artwork are examined through the lens of each of the three emotional themes.

Purpose

Although purpose is not semantically classified as an emotion, this theme can be related to the feelings attached to one’s expectations, goals, and aspirations, in life and in this discussion, in the processes of arts practice. What is important to note is the changeability of the emotions connected to one’s sense of purpose. Anger and anxiety are two emotions that arise as a result of the ambivalent and changeable feeling of purpose that an artist may experience towards the ceramic object and individual arts practice.
Practicing as an artist is a profession fraught with insecurity on a financial, societal, and personal level. The emotional component of purpose includes: the ambivalence an artist may feel in relation to their work and their place in society, a person’s ability to function and find purpose in daily life, and the emotional reactions of anger and anxiety which can affect a person’s sense of purpose in life. The connection of purpose to daily life and arts practice interrelates with upcoming discussions of anger and loss.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the gestation of a concept from intangible thought to the actuality of the art object creates a physical and intellectual link between the artist and their work. When aspects of arts practice are likened to the creation of new life, the emotion of purpose takes on yet another layer of meaning – the potential of the body as a container and creator of new life, and the connection this concept makes to the perception of the vessel. The human body is altered by life’s experiences; similarly the material of a clay vessel is malleable and will be physically and internally altered by its experience of making.

Often in ceramics there is an expectation of purpose and utility, especially when making vessel-based works. In this respect the vessel and function-based works can be sources of frustration, anxiety, and confinement, just as the domestic sphere offers fulfilment as well as discontent. The relation the vessel forms with the other more sculptural work links the pot-body metaphor to allusions of domestic and inner space through their formal characteristics and presentation. This interrelation and possible conflict between works in the exhibition aims to question, and thus highlight, the latent expectations of the vessel and ceramics.

The domestic ceramic vessel is a form loaded with meaning – vessels have carried human sustenance and goods of value for thousands of years and have been used as ceremonial objects throughout history. Icons of generosity, life giving, and female domesticity and fertility, the jug and bowl cannot escape the responsibility of purpose. Carriers of food, brought to the lips, delved into with the fingers, hands, and eating
utensils, these vessels are heavy with an accountability for basic human needs, as well as the qualities of care that are contained within family, society, and the self:

Pots do not cease to be pots when function is subverted. Indeed, for millennia denying function has been one of humankind’s ways of setting aside certain vessels for a different role, one that perforce became ritualistic and contemplative … This precluded domestic/utilitarian ideas of containment in favour of metaphorical containment.100

In the bodies of artwork presented here, those that are based on ideas of purpose and functionality are not in any way functional, they are not glazed, and do not embrace the actuality and conventions of functional vessels: The jug does not pour well, each vessel is cumbersome, and neither form can contain water without absorbing it and leaking through the open pores of the clay body and the punctures and tears made by the maker’s hand (see figures 3.1, 3.2). They are dysfunctional. The jugs and bowls of this body of work are simultaneously what they appear to be and not what they appear to be, they hold nothing but the intangible thought, emotion, and memory of their making and formal ancestry.

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The placement and treatment of these vessels in this project exposes their inadequacy as utilitarian objects. The jug and bowl are laden with tension and a conflict of interests; along with allusions to the fulfilment of needs, the marks that punctuate (and puncture) them suggest strain and anxiety. Objects that are hungry instead of full, these works speak about the opposing side of domestic spaces in the mind and body, about a lack of fulfilment, as well as the satisfaction of needs. The family home and care of the self are areas of life that are not always filled with warmth and contentment, they hold contradictions, hypocrisy and inadequacy - feelings that give an ambiguous affect to intellectual and bodily experience; the pull of insight, and the push of experience. Understanding stands alongside resentment in the homes of the heart. The poking, squeezing and puncturing of these vessels allows glimpses into the interior of form, a glimpse into the space which contains us, our needs and the experiential domain of being cared for and caring for others. Just as the feelings of a mother/artist can be ambivalent, there are aspects of domesticity that are taut with conflict, as the needs of others and the needs of the self are balanced and fought for. The use of the jug and bowl alongside other non-domestic forms in this exhibition is an exposure and investigation of these tensions, both in the domain of ceramics as well as the home and self.

Anger
The emotional theme of anger is often the most immediately recognised by viewers in the exhibited artwork; to others it is not evident at all. Although it can be an uncomfortable admission, the presence of anger is unmistakeable to the artist - both in the processes of and attitudes towards making, and the appearance of some pots. In the practice of making, anger is initiated by anxiety and the sense of impotence it causes. Nevertheless, it is argued here that anger and aggression can generate a sense of empowerment when these emotions are ‘acted out’ on a piece of work which is able to receive, contain, and calm them.

Despite its alleged origins as a survival instinct for self-protection\textsuperscript{101} anger is not generally seen as a positive emotion and is assigned by some to the unpalatable ‘shadow’ side of human behaviour.\textsuperscript{102} This conception of anger as a fundamentally ‘bad’\textsuperscript{103} emotion dismisses the worth of anger and aggression as self-preservative, and ignores the capacity for anger to promote positive and constructive personal growth.\textsuperscript{104} Discussing the diversity of opinions, Marianne Parsons states:

Views range from seeing aggression as an instinctual drive on par with libido, the derivation of the death instinct, an expression of the self-preservative instincts, a reaction to environmental influences … The capacity for aggression is essential for psychic growth. The healthy development of the self and the capacity to separate


\textsuperscript{102} Celia Harding, \textit{Aggression and Destructiveness: Psychoanalytic Perspectives} (London: Taylor and Francis Routledge, 2006), 4.

\textsuperscript{103} For instance, as one of the cardinal sins of Catholicism, anger or wrath is a behaviour that can incur eternal damnation. ‘Christianity has made the antinomy of good and evil into a world problem and, by formulating the conflict dogmatically, raised it to an absolute principal …’ Carl G. Jung, \textit{Jung on Evil}, ed. Murray Stein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 29.

and individuate require aggressive activity. Like sexuality, aggression can be used constructively and progressively or destructively and regressively.¹⁰⁵

Thus it is conceivable that aggression and anger are not inherently negative or wilful emotions; it is the ineffectual expression or suppression of these feelings that results in pathological and antisocial behaviour. In the field of Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy it has been suggested that a person can be ‘inoculated’ from stress or anger, potentially preventing the aggression or violence these feelings may provoke. With an awareness of the stressed or angry response and adaptive alternatives, the antisocial and self destructive aspects of these feelings can be controlled and even eradicated.¹⁰⁶ The basis of this emotional and behavioural ‘inoculation’ is its ability to aid the development of coping mechanisms for future situations in which the levels of distress and risk of aggressive or antisocial behaviour may be higher.¹⁰⁷ This theory can be applied to aggression and violence as discussed here. When angry, dropping pots is a way to express the emotion externally rather than suppressing the feeling; by confronting and expressing anger during this making process, the emotions (and the strategies that resolve them) become more familiar and thus more controllable.

The assertion of ownership is one of the most empowering aspects of performing anger on clay objects. There is a forbidden joy and sense of catharsis in it; it is a mischievous and experimental act as opposed to disappointing and anticlimactic, as unintentional mistakes often are. The permission to destroy or alter artwork is inherent in the artist’s possession of their artworks. This ownership allows the satisfaction of a visible, yet not quite controlled, action of aggression to be explored. From a psychological perspective, this behaviour can be understood as a displacement of aggression onto an external object, which is considered to be constructive adaptive behaviour, provided it is not

¹⁰⁵ ibid.
antisocial or illegal. In relation to this body of work, it is up to the artist to determine whether any true damage has been done – in this instance, clay is receptive to whatever marks it is given, without being intrinsically harmed. The act of altering pots challenges the timid, unsure and anxious aspects of the self that are driven by the urge to conform and belong. Feelings of anger, anxiety and frustration are displaced onto a robust material and the outburst of frustration is contained by each vessel that is dropped, poked, cut, or squeezed.

Harming or altering pots also offers a way to pre-empt and resolve the anxiety that arises from the potter’s awareness of the precariousness of the ceramic object. The practice of ceramics demands patience and persistence. Each pot must go through many trials before its final transition in the kiln and there are many opportunities for things to go wrong: cracks in the drying process, explosions in the kiln, the breaking of brittle unfired clay, to name a few. Destroying a piece of work holds the allure of rebellion against the ‘shoulds’ of ceramics, and the attraction of unpredictable results. The exposure or concealment of faults becomes a question of value. As an act of control, the deliberately altered pot has been exempted from the expectations (and possible disappointments) of conventional ceramics and allowed to form of its own accord. Mistakes that are made can provide the opportunity to learn new skills, often acting as motivation for the artist, rather than discouragement (see figures 3.1, 3.2, 3.3).

Alongside the act of making and the expressivity that accompanies it comes the potential of an ‘unmaking’ of the art object. Pots can be made, to be unmade; deconstructed, teased, and released from the set expectations and aspirations of the artist. This approach acknowledges the worth of spontaneity, intuition, and experimentation as a part of arts practice. The ‘letting go’ of pots that occurs when they are sacrificed to the maker’s hand and will also acts as a reminder that artwork and art practice reaches beyond the physical object. The aggression and possible

destructiveness of these impulsive/compulsive acts become an entry into making and reading artwork, rather than a broken ending. Gestures are enacted upon a material and object that is the artist’s own to act upon, muse upon, and they leave scars that are the artist’s own to live with and encounter. As an extension of the artist’s conception of themselves, clay is reinterpreted as a kind of flesh, a personal territory, a landscape possessed by its maker, who may litter or destroy it. In doing so, it is also the artist who is wounded and altered or, paradoxically, healed.

