Drop my heart like an urn; dissolve my skin like it's clay: Dichotomies of Destruction & Creation; the Material & the Intangible

by

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Abstract

Everyday life is punctuated by ceramic vessels, often poured into and forth from with little consideration beyond their functionality. However, when broken, the vessel's relationship to the user is shifted. While the vessel's maker has an intimate understanding of ceramic's integral relationship to breakage and loss, the day-to-day user has no such relationship, making the vessel's destruction all the more shocking. By thinking about the broken vessels present within Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) and Azza El Siddique's *Measure of One* (2020), this paper investigates the implications of intentional breakage, the materiality of clay and the evocative presence of the broken vessel in the museum.When placed within the context of the museum, the ceramic vessel becomes ascribed with meaning typically associated with sculpture while retaining its relationship to craft, the domestic sphere and archeology. The broken vessel can be contextualized as a reminder of death, understood through a metaphoric lens in relationship to bereavement, melancholy and transformation.

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Introduction

Take anything you'd like, my grandmother told me as my mom and aunts helped organize her dishes into neat piles on the dining room table. My grandmother was in the process of downsizing, preparing to move to the retirement residence on the other side of town and her brick bungalow – teeming with photographs, sewing supplies and glassware – needed to be emptied out. Milk glass, pinwheel crystal, pristine octagonal saucers with matching teapot and gravy boat, her spoon collection, wine glasses. Seeing the table our family had eaten at every Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter for as long as I had been alive piled-up like a yard sale made my throat dry. It felt like a wake, the contents of the cabinets displayed one last time, swaddled in newsprint and packed into boxes; it became clear that something was changing, someone was leaving. I traced the seams of the wood panelling clad walls with my fingertips, knowing that they were destined to be painted over or demolished by the new owners. I took a small sky-blue pinch pot with waved edges and fingerprint smudges fossilized on its surface. A crude "C.W." etched into the bottom is presumably from Aunt Carol when she was little. I did not know what I would use it for, if anything, but I knew I needed to hold onto something from this place…

Our everyday lives are filled with ceramic vessels; jewellery dishes and jars, vases for flowers, jugs and toilet bowls filled with water, and, at times, the urns containing the ashes of loved ones. The ceramic vessel is entrenched within the quotidian, so much so that it is easily underappreciated by those who are not makers. The day-to-day interactions that the ceramic user has with a vessel, versus the daily interactions of the maker, differ. While the broken vessel is typically undesirable, even jarring to the user, the maker has a deep-seated, engrossing relationship with breakage. The ceramic vessel's potential to be broken permeates every stage of

the making process. Being a maker of ceramics necessitates a constant awareness and acceptance of uncertainty, a constant negotiation with destruction.

The user is less attuned to, and less frequently encounters, the broken vessel. Its status or condition is often the consequence of accidents or missteps in daily life, rather than a normal part of the making process: a coffee mug injured on a hurried morning, roughhousing in the living room next to the collection of pinwheel crystal, an inebriated elbow swiping across the dinner table. The broken vessel is characterized by the transformation of materials and its function, as well as the emotional impact of breakage provoking feelings that can range from irritation to anger, from regret to dismay and lamentation. In a domestic setting, the shards will either be collected and put into a box with the promise of being repaired at a later date (which often never arrives) or they will be swept into the dustbin and disposed of; dejected debris destined to be forgotten. What happens then, when ceramic vessels are intentionally broken; what meaning is produced when the shards and fragments are considered in their own right?

Against the backdrop of the ongoing Coronavirus Pandemic (2019 – present), as the final threads of stability and constancy are being ripped from the fibres of our worlds, as daily life is punctuated by ongoing, inescapable loss, I believe it is timely to contend with the simultaneous creative and destructive forces which produce the broken ceramic vessel. By taking into account its domestic, anthropological and exhibition history, the broken ceramic vessel can be positioned as a semiotically specific, calculated and distinct form. Further, the broken ceramic vessel and its fragments take on alternative, discursive and symbolically expansive meanings when housed within the space of the museum.

In this Major Research Project (MRP), the role of the broken ceramic vessel within the context of contemporary craft and museum display practices will be investigated. Ai Weiwei's

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995) and Azza El Siddique's *Measure of One* (2020), both engage with the materiality of clay, their differing modes of destroying the vessel form are necessary components in the creation of their works. Ai's[1] smashing of the found urn and El Siddique's use of water to rehydrate and dissolve her raw clay forms will be discussed in relationship to the materiality of clay/ceramics, in addition to a broader look at the conceptual implications related to breakage and display (what does it mean to break a pot from the past, a pot made by someone else? What does it mean to destroy a vessel I have conceived with my own hands?).

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn is the (in)famous black and white photographic tryptic depicting Ai presenting an urn to the camera, unceremoniously dropping and smashing the vessel on the ground. The work is widely known because of Ai's iconoclastic action in combination with his emotionless expression as he annihilates a piece of Chinese cultural history. Intentionally provocative, the work has retained its visual potency into the 21st century. El Siddique's *Measure of One* features a total of seventy-five raw clay vases displayed on a central steel shelf with an open well of water in front (Miller). The water is pumped through an irrigation system, spraying the vessels at regular intervals, rehydrating the clay until their sides begin to crumble and cave in. The destroyed vessels are then moved – with bated breath – to be displayed along metal shelves radiating from the central column. Ai and El Siddique are both exploring the materiality of clay within their time-based works.

The broken ceramic vessel can be understood in relationship with, and in contrast to, the ceramic vessel which remains intact; destruction is a necessary force in the production of *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Measure of One*. Dropping, smashing, rehydrating and

[1] Within Chinese naming conventions, the surname is placed first (Purdue Writing Lab).

dissolving are all catalysts for generative recontextualizations of the ceramic medium. In this context, *brokenness* is being treated and discussed as a state of *wholeness.* The maker has an awareness that at any point the ceramic vessel can be broken or destroyed. Raw clay can be uncompromising on the wheel, wobbling and distorting with a slight misplacement of the maker's fingers. The clay can crack once formed and dried, it can be damaged before it ever reaches the kiln, before ever being bisqued. Should the vessel emerge from the kiln's flames intact, it maintains a porosity until glazed, and even then, can still be broken or damaged. Ceramics are in a constant state of fluctuation; the making process is a network of transformations and changing states of matter that do not have a defined point of completion (any such point is defined by the maker, not by the medium itself). The ceramic objects which we encounter, either in our cupboards or in the museum, with rounded bellies and smooth necks, are deceptive in their stagnation; we have just so happened to encounter them at this moment in time. There is an illusion of stagnation, of certainty, yet the ceramic vessel is always and forever in a state of flux even if that undulation and potentiality is imperceptible to the human eye.

Ai and El Siddique are both manipulating clay's lexicon. Clay can be fired in a kiln, then smashed and ground down to dust.[2] Raw clay can be molded and dried, rehydrated and liquified. A ball of clay can be mulled over and over in the palm of one's hand until fingernails are chalky and tendons sore. The end results may not appear dissimilar from the starting point, but the process of material transformation and translation, contemplation and energetic exchange still occurred despite a lack of tangible residue (the lack of a physical container).

It is important to address what "everyday" denotes in the present moment – what is everyday life considered in the midst of a pandemic? What does past, or even the passage of time

[2] See, for example, Ai Weiwei's *Dust to Dust* (2009), where he ground down Neolithic pots before putting the powder into contemporary glass jars (Smith 37).

mean to us now, a year into social distancing and separation? The body becomes a covert site of disease, virality and is sequestered away from others. If I am to think about clay and ceramics – which are inherently tactile – what meaning becomes ascribed to touch when the thought of touching another is now laced with dread? One's home becomes fragmented as private and public spheres converge through pixilated screens into multi-functional spaces; the couch becomes a classroom, an office, a site to socialize mediated by a computer screen. This new experience of everyday life thus impacts the ways in which "the everyday" is considered in contemporary art and craft practices. In the current moment, there is a new or skewed relationship with time, touch, and what is considered "normal life." Contemplating the material and metaphoric meanings attributed to the fragmented ceramic vessel can serve as a methodology for considering and coping with exploded (and imploded) worlds. Rather than an inquiry into processes of reconstruction and restoration, this research questions what happens after breakage; what lingers in the aftermath, what can be gained when thinking through pain, the fractures and the dissolve of tangible matter. Ultimately, the broken ceramic vessel can embody the dual nature of destruction and creation, and more broadly shows that not everything needs to be immediately discarded or repaired; there is something productive in sitting with the discomfort of ruination.

The first section of the paper focuses on contextualizing the ceramic vessel's relationship to the museum, discussing the implications associated with display and drawing on an interview conducted with the Gardiner Museum's Chief Curator Dr. Sequoia Miller. Esther Pasztory's explanation of "art" versus "non-art" and Louise Mazanti's definition of the super-object will be used to frame the research. In Section Two, secondary research will be used to discuss Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and an interview conducted with interdisciplinary artist

Azza El Siddique will be drawn on to consider her piece, *Measure of One*, focusing on "destruction as a creative principle" and their modes of engagement with the materiality of clay (Miller). The connection between Ai's work and archeological shards of pottery will be discussed; El Siddique's use of raw clay and its associations with the human body will be explored. Section Three of this paper continues to consider the conceptual and metaphoric relationship between ceramic vessel and the human body, in addition to thinking through the broken vessel as a symbol of memento mori and its relationship to contemporary definitions of melancholy. Further, the compounding of the interior and exterior space within and around the vessel will be discussed, in addition to the use of photographic documentation within their practices.