Figure 3.3

**Anxiety**
Of the themes identified and examined in this research, it is anxiety that inter-relates with both of the other themes, purpose and anger. The impotence and powerlessness of anxiety can result in frustration and explosive anger which is characterised in this project by pots that have been intentionally altered in an aggressive manner. Anxiety also accompanies the notion of function in this work – in reference to the vessel and functionality in ceramics. This leads into the tensions between what can be called ‘art’ and what can be called ‘craft’, and on a more personal level, the function of the artist, arts practice, and the function of an individual in society and daily life.

The anxieties an artist may feel in relation to their career as well as their place in society may promote certain behaviours such as rumination and procrastination. Anticipatory anxiety can lead to a vigilant avoidance of stressful situations, manifested as procrastination and rumination. While adaptive (or positive) ruminations involve ‘concrete, process-focussed and specific thinking’, maladaptive ruminations are ‘abstract and evaluative’. Negative forms of rumination are significantly linked with depressed mood or a susceptibility to depression. The constant swirling of the same ideas, fears, memories and beliefs can be exhausting and incredibly destructive.

In the personal experience documented in this research, making can be a form of diversion from maladaptive rumination; an activity which simultaneously manages and expresses inner anxiety. The management and expression of uncomfortable emotions and experiences is recognised as one of the major benefits of art as a therapeutic tool.

111 Vassiliki Karkou and Patricia Sanderson, Arts Therapies: A Research-Based Map of the Field (Cornwall: Elsevier Churchill Livingstone, 2006).
The concepts that arise during making can be repetitive and cyclic, thus it is suggested that arts practice and its conceptual components are a positive form of rumination; the action of making as expression is able to skip over the debilitative freeze of rumination. This fits into the supposition that adaptive rumination is ‘process-focussed’ and ‘concrete’, thus it is argued that the physical acts of arts practice move the abstract and evaluative thinking of potentially negative ruminations into the realm of process and actuality.

Another behaviour addressed in this project is procrastination, which is also connected to feelings of anxiety. Procrastination may derive from a fear of failure, feelings of inadequacy, and a lack of function in one’s personal life. There is a perceived purpose to procrastination, albeit questionable: by doing things other than required tasks which cause stress and anxiety, the procrastinator, finds temporary distraction, thus improving an anxious mood in the short term. The paradox of both procrastination and rumination is that they promote inaction and diversion when it is action that is needed, thus ultimately reaffirming negative perceptions, thoughts and maladaptive behaviour. In this arts practice there has often been a feeling of anxiety attached to making and exhibiting artworks because it puts the artist at a point of extreme vulnerability. The revealing of the self and artwork to an audience could be understood as a request for acceptance, or at its least, a communication. For this reason actually undertaking artwork can often be difficult and frustrating and may result in different forms of procrastination. In the collection of artwork that accompanies this exegesis, procrastination is manifested in the Squeezes (see figure 3.4) which originated as a

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112 To give a personal example of the debilitative freeze of rumination, regarding my PhD, I may continuously think ‘I will never finish this, I cannot, I am not even good enough to finish this, I will never finish …’. By telling myself I am not good enough I am repeatedly confirming a lack of self-belief (as if learning by rote, this thinking becomes ingrained in the mind, becoming a deeper and more difficult pattern to get out of). A sense of guilt, pessimism, depression can develop from this. An alternative way of thinking about my anxieties would be: ‘I feel like I will never finish. What strategies can I plan and execute to finish on time?’ Focussing on the thought processes behind unwanted or pathological behaviour, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (one of the most popular psychology methodologies) targets this ‘self-talk’ as one of the major ways in which psychotherapy can help change behaviour.


114 ibid., 359, 360, 363.
delay tactic not intended for use as artwork. However, as the Squeezes accumulated, their value as carriers of the artist’s mark emerged.

As a direct response to, and result of, procrastination Squeezes signify anxiety, a loss of function, the state of procrastination, and a lack of purpose. Despite their apparent uselessness, Squeezes are formed in porcelain a material which carries a long history of reverence, and an expectation of value. This conflicts with the treatment of the Squeezes, and questions both the assumption of value connected to certain ceramic forms and materials, as well as the estimated value of the discarded Squeezes as representations of the artist’s time and anxiety. What is being mourned in this artwork was still breathing when it was hidden in the palm, being pushed into the spaces between anxiety and comfort in the fist; once fired, it serves only as a reminder, record of a moment, now past.

The fist is a gesture of readiness, waiting, withholding, protection, comfort; one of the first gestures we make as infants. The strength of a baby’s grip is often surprising when he or she instinctively grasps onto objects. As a part of a primitive human instinct, the fist is a powerful gesture, it is simple and yet part of the first building blocks of action that allow us to explore and impact the world outside our bodies. The fist is not only a
motion performed daily, it is a gesture that symbolises anxiety and suppressed aggression - the hand holds into itself, letting nervous energy concentrate in the palm.\textsuperscript{115} When something malleable like a piece of clay is released from the fist, the gesture and emotion leaves its trace in an inverted impression. The hand becomes a vessel and the clay reveals the negative space of the fist. The spaces between comfort, anxiety, and the suppression of aggression are transferred onto the clay. These aspects of gesture will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{squeezes.jpg}
\caption{Sophia Phillips, 2008, \textit{Untitled (Squeezes)}, porcelain, photographed by Michael Kluvanek.}
\end{figure}

Collected, \textit{Squeezes}, resemble bleached bones, vertebrae, seed pods, organic refuse (see figure 3.5). As something that has literally been discarded from the enclosure of the artist’s palm, they portray loss: the loss of function, procrastination, rumination, and the anxiety that underlies these concepts. These pieces are individual measures of time: the time used to make these ostensibly useless objects and the thoughts that occupy time in our minds. The flesh is embedded into the plasticity of the clay to become a representation of the maker, inverted and altered. Echoes of the creative process

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emerge from this simple, yet emotionally loaded action as the maker’s imprint is embedded, psychologically and physically, into an object and subsequently, released. *Squeezes* are in-between sensing and being, a point at which the momentary becomes concrete and emotion is subdued and seized. For a moment.

In relation to the theme of anxiety, the *Squeezes* forming *The Spine* take on another layer of significance. When laid upon each other and strung the *Squeezes* present a different perspective, one that speaks of isolation and loneliness as well as a sense of anxiety and procrastination. As much as the taming of these objects by tethering them satisfies a certain amount of anxiety, the chain is also difficult to manage and vulnerable to breakage. In its occupation of space, *The Spine* demands stillness. The vulnerability of this work’s physical state, hanging from one thin strand of transparent polyethylene, invites anxiety and an altered sense of space and perspective in the viewer. Though they come from the same source, the *Squeezes* on the floor and those in *The Spine* arrive at different meanings because of their treatment in space and in their execution. Both groups of work speak about anxiety though neither work resolves the fear; they are two different kinds of physical togetherness that threaten to dissolve.

**Summary**

This discussion of the emotional themes lays the foundations for the analysis of gesture in Chapter Four. Making is a space of contemplation that allows the discomfort and confusion of significant emotions to be safely deposited and explored. It has been argued that clay is an especially suitable material for the expression of the emotions categorised by these three themes because of its physical, as well as symbolic and personal qualities (discussed in Chapter Two). The added domestic dimension of this conceptual framework, along with the physical and psychological aspects, demonstrate how the material of clay can embrace and express the ambivalent feelings connected to the making process.
Chapter Four

Gesture as Abstracted Action

… we are more apt to make a grasping gesture when we speak of grasping an elusive idea than when we speak of grasping a doorknob. ¹¹¹⁶

In this chapter the importance of gesture in the body of artwork exhibited is explored. This discussion investigates the unconscious and conscious aspects of certain actions, the un/conscious intentions of the maker, the resulting affect of the object as a physicality, and its metaphorical potential. The marks of the gesture are embodied traces of the maker which exist on both a physical and imaginary level. The spaces that gesture can disrupt, rearrange and investigate are spaces that are physical, psychological, and metaphorical.

A transition is made when using gesture as an expression of experience or feeling. When used as physical metaphors for internal space, the actions that manifest emotion and experience (gesture) form a link between the private and untouchable space of internal life to corporeality, and from this physical point, the outer ‘public’ world. The elusive ideas investigated in this work are captured in a physical expression, while the motivation that inspires acts of expression wavers beneath the surface, continuously realigning the superficially separate realms of internal and external experience.

Conventionally, gesture is an addition or alternative to speech. However, in this research, gesture is used to communicate and develop metaphor and subjective experience. In relation to this discussion, it is necessary to define the terms ‘gesture’ and ‘action’, as they have multiple and shared definitions. The conceptions of gesture and action overlap at certain points, thus has been important to be consistent in the use of these two terms.

Gesture is variously defined as ‘a movement, usually of the body or limbs that expresses or emphasises an idea, sentiment or attitude’; ‘the use of the motions of the body or limbs as a means of expression’; ‘something that is done by way of formality or courtesy, symbol or token, or for its effect on others’. For the purpose of this research, the latter definition is appropriate, and gesture is used to describe the meaning or intention behind certain movements. Action describes the actual physical movement that embodies the sentiments of an overall gesture. For instance, letting go of something is a gesture, dropping something is an action. Gesture inspires action and is subjective and conceptual, while actions are movements of the body that act as physical expressions of gesture.

Five main categories of gesture are investigated in this chapter: ‘Poke’, ‘Squeeze’, ‘Pull’, ‘Cut’ and ‘Drop’. Each gesture is examined as an expression of (1) self, (2) artist, and (3) humanity. Consequently the interrogation of gestural meaning will apply to the personal and private/individual persona (self), the professional and public/group assignation (artist), and lastly the incorporative category of belonging to and acting within the human species (humanity). This analysis traces the origin of gesture from its core within the subjective interior of the individual, to the immediate exterior identity of artist, and ultimately to the responsibility of being human. The power of gesture is not a new concept in the arts, but it is the intention here to translate the literal and metaphorical meaning of specific actions into physical artworks.

Each action (poking, squeezing, pulling, dropping, and cutting) is discussed from an experiential point of view. As a project that focuses on the personal and subjective basis of artworks and making, an exploration of the significance of individual experience is a pivotal link between artist, object, and ‘public’ conceptions. Accordingly this chapter will include creative (rather than critical or theoretical) writing, using the process of writing to explore the significance of gesture in the making

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118 These gestures will be referred to using this format, i.e. ‘Drop’, in order to distinguish between movement/action and gesture in the wording of this Chapter.
process and its consequences.

**Poke**

Poking is an action that appears in the function-based work of this project - the exploration of the jug and bowl forms. In this context, the movement of poking an object embodies many different emotions. The withdrawal of the finger, making the action a poke rather than rupture, results in a conceivably incomplete gesture that is open to several (and at times conflicting) interpretations. The poke is suspended in time; it is a relic of curiosity, of dismissiveness, of anger. When left as a symbol, the overall gesture - silent in its authority - abstracts physical action, and the feelings being expressed through action, into a personal and universal mark (see figure 4.1).

The ‘Poke’ is a gesture that incorporates several emotions, but most importantly, it is an investigative action that punctuates the blank skin of a vessel. This action reflects curiosity, and has mischievous and provocative connotations, begging for a retort. Whether performed in anger or delight, the provocation and anticipation of consequence motivates the en-action of this gesture. Through remains of the actions of poking (and any of the actions discussed in this chapter) an abstraction of the action forms and extends the physical into the metaphorical realm.

In the case of this work, the gesture of poking is both cautious and investigative; a celebration of spontaneity and the artist’s inherent ownership of object. The gesture is a negation of certain values – such as the ‘do not touch’ attitudes of institutions of fine art, i.e. do not destroy, do not disturb, your touch is a pollution of the sacrosanct artifact. The ‘Poke’ is irreverent and disregards status and lineage. Similarly, where the gesture is performed on traditionally functional forms, the ‘Poke’ rejects ingrained expectations of functionality that appear in the field of ceramics. Perhaps it is through the interrogation of functionality, utility and purpose that the conventional understanding of function, as a concept, can be rearranged.

With the impression of the hand and expression of gesture, the maker gives a conceptual and perhaps more potent purpose to these forms as carriers of meaning; they
are forms that question the vessel, functionality, and the literal and figurative boundaries of each.

Figure 4.1

The gesture of the ‘Poke’ can also be viewed as an affirmation of ownership and exploration of the limits of curiosity which demonstrates the inherent qualities of material and object - in the case of clay, malleability. An exploratory conversation is initiated, and through sensation, the action intimately connects material to perception. The act of pushing a finger into a plastic surface can be loaded with caution, aggression and curiosity. One might poke something to arouse movement or check for signs of life, but not without reservation, not without waiting with a little distance for consequence to arise. In some situations poking is an indication of carelessness, of detachment, or revolt against the forbidden. A tentative rebellion at times, the ‘Poke’ embodies, in part, the destruction that curiosity can initiate. This gesture and its mark
can form metaphors with broader significance that transcend the object itself. The ‘Poke’ is a violation of form, not only does the mark leave an interruption on a uniform surface, it is an aggressive action made with the intention of disrupting the potential function and ‘finished’ surface of a vessel. This attack on the skin of clay demonstrates the physical qualities of each individual pot, whilst maintaining the precarious tension of intrusion versus investigation.

These paradoxes create a tension, and in relation to the vessel form, acknowledge the competing and often opposed forces of the domestic environment, maternal experience and the personal experience of practicing as an artist. The impression left by the poke emphasizes the simultaneous unity and separation of interior and exterior, mirroring the interrelation of maker, made and material. Limits are tested; what are the boundaries of this investigative action, what harm or benefit can be discovered? The unsettling of the status quo of the comfortable jug and bowl is at the heart of this gesture. The artist’s impression imposed upon a vessel is a signature, a stamp of identity, impressed and embedded into the memory of the material and making, and the different experiences the vessel can embody.

Point
It is argued that the elements of aggression associated with the action of poking relate to the deliberate testing of physical and personal boundaries. Emotional relations are identified between the gesture of ‘Poke’ and the action of pointing. Thus the emotion and sentiment that lie at the root of the ‘Point’, are important components of the ‘Poke’ as a broader category of gesture, especially in view of the personal perspective and associations of the action of pointing described in Untitled 1.

I remember my father’s finger pointed in my face,
you must have done something wrong.
The suffocating pressure of all eyes,
sends my guilty ones to the floor.
You do not have a name,
but I am addressing you,
and you won’t look away.
You are to blame.
I am not asking you,
I am telling you.
I try not to.
Who, me? 119

Pointing at someone or something is an action that can draw attention, consternation, or accusation to the subject. In many instances the action of pointing indicates an appraisal or judgement which is another indication of the testing of personal and physical, limits. 120 During a confrontation, pointing at someone is a physical cue of the (attempted) imposition of one set of values over another. This action often indicates aggression in one form or another, and may be a precursory action of violence. The action of pointing embodies a threat of explicit or implicit violence. When performed within a reduced and therefore partly metaphorical spatial plane, this gesture can be felt on both a bodily and psychological level. With the force of threatened violence, the ‘Point’ becomes an attempt to establish and test the limits of an object without outwardly engaging in physical violence. A barrier, whether physical or emotional, is prodded. The potential for conflict or submission is queried and even antagonized by this gesture.

Rupture
The possibility of ‘Rupture’ that comes with a ‘Poke’ threatens the vessel, highlighting the fragility of the pot’s boundaries, an impression that alters both exterior surface and the contained space of the interior.

The act of penetrating the clay surface completely extends beyond poking and pointing (see figure 4.1 for an example of rupture). The gesture of pointing and pressing one’s finger into something or someone can be viewed as an initiation of aggression, a kind of threat and conversely, an embodiment of curiosity. ‘Rupture’, on the other hand, is a completed gesture. It is not tentative but violent – the gesture affirms a maker’s ability to both create and destroy. To rupture the containing walls of a pot violates the ‘sacred

space’ that volume occupies in ceramics. Through this denial of function, the physical purpose of the vessel is questioned, and the conceptual understanding of the vessel can be explored. The destruction of potential usefulness highlights the original integrity of the vessel by denying its utility. Physically, the penetration of the surface is a direct confirmation of the thickness, wetness, and pliability of the vessel’s containing wall. Conceptually, a barrier is broken. The functional confines of vessel-making are removed because the possibility of utility has been eliminated. Consequently these vessels assume a new identity and transcend the functionality of the form.

The completed movement made in the act of rupture integrates interior with exterior; the vessel’s surface is pushed into the interior and with the pulling back of the fingers, the interior is brought outwards or left as a hanging crescent. This refutes or queries the dichotomy that rules the perception of interior and exterior. The binaries of inside/outside are suspended and inverted in order to magnify the relationships between vessel-making, studio ceramics and their domestic context. This deconstruction both relies upon and attempts to rupture the ‘laws’ of the vessel and function. Laws, as Elizabeth Grosz has described them, are the implicit rules that binaries enforce upon western society. Such laws’ govern society and prevent deviation for what is considered normal, but they are insidious in their invisibility; they do not acknowledge their own presence and influence and therefore have an authority that is not justified. In the case of the vessel, conventional laws of functionality enforce conformity.

In her discussion of deconstruction and Jacques Derrida’s writing on the topic, Elizabeth Grosz points out that it is necessary for the process of deconstruction to dwell in a space that is distinct from the deconstructed. Yet, simultaneously, deconstruction as a concept or an act is inseparable from the actual or conceptual space of contention. The violence that the maker enacts upon the vessel is both physical and conceptual, wavering between that tradition of thought and form which is being deconstructed, and the act of deconstruction itself. This violence is not just embodied

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123 ibid., 55-63.
in physical acts, it is also suggested that violence can be identified in thoughtful and (more) passive acts, such as writing and arts practice.  