These selected works and use of the vessel form can be considered craft, however, that does not mean they cannot also be considered artwork. What I mean to say, is that the broken vessel is not transformed into "art" because of the destruction of function, but rather that it remains within the realm of craft while being ascribed conceptual meaning. The German term *aufhebung* relates to Hegelian philosophy, describing "the process by which the conflict between two opposed or contrasting things […] is resolved by the emergence of a new idea, which both preserves and transcends them," becomes useful in understanding the duality of destruction and creation ("Aufhebung"). Translated as *sublation* in English, the term articulates the process by which the vessel's previous form is negated, while still maintaining and preserving an element of the previous state within the new synthesis ("Sublate."). The broken vessel remains an object of craft while being contemplated as an artwork.

The broken ceramic vessel is symbolically and semiotically linked with the human body, in part because "three-dimensionality [suggests] embodiment – some being, or concept accorded

corporeal reality" (Pasztory 54). Subsequently, the destruction of the pot's body evokes feelings of melancholy while concurrently engaging with generative processes. The productive forces necessarily exerted to create *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Measure of One* are deeply entangled with loss, bereavement and melancholy. Ultimately, instead of rushing to repair or dispose of the broken vessel, there is knowledge which can be gleaned by pausing within the space of creative destruction.

Methodology & Literature Review

With a background in studio painting and art history, the methodological approach I have taken towards my MRP has included a process of familiarizing myself with key figures from within the field of contemporary craft, as well as thinking through making (or thinking through craft) as a way to become more intimately intertwined with the medium of clay.

My research process has included reading the works of Glenn Adamson, Edmund de Waal, Louise Mazanti, Esther Pasztory and Erin Manning, in addition to conducting personal interviews with Azza El Siddique and Dr. Sequoia Miller. The goal of my MRP is to investigate the following questions:

1. What happens when ceramic vessels are intentionally destroyed as a mode of engagement with meaning, memory and materiality?
2. What does the broken or decaying ceramic vessel evoke when displayed within the museum?

My research has taken place in Toronto, Ontario in the wake of the Coronavirus Pandemic which becomes extremely pertinent when discussing museum display practices, as well as notions of the everyday. In addition, my research takes into consideration the ideas of

"wholeness" and "brokenness" in relation to the idea of "destruction as a creative principle" (Miller). Looking at the ways in which Ai and El Siddique engage with the materiality of clay also takes into account their differing approaches to destruction; Ai's approach as one of violence, destroying a historic object in one swift blow, and El Siddique's more quiet, subtle dissolution of her own vessel forms over time. The destruction in both works equally evoke feelings of loss and melancholy, however this is done through different manipulations of clay's materiality.

Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai Weiwei is the son of famous poet Ai Qing, who was exiled soon after his son's birth in connection with the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement; an attempted to stamp out and silence opposers of Chairman Mao Zedong (Smith 32). Ai grew up in Xinjiang, before studying at the Beijing Film Academy in 1978 (34). He would later move to the United-States in 1981, living in Philadelphia prior to moving to New York City in 1983 (37). This research is not a comprehensive history of Ai Weiwei's practice, nor an analysis of the historical implications and impact of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) on contemporary Chinese art. Rather, it considers Ai's work in relationship to a broader conversation around materiality and conceptual interpretations of broken ceramic vessels (specifically, the act of breaking another's vessels). Further still, while it is relevant to contextualize Ai's ceramic practice in relationship to other notable works such as *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca Cola Logo* (1994), *Coloured Vases* (2006) and *Han Dynasty Vases with Auto Paint* (2014), I have chosen to focus on *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* because of its homogenous engagement with the material potentialities of ceramics. While an investigation into the implications of the mixed-media interactions between the Neolithic urns, automotive paints, typography/design, is worthwhile, it is outside the scope of my present research.

Born in Khartoum, Sudan, Azza El Siddique immigrated to Vancouver with her family, before later going on to study Material Art & Design at OCAD University in Toronto (Reid). El Siddique engaged in material explorations throughout her undergrad, and following a three-year residency at Harbourfront Centre, she began her MFA at Yale University's School of Art, focusing on sculpture (Reid). Curated by Sequoia Miller, The Gardiner Museum's *RAW* (2020), is her most recent exhibition in Toronto which featured *Measure of One* alongside the works of Cassils, Magdolene Dykstra and Linda Swanson ("RAW"). Additionally, all the works featured in *RAW,* were on display for an extended period of time due to Covid related stay-at-home orders and lockdowns. This not only affected the time-based component of El Siddique's work, but also affected when I was able to view the exhibition. Had I not been able to view *Measure of One* in person during the brief period of reopening in the fall of 2020, it's unlikely I would have experienced the visceral, cerebral impact which ultimately guided much of my subsequent research.