…Violence is ineliminable; it is the condition of force that must be in play even in the analysis of violence, let alone in any response to violence … acts of condemnation, resistance, or defiance are acts of violence. And modes of reflecting and reporting on this recognisable violence are also of (commonly unrecognised) violence.  

Thus the violence enacted in this body of work is two-fold. Not only is the physical aspect of violence and aggression explored, the analysis of this violence is a form of violence in itself, that sits both inside and outside the artistic and conceptual framework of this research. Through this violence the worth of the object is questioned and, when viewing the object as an extension of the maker, the artist and their purpose is challenged as well. Gesture designates the object as a physical and metaphorical space of contention which references arts practice as a larger activity through an individual perspective. This is a view of the internal and external processes of gesture that can be applied to the other gestures discussed here, as they all contain violence on one or many levels.

Squeeze

_A child pulls on her mother’s hand, looking up, 
pleading with skyward eyes, 
‘Don’t ignore me’
_A mother’s body completely skewed 
by the weight of need.

_My father’s way of killing insects - 
a sudden empty grab at the air, 
an inspection of the palm, 
the proud display of the occasional sticky corpse. 
_My mother’s white knuckles when dad drives._

124 ibid.
125 ibid., 55-56.
The pathetic nursing of a man’s crushed hand,  
when his pregnant wife has been in labour –  
it must be more than physical pain he is feeling,  
he cannot leave her,  
she won’t let him.

Fingernails driven into a palm,  
and the comforting pain,  
anxiety affirmed.  
I am thinking of the release,  
of all of these,  
forced or with an appreciative sigh,  
I am feeling the relief.  
The Squeeze anticipates release.  
Cannot hold on forever,  
have to let go sometime,  
holding onto nothing,  
Holding.  
Onto myself.  

The ‘Squeeze’, as a gesture, can conjure two quite different sets of feelings and intentions; on one hand the action of squeezing can indicate familiarity, love, compassion and support; on the other hand the gesture can be a metaphorical confinement of the self or others as an expression of emotional or physical smothering. The conflicting nature of these undertones possibilities indicates a blurring of boundaries and paradoxical interchange. The changing space between ostensible opposites has been continually revisited in this research, and forces a compromise between sentiments that appear irreconcilable. Although all of the gestures discussed here have conflicting associations, the intimacy and simplicity of the ‘Squeeze’ offers an intensity that appeals to the most basic urges of the hand and human. It could be argued that the emotional power of the action of squeezing makes the conflicting interpretations of the gesture all the more palpable and potent. It is a physical familiarity, a bodily echo of the feeling, as both receiver and giver of the action on the surfaces of the body, on the soft and hard objects we enclose and cling to, pull closer, and try to obliterate.

126 Sophia Phillips, 2008, Untitled 2. This section begins on a new page simply to preserve the format of Untitled 2.
The envelopment of the clay during squeezing is reversed in the process of throwing, an instance in which the maker might be able to physically identify with the experience of being made. The process of ‘opening up’ a centered piece of clay, when the interior of the pot is first defined, the first move - inserting of fingers or thumbs into the middle of a centered clay mound - leaves the potter’s fingers contained by clay, literally delving into center of a moving lump of clay. The feeling of suffocation can be uncomfortable particularly when entering a large (and therefore more difficult to manage) lump of clay; the flesh is overwhelmed, the spinning of the clay around the fingers amplifies sensation. The finger, as an extension of body, is sucked into the spiral of the wheel, like an inquisitive finger into the drain. In making a Squeeze, the handful of clay fills the hand, the mould, and it is the clay that is suffocated yet never obliterated.

Squeezes are the manifestation of the literal and figurative suppression of feelings, in particular, anxiety - which is compacted within the clenched fist and pushed into the self. The action of squeezing urges anxiety to transfer itself onto the impressionable handful of clay. The strain of muscles and awareness of the attempt to calm one’s self moves emotion into expressive action. The clay is the buffer that transfers the ineffable
into a physical representation. The embodied manifestation of the ‘Squeeze’ literally clings to nothing but one’s self, the mortal and fallible flesh, finding both comfort and opposition in the physical articulation of anxiety. Thus the gesture ‘Squeeze’ could be viewed as a physical link between two contradictive states. During the act of making Squeezes a reversal of physical and conceptual process occurs - the hand is vessel, it is the clay that forms the interior as it is temporarily contained in space, forced into the crevices of the fist. The elusive clay slips past the apparent barrier of this fist-vessel, seeping into the space between comfort and anxiety, slipping through the fingers, and ultimately escaping control (see figure 4.2).

As an ordered accumulation of Squeezes, The Spine reiterates the attempt to hold onto something and suspend its momentum or power, by amassing the Squeezes in a single strand. However this work never quite manages to obliterate the anxiety that is expressed, lived, and relieved through the processes of its making - the comfort and discomfort of making Squeezes and the sometimes meditative, sometimes tedious, drilling and threading of each component. This single ceramic vertebrae challenges space as it is embodied by the maker and the viewer, highlighting the shared territory of control and abandon. Threads of feeling and experience are shaped into a homogenous form made of hundreds of moments in time.

When the hand forms a fist the fingers make contact with the palm. Expressive actions that involve touching oneself are classified in anthropological texts as ‘self-comfort’ gestures. These often unconscious acts of self touching (including rearranging clothing, crossing legs, nail biting and rubbing the chin) may soothe a sense of discomfort and vulnerability thus reassuring oneself. Self-comfort gestures indicate an unconscious revisiting of infantile tendencies such as ‘the childhood comfort of oral contact’. This regression implies a shared human sense of vulnerability and, in this way, the making of a fist becomes a potent gesture of vulnerability, anxiety and self-comfort, as well as aggression and violence.

128 ibid., 88.
There is something hidden in the act of squeezing; it is less overt than poking; it can be done close to body. To make a Squeeze, the clay is embraced by palm and fingers and pushed into private folds and wrinkles of the hand, contrasting with the outwardly directed engagement of the other actions performed in this body of work. Within the action of squeezing there is a sense of control, even sinister intent, yet there is such intimacy; the small piece of clay is hidden within the fist; the destruction occurring within remains unseen. Emotion is suffocated. The action is still and focused. Once in the palm of the hand, the only thing to do to the clay is squeeze harder or let it fall from the hand. The potentially endless repetition of the action affirms a loss of time and anxiety, but it is also, importantly (and paradoxically), a rhythmic ritual of comfort.

A Squeeze is formed without interrupting the surface of an existing made object, but in the case of the jug and bowls the ‘Squeeze’ is inflicted upon a pot, making a direct reference to action and the emotions actions can carry. The representation of gesture makes a literal and figurative reference to the grasp taken, forced even, upon the vessel forms. A kind of handle is formed, but appealing as it is to the memory of the hand, these vessels refuse functionality; the grasp is uncertain, sharp, discomfiting. A physical engagement with the artwork links the sensual with the psychological when discomfort, empathy and familiarity waver over several levels of perception and experience. The viewer’s re-enactment of process when holding a Squeeze may be interpreted on some level as a way to hold the maker’s hand, or remake their grasp. Yet, like the awkward handles of the vessels, Squeezes do not fit in everyone’s fist. This discomfort has a component of familiarity as well as irritation, like putting a shoe on the wrong foot. The hardened negative spaces of different hands cut into the flesh of the fingers, irritating in the slight variations that are reminiscent of what it is to fit in, or not. The inwardly squirming flesh wants to assume this shape despite the impossibility, reiterating the indifference and durability of the object and the conflicting emotions that the gesture and object carry.

The action of making a fist can be a gesture of threat, anger, (superior) physical strength, and power. As a symbolic action, the fist conjures images of combat, and is

129 ibid.
the ‘most commonly observed threat display of our species’. The physical focus of the action transfers the internal desires, which inspire a sense of vulnerability or anxiety, into the realm of physicality, communication and interaction. The tensing of the muscles indicates anger or distress, or the suppression of these feelings through the physical inhibition of violence. The physical intention symbolized by the gesture is suspended, straining, teetering between inhibition and expression. In this body of artwork, the making of a fist is translated as a metaphorical act of suffocation as feelings of anxiety and anger are displaced onto the ‘safe’ clay. The clay cannot be destroyed, squashed or compacted into nothing, it is implacable. Perhaps herein lies part of the comfort of squeezing in this arts practice - the clay will not die, it cannot be destroyed, it will not react. Instead, the material accepts the impression, a reversal of the intricacies of the maker’s fist; maybe it can become a minute reversal of the discomfort of anxiety.

The slightly menacing image of the suffocation of clay within the dark interior of the fist can be likened to a revelation and investigation of the self, in particular Jung’s ‘shadow’ side discussed in Chapter Two. However, with this particular transference of the darker sentiments, a literal and metaphorical reversal may take place in the artist/maker’s interpretation. The indefinable, unspeakable words of anxiety and ennui are printed across the contours of the porcelain, and with this stamp, the ineffable internal intersects and mingles with the external.

This potential reversal of negativity could be where the urge to collect originates. *Squeezes* are little stamps that say ‘Mine’; they are of their maker, reminders of all the worries and the waiting that occurs through the experience of life and making. *Squeezes* are a temporary cure, and here too lies the motivation to collect. One *Squeeze* is not enough; neither is one hundred. The making of these objects is potentially endless and, in the mass of these stamps, the artist finds comfort, a simple fulfilment. However, both loss and satisfaction are felt towards the collection - temporary cures,

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130 ibid., 73.

Explanation of the term ‘displace’ in reference to psychology, ‘… displacement is the expression of [such] feelings toward neutral or less dangerous objects than the ‘real’ source of the feelings …’
they will never be quite enough. They are an affirmation of the constant vulnerability that anxiety creates in the human psyche.

Louise Bourgeois has written extensively about the act of collecting; her words provide some interesting discussion regarding the overall affect of the collected *Squeezes*:

The need to be a collector is to be omnipotent in a little area. Rather than be passive to anxiety, you become a manipulator. To alleviate fear we retreat from the world to the comfort of the object; and to this object we attribute great value and power. Collecting is a mirror of the collector. Collectors are arrested characters. Collecting holds you. What are we holding on to – maybe life itself?\(^\text{132}\)

Anxiety and fear will revisit, and herein lies the urge to collect, to see an end to something that cannot end: trying to grasp those uncomfortable and unspeakable feelings and suffocate them, to transform emotion into a material of physical comfort and expression. The process of squeezing is a kind of violence, and yet it is against something inanimate. In the process of making and collecting these little records of time and emotional space, the artist continually seeks to articulate something elusive.

In her article about mourning and loss and its relation to politics, feminist writer Judith Butler discusses qualities of violence performed against those things that are ‘unreal’ (understood to mean objects that are unable to be physically harmed; in reference to this work: emotion and clay) and the ‘spectral’\(^\text{133}\) properties of the object of violence. In both the appearance and affect of the *Squeezes*, it is possible to make this violence palpable. Louise Bourgeois’ reference to collecting as a symbol of omnipotence reiterates the importance of control. The act of collecting, futile as it may be, is an attempt to assert some control or will upon the unreal as well as the real. *Squeezes* are silent records, traces, the ghosts of some hand.

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost, or,


rather, never ‘were’, and they must be killed, since they seem to live on stubbornly, in this state of deadness. 134

In their transitional state between the real and the unreal, the shadowy emotions exposed in *Squeezes* are alluring because their expression is cathartic and calming. The *Squeezes* adopt the familiar creases of the palm and rearrange those contours into a bony and ambiguous artefact. Like a pile of discarded bones, the reception of gesture has both created and destroyed the potential of these objects. Without burial the bones act as a reminder of something that is neither dead nor alive.

Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the ‘Other’ means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral. 135

Within the imagination of the maker there is no end to this cycle, no conception of an end, and barely a memory of its beginning.

**Pull**

The gesture of the ‘Pull’ describes the action in which a potter pulls the finger or fingers from inside the rim of the pot to form a lip by coaxing the clay wall outwards. When making jugs intended for daily function, the clay would be worked for a much longer time than it is in this body of work. In this instance, the ‘Pull’ is embodied in a single action; in one movement the finger is dragged, whilst slightly hooked, upwards towards the rim. The emotions this action embodies are not as ambiguous as the gestures previously discussed, however within this gesture lie potent evocations of care and nurture, curiosity, and on the other hand, disruption.

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134 ibid.
135 ibid.
The ‘Pull’ is performed with a single action, thus forming an abstracted and directional lip (see figure 4.3). With a yielding but firm pressure, this action distorts the rim and the whole pot leans to accommodate the direction and strain of this movement. Pulled back to form a gentle channel - like the impressions of fingers running through loose soil – the lip is formed with care and a kind of finalising flourish. This channel that pours and withholds can guide what is contained by the jug to a point in which the distinction between inside and outside is unclear. Like the alternating flow of water, this point - physical and metaphorical - is an exit as well as a visual and physical entry into the form. Interior is revealed, the defined rim is bent; the interior becomes a part of the outside profile of the pot. Just like the ‘Poke’ and ‘Rupture’, the ‘Pull’ signifies an integration of interior and exterior. It is a gesture that embodies both exploration and disruption.

Because it interrupts the linear definition of the rim, the ‘Pull’ is disruptive. The force of the action is lived through the surface of the clay as well as the physical act. If pots are viewed as texts-of-the-hand then the gestures explored in this chapter can be viewed as the punctuation in a sensual and gestural narrative. The ‘Pull’ may be envisioned as full-stop. Like the wonderful finish of a concluding sentence, the finger moves like the writer who pushes the full stop into the paper, holding the pressure, only to remove it with a swift and joyful flourish.
As an interruption, the action of pulling can also be seen as an embodiment of mischievousness. There is a certain rebellion in the making of all the artwork presented, but the ‘Pull’ in particular is reminiscent of passing fingers nonchalantly breaking the rules – like scraping the icing from the side of a forbidden cake, daring someone to object to this intrusion. The interruption of the ‘Pull’ questions and confounds the definition of interior and exterior. In relation to jug-form as a reference of the human body, and in particular the female body, this is a gesture that defies the boundaries that binaries have created in the perception of the world and the conception of the self. With the pull of the fingertips across the surface of the clay, the lip is stroked into a reflection of action, this undulating entry point - the invitation to give and to receive.

**Cut**

The ‘Cut’ is a gesture that can be interpreted as either curious or destructive, but beneath both of these motivations lies a desire to challenge the potential confines of the pot through the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of form. The ‘Cut’ involves revealing and manipulating, making something from something else’s parts, and rearranging form. As an exploration of space, like Lucio Fontana’s hole and cuts, the gesture is not necessarily (or just) an act of explicit violence; it is a challenge to metaphorical and physical space. The ‘Cut’ is a gesture used in the making of *Waves*. The ‘Cut’ frees interior and exterior, opens the pot up to manipulation and allows new hollows and extremities to emerge as the *Wave*. In this way it is most certainly an act of creation, yet the cutting open removes the clay from its safe circular form; it is literally and figuratively opened up to countless possibilities; with those possibilities comes risk, and these forms do fail. The pressure of formation can be too much and a long undulating text is fragmented, its original form forgotten and spent. In this sense of simultaneous destruction and creation, the ‘Cut’ is similar to the ‘Drop’ because something is destroyed in order to make something new and the moment of creation and destruction merge, becoming intriguingly unclear.
When the cylindrical forms are cut, the walls open in a curving wake, they shrug and roll away like shoulders relaxing, as the form is detached from itself. There is a heavy flop, a kind of death, the fleshy slap of clay. Palms lift and readjust the sheet of clay. The ‘Cut’ is a release, a death and rebirth. From a slab of thrown clay new twists and turns are formed, stroking its length, propping, supporting; the hands sneaking underneath the clay slab as if it were a sleeping body, forming rises and falls in a landscape of the hands.

When the interior space of a pot is disrupted something is lost, and something is gained. From this most basic physical and spatial point the maker creates line and contour simultaneously as the exhausted tension of the pot is pushed further to its physical limit. In Waves, the ‘Cut’ has enabled the tension of the original pot-form to be released, manipulated and potentially revived. The ‘Cut’ is blunt, harsh, decided, and firm. Yet as a result of cutting a thrown form, open a delicate and sometimes awkward dance of formation is performed. Full of compromise and gentle mutual guidance between
maker and clay, the fragile clay slab is coaxed and smoothed into a new position that asserts both the loss and gain of curiosity.

The dissection of the ‘Cut’ validates the pot’s life during and as a result of its metaphorical death, it is an exploration of the most basic material of a pot; the sheet of clay pressed between the fingers and guided into shape. This dissection sets a beginning and an end to what was not separable – the circle. As such it is a kind of assault, and, as if they were trying to reassemble their original form, the waves arch, aching to come back to themselves and become whole.

**Drop**

The process of throwing necessitates control; knowing when to exert your will, and when to surrender to the inherent tendencies of clay. However, in this research the boundaries between control and acquiescence are often blurred. The motion of intentionally dropping a pot originates from failure. The act of dropping pots in this project was not originally intended as a process to make artwork, but upon reflection and repetition, these spherical pots that are flopped upon themselves became more interesting, particularly in view of the personal associations between the maker and the form of the sphere. The interaction of the making process and the resulting objects blurs the lines between concept and process as the maker’s intent is shaped in an arguably intuitive and interactive way.

In this arts practice, mistakes inevitably trigger frustration. Pots are scrunched in the hand, explosively discarded on the ground, or thrown back onto the kneading table, into a bag filled with the flopped corpses of other failures, or occasionally, the wall. When a pot fails, there is a sense of rejection, a frustration that, when released, forms an explosive action and expressive mark. In a way, absolute control is practiced when a potter deliberately lets go of his or her work and drops it on the floor, yet

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136 I have always been drawn to make spherical forms when throwing. I enjoy the generosity of roundness and the comfortable weight of these forms in my hands and arms. One memory that strikes me when considering this fascination is when I learnt the names of shapes: I heard ‘sphere’ as ‘Sophia’ and felt rather puzzled but also honoured, because it was my favourite form of all the choices. Like all my pots, the *Drop-pots* are an experimentation with a piece of my self as well the material itself.
simultaneously, control is completely surrendered as the pot leaves the hands. In this body of work, taking control in the process of making is a conscious and paradoxical decision to let go. The potter releases a piece of her self, her time, her personal flesh and territory, to the coincidences of physics and circumstance.

The aspect of control that is both exerted and surrendered in this body of work initiates a discussion of the joy of surprise, the unknown, and the curious spirit. However the act of dropping a pot can also be viewed as an abandonment that is detached, even cruel. The gesture of ‘letting go’ is a release of the self, as well as object, but also must involve the literal and figurative distancing of one’s self from the made object (see figure 4.4).

Distancing is a form of self-preservation and may indicate the suppression of vulnerability and an attempt to protect oneself from abandonment. Yet rejection and abandonment can go both ways; the made can be rejected by the maker and the maker can feel rejected by the made. When mistakes are made and pots disposed of, a potter rejects these failures, however a sense of rejection may be felt by the maker who is denied satisfaction by the process and the objects that are usually such havens. By dropping, the potter does not become too attached to individual pots, thus hopes are hung on the element of surprise rather than on the absolute control of process and material. Drop-pots are thrown to be sacrificed, to be dropped and, in a way, that is their purpose. However, it is for the maker’s entertainment and it is in this distancing of the self - physical and mental – that the process verges on cruelty. This is especially true given the metaphors discussed in this research: maker as a mother, clay as flesh, and pots as children or family.

The deliberation, premeditation, and detached enjoyment of the disintegration and destruction of pots makes dropping them a conceivably cruel act. Thus it follows that the resulting flopped, sagged and slumped pots become figures of sympathy, as well as interest. The deliberate act of dropping something is very different from the explosive reaction of a frustrating failure and the dismissal of a pot. The artist becomes a decider of fate and the act of dropping can be seen as a kind of assassination. Louise Bourgeois
comments on the feeling of pity and remorse for the products of her creativity. Here she speaks about herself as a ‘murderer’ in a way that relates to the themes and tensions of this research:

In my art I am the murderer. I feel the ordeal of the murderer, the [wo]man who has to live with his[her] conscience. The process is to go from passive to active. As an artist I am a powerful person. In real life I feel like the mouse behind the radiator. It is mind over matter. You transcend real life in your art.¹³⁷

The introduction of the ‘murderer’ in this arts practice initiates a discussion of the less palatable aspects of the maker’s self (and humanity in general) that are revealed in the violence and detachment of the gesture of dropping, as well as squeezing, cutting, and poking. There are abject qualities to the Drop-pots; reminiscent of human anatomy, they sag like aging flesh. This could be seen as a reflection of those hidden aspects of the personality that one might prefer to remain hidden. The therapy of these works lies not only in the cathartic nature of the making process, but also in the exposition of the shadowy sides of persona, the urge to destroy; the embarrassments and excesses of the mortal flesh and the cruelty we show to others as well as ourselves.

Drop-pots challenge the domains of interior and exterior like the excesses and spillages of the body. The conventionally distasteful and uncontrolled are exposed for contemplation as well as visual and tactile engagement. The confines of binaries, such as the division of inside and outside, arise from an inherent fear of the uncontrollable. In this practice such categorisation is denied; indeed it is impossible in view of the processes undertaken, especially the act of dropping pots. Instead, this work attempts to reveal the simultaneously abject yet potentially beautiful qualities of material, physicality, the self, and conceptions of the human flesh - all of which drift between control, acquiescence and chaos.

The abject is what of the body falls away from it while remaining irreducible to the subject/object and inside/outside oppositions. The abject necessarily partakes of both polarized terms but cannot be clearly identified with either.\footnote{Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 192.}

*Drop-pots* defy boundaries, and the lack of a base leaves them both open and closed forms with hollows and cracks. These forms waver between vessel and non-vessel, between ultimate control and complete resignation, alluding to conceptions of the ‘dangerous’ abject.\footnote{ibid., 195} *Drop-pots* do not accommodate categorisation as vessel or non-vessel, thus the inherent threat of the uncontrollable is not subdued, rather it lingers. This threat is also evident in the relinquishing of control that occurs when a pot is dropped, capturing a moment of simultaneous creation and destruction. This relates to the mixed emotions and risk of discomfort in the act of making shared by all of the
gestures discussed. Importantly this threat can also be viewed in the sense of the vulnerability that accompanies the admission of personal failures and weaknesses through the exhibition and analysis of these objects.

Summary
Within the gestures discussed in this chapter there are mixed, ambiguous and conflicting feelings embodied in action. What might appear to be incompatible emotions occur simultaneously creating ambiguous affect, a potent tension that may begin to define the interaction and interdependence of conventionally separate aspects of humanity and the self. An analysis of this paradox confounds binaries; thus adjusting the figurative black and white of life and art into a gradual and changeable scale of grey. Without curiosity there can be no discovery, and without the cycles of destruction and construction the world would not move or change as it does constantly. Even emotions such as anger and anxiety can be quelled and transformed through the acts of making; thus gesture (as abstracted action) is a vital part of the expressive and, in particular, therapeutic aspects of this project. The following chapter ties together the discussion of gesture, the three emotional themes, and the underlying mother/maker metaphor by examining the exhibition as a lived entirety and explores potential readings of individual artworks from a personal point of view.
Chapter Five

Internal Geography

This chapter is a personal reflection on the exhibited work as an entirety. This chapter is a space of contemplation, offering an opening into the exhibition that is descriptive, personal and conceptual. I do not intend to prescribe reactions; rather, I act as a guide to the viewer’s exploration of my internal geography. It is my aim to lead the reader through my experience of the exhibition and the evolution of artworks by examining each body of work separately.

Lived Landscape

The artwork that has been produced during this research has emerged, and been refined, in a sequence of generations; from each form that has been explored subsequent pots and forms have evolved. I am seeing my own refinement of concept in concrete form, which is quite confronting in many ways. I feel as though I can relate to the experiences of these bodies of work as they are exhibited when I am amongst them. Strewn around a room, different parts of me are being described and read by other people. I often find myself drawn to rearrange my artworks; to be close to my work is a way for me to no longer stand alone and vulnerable. Just as clay is a addition to my flesh, the objects I make are a part of myself; my body as a concept and a physical reality, is my sculpture. As if I am self touching to comfort myself, I seek protection from my work, positioning myself alongside or behind it. I am both exposed and sheltered by what I have made.

As I wander through the space what strikes me most is the use of the floor over plinths for much of the work, a choice I made because I think plinths interrupt the organic flow of space. The use of the floor, atypical of many ceramic exhibitions, was a little rebellion of my own. I want to avoid presenting objects as precious, to be idolised. On the floor and the table each group of artworks leads into the next, creating a sense of greater whole as well as individual parts. In the case of the jug and bowls I chose to use a sturdy, almost imposing table to create a sense of the domestic space within the exhibition. However, because the table is taller than might be typical of the domestic
scale the open space of the exhibition is not interrupted, instead a new dimension is
developed, which like *The Spine*, integrates an awareness of vertical space as well as
horizontal. Because of the experiential and tactile elements of being that I am trying to
evoke through my artwork, I consider it important to make viewers more aware of the
space they are in as well as the objects on display.

*Jug and Bowls*

When read in conjunction with the objects upon and around it the table is an object that
evokes the familiarity of the dinner table – a sense of home, family. The dinner table
was an ongoing presence in my childhood and my experience of home. I am reminded
of the clamour of my childhood, when we would line up to be fed, bickering and
snatching, fighting for certain places, with the intermittent groan of chairs being scraped
across the bare cork floor. The place where my entire family would meet. A place
where happy battles were fought and won, grievances aired - and in the never ending
teenage years of one family member after the other – the clatter of someone storming
from the room. The kitchen was the beating heart of our home, the table a stage, the
face of ourselves as a complete group. Now with distance, I see that the tension that
exists in myself and the mixed emotions of that place, are articulated in the placement
of the jug and bowls. This is a potent internal space in which people can be both replete
and hungry, embodied with the human desire to satisfy physical and psychological
needs.

My experience of the jug and bowls is one of giving and receiving and the tensions and
contradictions that exist in this apparently straightforward interaction. The jug contains
and distributes. The bowl, not so strongly linked to the act of distribution, is receiver,
container – a place to rest, a place for things to accumulate, to be brought with
expectation, filled and emptied. The one jug, to me, is a symbolic mother, a
representation of my feelings towards making, as well as a echo and discussion of the
tensions I perceive in the idea of mothering and my own experiences of being mothered.
The jug is in a state of flux, it offers up what is contained, but a gaver can also withhold.
The scars that punctuate the vessel are my questions, explorations of this jug’s actual
function, the tensions involved with the role of mother as caregiver or maker, and the
associations between the female body and the vessel. The bowls speak about isolation, as an artist, as an individual or characteristic of a family – to me they are symbols of entire concepts whose meanings can change and waver whose origin can be traced back to a potent source. The hidden desires, separations, what remains unspoken, unfilled.

My decision to place a bowl on the edge of the table and the ground came about when playing with the presentation before its finalisation. This placement makes me very aware of the objects, they are disrupting space. The bowl on the edge is between falling and sitting, the threat is real in some ways, but mostly the position is simply provocative; begging the viewer to ask their own questions of this strange but somewhat familiar tableau. I want to push it back to safety, as I imagine others do, but I also enjoy the simple poetic of its placement. Similarly the bowl on the ground is a reminder of space as well as metaphor. Hidden or excluded, forgotten or a secret, this bowl also disrupts the space and my expectation. I am doing what I think should not do, and though I delight in those decisions, sometimes I am also plagued by doubt. Despite this unease, I see I am daring myself to openly question the space in which my work is situated and the way the viewer engages with that space.

Squeezes

White has interesting implications when considered in relation to the repetitive and potentially endless process of making *Squeezes* and the attempted transfer of anxiety onto clay. Louise Bourgeois makes a psychologically based estimation of the significance of white which I believe relates very well to this project’s conceptual and psychological basis: ‘White means to go back to square one. It’s a renewal, the possibility of starting again, completely fresh.’140 The compulsive and cyclic process of making *Squeezes* is a repeated attempt to seek, explore and express comfort and anxiety. To start afresh, to go back to the beginnings of the hand, of the body, of the self. Yet, there is a threat in the piece of blank paper, I ask myself repeatedly what I have to say that is worth saying.

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White is a colour of absence, bare, virginal, it is begging to be altered, disgraced and dirtied. The fate of the colour white is to become dulled, a memory of perceived purity shaded with the remnants of experience and time. Different shades of white emerge in the pile of *Squeezes*, what might have seemed to be simply white is actually blue-whites, the most pure almost glowing white, a creamy shade like milk, the greyed white of parched bone, and the immeasurable graduations between. This sense of difference amongst sameness gives the *Squeezes*, in my mind, a sense of age, of different stages of growth or decay, different generations of the same thing, and different hands clasping the clay. That feeling makes me want to carry the *Squeezes* to a beach, river, or mountain, and see them meld into the landscape, start something new themselves.

The association of white with purity is an important part of my attitude towards porcelain. I have always felt uneasy about this material – expensive, challenging it seemed to be almost a *fussy* material for people with more vigilance and more patience than I possess. When I first touched it I could not believe its incredible dense softness, a paradox it seemed. I was attracted to the completely seductive way it felt when on the wheel, in the hands. So smooth. When wetted, porcelain looks to me like the thick double cream you can stand a spoon in; luscious, rich, appealing, almost too much - porcelain coats the hands like that cream. Despite this delight, the threat of contamination shadowed my engagement with the material. To use this material in such a major body of work is my private rebellion, against myself and the ‘rules’ that a craft-based field like ceramics can *seem* to enforce.

I am the frustrated writer scrunching pieces of paper into balls. Perhaps, sitting on this chair was a respite; the impotent repeated action, an antidote to potter’s block. Discarded and to one side, the *Squeezes* are abandoned, tossed onto a pile. Like clinking stones on a beach - collected, touched, and moved - the *Squeezes* are in a state of flux yet they are so very still on their own. Stillness conflicts with, and sharpens, the sense of life so closely captured yet so conspicuously absent. Like a pile of bleached bones guarded by an abandoned post the *Squeezes* are discarded, but still clinging together.
The Spine hangs nearby, the collection, the lonely attempt at control that also speaks about light and shadow, the inside and out. The Spine, whiteness against whiteness, shadows on the wall, the purposeful drop of the chain into a pile – this is a work that reconfigures the Squeezes and speaks to me about vulnerability, purpose and loneliness as well as togetherness on a different level (see figure 5.1). It was through my writing about the Squeezes that I began to see how they could be used to create other meaningful objects, and that their bony appearance could be explored further. From a point of uncertainty a sense of purpose for the Squeezes began to reveal itself to me. I began to see potential configurations in the growing collection of Squeezes in my studio. In this single chain a sense of vulnerability, loneliness and the attempt to control something is expressed and altered. The Spine engages with space on a different level to those Squeezes seemingly discarded in a pile on the floor. To look up, to be dwarfed

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141 The Spine is documented on the ground for the ease of the photographer, rather than hanging as it is presented in the actual exhibition.
by something threatens me, so much weight is hanging on a piece of fishing line around three millimetres thick - I am all too aware that the slender line could become fragile and snap.

The Squeezes in this work have gone through different processes in their making: those involved in The Spine have been drilled with small holes before firing and then threaded onto wire and hung. Within the pile of unthreaded Squeezes some have holes, some do not – demonstrating the connection and difference between the Squeezes and Chair and the Spine, as well as the potentially infinite opportunity for labour that the Spine and the Squeezes signify. It is a revelation of process, labour and potential. This is a chain that could continue, on and on, each progression a metamorphosis of significance whose end cannot be defined nor its beginning. This simple form speaks about the internal and external body, the processes of its formation, and the most basic method of creation; addition.

Drop-pots

The Drop-pots, like a profusion of nests or cells make me think of a sense of growth, flux and family. Individuals amongst many, yet of the same kind, made by the same hand, the same substance, the stacked pots are growing, additions that teeter. As finished forms I am struck now, perhaps most of all, with the transformation of soft earthy smelling clay to something hard, a form of its own. This is particularly evident to me because of the moment I see captured in these forms, that moment when I let go and watch as the clay behaves like flesh, enveloping space, sagging and bulging. Interior and exterior space are competing and exchanging, both within the pots themselves and the space they inhabit. Those soft nests contain and contour space, inviting what is outside into hungry thin-lipped mouths.

The particular clay used of the Drop-pots is one I have a long history of working with - from the humble beginnings of making things on my bedroom floor as a child, I see how things have changed, but also, how they have stayed the same. The contrast

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142 When I was young my mother would buy me the occasional bag of Bennett’s terracotta clay for a birthday or Christmas. This bag usually sat in a corner for a while; the time it was used was often when I was sent to my room (a fairly regular occurrence). Seated cross legged on the floor I would sometimes beat the clay angrily; the blows would soften gradually, the anger would dissipate. The
between the ragged edges of the partially formed bases and the smoothed walls and soft bulbous forms to me is almost dangerous, the sharp edges of a form which is flowing and soft is a warning, or perhaps an invitation into the conflicting worlds the Drop-pots inhabit. The eye is led first around the dips and sags of the pot then into the concave space of the form, but this space of shelter and comfort rests on wavering borders - the ruffled snags of clay of the empty base, the defined thin rim. These forms are simultaneously comfort and disturbance; to hold them, to touch them is an exercise in tactile contrasts. I see the Drop-pots as the most playful of this body of work, the gesture captured in the form is one of curiosity and a struggle between being in control and letting things happen. After guiding the clay, the form arrives of its own accord, the clay will do what its structure demands, giving away to gravity.

Now that these are finished, I see the attraction of terracotta also lies in its colour when fired a little higher than usual. The mortality of the forms, dropped or discarded maybe, the resignation of control, and the life that is captured needs a strong colour and indeed a strong clay to withstand the intensity with which the clay is approached. The decision to use this clay was also technical, no other clay was robust enough of flexible enough to withstand the pressure it was put under in the making process. Like the incidental resemblance of these forms to red blood cells I feel like this is another example of the happenstance that guides my own practice into areas where the experience of making is a crucial part of the artwork’s arrival.

Waves

The Waves are forms that are reminiscent of nature. Stationary curls of water, bark, cloud, about to make their move. A moment of vitality of life, of making, is captured, as well as the unmaking. The elusive life and movement that the Waves seem to have captured is noticeably absent, though the Waves heave and dip on the harsh concrete floor. Like clay breaths that are held, waiting to be released from their contraction, the repetitive stroking of the malleable material was calming. Smoothing what was bashed into soft curves, sculpting the clay with movement. Every time I use Bennett’s I am reminded of those times; the smell of shale oil (a petroleum-like oil derived from sedimentary rock similar to slate, ‘oil shale’ with a very distinctive odour similar to diesel fuel) and uncovered earth wafting from the light muddy brown mass.
Waves are as much about tension as they are about the releasing of the pot from its circularity (see figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2
Sophia Phillips, 2007, Untitled (wave), stoneware, dimensions variable.

When I initially began throwing, the idea of cutting open pots was abhorrent. I first witnessed this sacrifice of form when watching someone make a huge bowl with deft hands. As he finished and began to slide a wire beneath the pot to remove it from the wheel he changed the direction of the wire, and pulled it up through the centre of the form before the audience could even gasp. Parting the two halves he seemed satisfied at the shock of the beginners watching, but also unconcerned about his forfeit. The lack of preciousness was both disconcerting and appealing to me. With time I realised this lack of preciousness was not the same as slashing a finished painting open for instance, and the opportunity for redemption that lies in repetition became one of the aspects of ceramics that challenged and fulfilled me the most. From that early point onwards the profile of the clay walls were an unconscious concern in the forms I was producing.
At first the only time I could bear to cut open a pot was when it was unusable, and would be discarded anyway. In fact, my experiments with ruined pots initiated much of the work I have produced during this project. However as time progressed and the process of throwing became second nature to me, I deliberately made pots to be sacrificed. These early Waves were different, I enjoyed the idea that a pot could be unravelled, that circularity and symmetry were not mandatory conditions of the thrown form. The shaping of these long slabs became the most challenging part of making Waves and I rose to the challenge with the same tenacity I initially approached throwing. Like the man who first flaunted his ability and lack of preciousness, I too began to enjoy the shock, and sometimes dismay, as others saw me dismember what began as ‘perfect’ pots.

I like to rock the Waves and leave them to slowly still themselves; the latent life of these forms is awakened. This paradox, of stillness and vitality captured in the one form is echoed in their physical qualities also: On one hand these forms are surprisingly resilient, on the other, when stressed at a particular point they are very fragile. When they are accidentally banged you can feel the shudders of shock waves moving through the form, as what appears as rigid reveals itself to be surprisingly flexible. Other times, when stressed across rather than along the form, Waves readily give up their rigid form and snap. To me these unravelled pots are a poignant combination of strength and fragility, life and death, movement and stillness.

Summary
This chapter positions the exhibition space as one of changeability that can be negotiated bodily, emotionally and conceptually. Providing a overview of the exhibited work incorporates my own experiences of the making and presentation of my work with conceptual and formal concerns relevant to the reflection and discussion of previous chapters. From embodied objects an emotional and metaphorical landscape may emerge; a landscape inhabited by the artist, artwork and viewer, all situated at different and changeable spaces of perception and attachment. Offering my point of view has been important to the realisation of this entire thesis because my experience of embodiment is a key concern in this research. The artwork presented, combined with a
subjective analysis of the arrangement of the exhibition elaborates upon the emotional landscape this research has developed. Different interpretations and meanings can be layered upon my own understanding of the made. The maker, the made and the processes between have been utilised as points of discussion demonstrating the integration of process, concept and coincidence in the arrival of final artworks. To follow this chapter a conclusion will examine how the main aims and questions of the proposed research have been realised, their implications, uses, and potential for further study.
Conclusion

This thesis, *Metaphors with clay: embodying the maker in the made*, set out to establish how the physical and metaphorical aspects of clay translate the making process from an enjoyable activity into a fulfilling, challenging and, importantly, therapeutic practice. With metaphor in mind the embodied aspects of making and the made have been analysed using my conceptual, theoretical and emotional engagement with the making process; these cycles of material, process and concept translate into an internal method of research and self-discovery. The record and discussion of a personal relationship between maker, made, meaning and clay reaches beyond the subjective and conceptual into several different areas of theoretical and philosophical analysis. Additionally, the knowledge developed in this project has practical applications. Arts practice and making are expressive, therapeutic practices that have the potential to significantly improve a person’s quality of life, health, and functioning in society. This exegesis has demonstrated the capacity of clay to translate and explore emotion and thus become a useful material for expression and therapeutic practice. Consequently, this research could be successfully applied and extended in a social arts network and art education as a therapeutic tool.

This research challenges embedded hierarchies in the field of contemporary arts by refusing to take on board sacrosanct notions of the functional vessel or the conceptual art experience. Additionally, delving into the materiality of clay and connecting the organic qualities of clay with those of human body and its associated senses lays open new possibilities for art therapy. This situates my research between visual arts and health, a conventional divide that is arrogant to maintain. It is only recently that consultancy projects in Australia have offered this alliance between visual arts and health its deserved recognition – my research examines the tension that exists between art and therapy and thus continues in this vein.

The first chapter of this exegesis has provided a background for the research, introducing the subject position of the maker, theoretical and creative influences - these included discussions of the work of Peter Voulkos, Jane Sawyer, Vilma Henkelman, Louise Bourgeois and Lucio Fontana. The description of my subject position and the
ability of human beings to assign meaning to objects and experiences creates a link between concepts developed by other writers and philosophers and this research; these influences include Paul Rodaway, Yi-Fu Tuan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Elizabeth Grosz, Julian Stair and Tony Fry. This chapter also outlines the importance of a cyclical methodology and how this relates to the internal as well as external processes of creation in clay.

It is in this chapter that ideas from the field of art therapy are assigned as base concepts of this research and connected to the healing, meditative, and expressive capacity of the making process, particularly in clay. The concept of a therapeutic practice is elaborated upon using the work and words of Louise Bourgeois. Additionally, the power of gesture as a form of communication is discussed using the work of Lucio Fontana as an example, thus providing a point of departure for Chapter Four.

Chapter Two provided a discussion of the abstraction of subject position and elaborated upon the metaphorical significance of clay as material of creation. The metaphor of mother as maker that is considered in this chapter sets the foundations for the ensuing description and examination of three emotional themes and gesture. This conceptual framework allows shared awareness and experiences to intersect with the deeply personal; the ambivalence of experience is a key factor in this exploration of metaphor and clay.

Malleable, soft, and yielding - wet clay not only accepts imprints of the body, it has a density that is fleshy, and when it is smoothed or burnished, a skin-like hue. It is through these characteristics and metaphor that I came to liken clay to flesh, and through this, to see my pots as children, bodies, and components of a family. Like the interactions between a mother and child, this relationship with making can be simultaneously challenging and fulfilling, moving beyond the unencumbered joy of playing with clay. Beyond their lived utility, ceramic vessels are also containers of nourishment, comfort, and spiritual and cultural significance. The presence of clay in creation myths - which relate to the subconscious and symbolic understanding of the world and events -
indicates an important psychological connection between clay, creation and the human body which has strengthened the efficacy of the mother/maker metaphor. Led by the musings of potter and writer Mary Caroline Richards, a discussion of the meditative conversation between hand and clay during the act of centering abstracts the physical movements and sensations of making, thus initiating a psychological and theoretical analysis of gesture as an embodiment of emotion.

Chapter Three further discusses the internal processes and emotions of maker and relates these internal experiences to the making process and resulting objects. The three emotional themes that are identified are purpose, anger and anxiety, each of which is considered in relation to the experience of the concept of mother/maker. This chapter reveals that these themes share sentiments – anger is often initiated by fear and anxiety, and feelings of purpose can also waver between anxiety and fulfilment. Overlapping and conversing with each other, this theoretical interpretation highlights the ambivalence of communication and sensation and how it resonates in life. The exploration of these themes illustrates the need for mistakes and accident to inspire and stimulate:

You have to like imperfection, rehearsing imperfection. There’s something very powerful about disappointment - something creative always emerges later. It’s essential to learn to be freely imperfect.143

By giving myself to the making process and the implicit desires that making fulfils, those mistakes that inevitably arise along the way can become insightful progressions. Learning to be ‘freely imperfect’ and open to disappointment is perhaps the most important lesson that practicing as an artist has offered me; the conflicting feelings I have felt towards my work and practice are better understood when performed in the safe space of the studio and later analysed through the embodied object. Alternating currents of anger, anxiety, and ambivalence have formed artwork that references its making as well as the spaces, behaviour, and ambiguity of lived experiences.

143 Gabriel Orozco, Gabriel Orozco: Trabajo (Koln: Verflag Der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 1992), back cover.
Chapter Four reveals how the ambivalence of the three emotional themes is symbolically represented, and the ability of gesture to transcend apparently opposed concepts and experiences. Gesture is envisioned as an abstraction of action, thus able to capture the nuances of non-verbal and symbolic communication. The gestures that are examined reveal themselves to be mixed, ambiguous and convey conflicting feelings which are expressed through the maker’s imprint. The mutability of the art object, its function as a symbol, and ability to evoke varied and even conflicting reactions - simultaneously or with reflection - calls for investigation through the analysis of philosophers such as Frederich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze. Combined with the speculation of feminists such as Elizabeth Grosz and Judith Butler, the underlying conflicts that this research has touched upon on can be extended and examined from a gendered perspective. Carl Jung’s work offers further elaboration on the production of symbolic meaning and the conflicts that symbols describe in the human psyche. Additionally, an examination of arts practice from the perspective of object-relations theory would also extend this research in its relation to psychology and art therapy.

In Chapter Five the themes, gestures and metaphors of the previous chapters are tied together by subjectively examining the exhibition that accompanied this exegesis. The symbolic conversation between the maker and the made describes another part of the making process; how things came to be and what they say to the maker. Autobiographical experiences and motives have been incorporated as asides in footnotes describing the personal point of view which integrates the highly subjective with more a formal and symbolic discussion. Here the internal experience of materials and forms, as well as the personal understanding of the made, is presented without the assumption that the audience requires this viewpoint. I include my experiences in the analysis of the exhibition to highlight the presence and absence of the maker in the made.

The metaphors that have been unravelled in this exegesis offer an entry into the complexities of existence as an artist, and indeed, a human being. The metaphors I have developed during this engagement with process and expression have revealed the fluidity of concepts and attitudes in arts practice and the ability of conflict to speak to
the viewer and artist over many levels. The conceptual basis and visual impressions of this exhibition combine the artist’s internal conflicts with a more physical realm, in which emotion is transformed by the impressions of the body, the intent of the maker, and the engagement of the viewer.

With clay in hand and mind, this project has examined the psychological, emotional, and embodied aspects of the making process, and through this, arts practice and its potential as a form of nurture, catharsis, and self-knowledge. With this perspective it has been possible to describe how the qualities of clay have promoted the development of a gestural language of emotion in my arts practice. I have argued that the making process provides an outlet for the mixed feelings that I feel towards the results of the making process, life, and myself. In reaching beyond the formality of the art object and vessel, the complexities of the making process have been explored, revealing how experience and emotion can be reflected upon and expressed with clay. Wavering between opposition and association, the emotions and metaphors explored offer a broader understanding of an artist’s embodiment in the art object, and importantly, how this can affect, reflect and enhance human relationships and experience.
Appendix

Bibliography