As part of my methodological approach, I decided it was important to engage in primary research which encompassed personal interviews with Miller and El Siddique, as well as a first-hand interrogation with clay. As a form of studio-based research, I went through the process of making clay into vessels at my kitchen table, having them fired, and lived with them in my apartment over several months (see fig. 1). Then, swaddled in tea towels, I smashed them in my studio's courtyard (see fig. 4). I felt a deep pang of sadness in destroying these vessels which I had loved and laboured over. I do not know if I could be a ceramicist, because from what I have experienced, it requires an acceptance and a constant surrendering to loss when things go wrong. If one were to adopt a potter's methodology when faced with devastation, I would imagine an intimate knowledge of or acceptance of loss, rather than a jarring, emotional upheaval.

Fig 1. Ceramic vessels made by the author.

Creative writing and prose have played a large role in my research practice, allowing room for emotional connections and poetic interpretations of materials, meanings and interactions. My approach to writing my MRP strives to marry my academic voice with that of a more personal tone. Initially, I thought to include my creative prose as an appendix or foil to this paper, however I decided that a key component of my research is the intermingling and overlapping of differing epistemologies. My decision to more seamlessly include my creative writing voice is directly influenced by the works of Adamson, de Waal, Pasztory and Manning, whose works are as rigorous as they are poetic and grounded in human experience.

My research exists within and emerges from the overlapping tensions between art, craft, and design practices. I have attempted to formulate a cohesive conversation between authors through the breadth of my research, taking on an interdisciplinary approach by engaging with the works of craft theorists such as Adamson and ceramicists such as de Waal, as well as understandings around the artifact, the art object and the ceramic vessel in relationship to the broken vessel.

In Glenn Adamson's *Fewer, Better Things*, he describes how breakage shifts our relationship to an object. Citing Heidegger, he writes "If the shaft of a hammer should break, all your attention goes to it. Heidegger says that in this moment, you are brought in touch with the hammer's 'thingness,' such that 'it becomes present to us.' This in turn opens up a different sort of relationship to material, one marked by inquiry rather than use" (29). This same notion of a shift from function to inquiry can be seen when discussing Ai's and El Siddique's works. While it is true that El Siddique's vessels were made to be rehydrated, they carry with them associations and the visual language of function.

Adamson goes on to discuss the art of mending or making a "broken object like new" again, at times through replication techniques, and other approaches such as the Japanese *kintsugi,* "when a valuable ceramic object has a break or chip, [and] it is filled with clear lacquer mixed with metallic powder" (61). However, the vessels in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Measure of One* do not require mending; the focus is no longer on the intact ceramic vessel. The point is not to rush to "fix" the breakage, but rather to engage with the broken vessel as an autonomous form.

Manning's *Politics of Touch* has influenced my interpretation of Ai's work, prompting me to consider the notion of touch in relationship to violence and absence. Rather than the

transformative nature of skin-to-skin human contact, I am considering Manning's ideas of becoming when the reaching towards another cannot be satisfied, when the body one reaches towards is substituted by an object, acting as a surrogate non-human body (85).

Lastly, my research has been guided in part by my personal experiences with grief, being influenced by the death of my grandmother and my father's ongoing stroke rehabilitation. This research focuses on attempting to materialize the immaterial through making, through writing, and attempting to grapple with immaterial feelings of loss. I see my meditations on the broken vessel as the preliminary stages of developing an art/life methodology for coping with, learning from and working through bereavement, and disenfranchised grief. In an intensely personal way, I am attempting to communicate the iterative, cyclical nature of creation and destruction, and grapple with coexisting feelings of excitement for what can be uncovered, and a sadness for what has been obliterated.

SECTION ONE: Ceramic Vessels in the Museum

While my personal relationship to pots is largely defined by the domestic sphere, the ceramic vessel has a sordid exhibition history as detailed by Laura Breen in *Ceramics and the Museum.* In her PhD research on museology and ceramic arts, Breen explores the idea of "art oriented ceramic works," detailing the unique tensions which arise when ceramics are placed in the context of the fine art gallery (4). She describes how the move towards ceramic exposition is intertwined with efforts to legitimize studio pottery's worth (11). She refers to "The persistence of ceramics as a mode of categorization and a site of individual and collective identity" (8). By the early 1970s, artists such as Robert Morris and Eva Hesse were beginning to use non-traditional materials in their sculptural practices, experimenting with materials such as cheap metals, plywood, and notably, raw clay (127-128). Sculptors were "concerned with the

phenomenological relationship to the object, producing works that heightened the spectator's awareness of their own embodied presence and its impact on their reading of a work" (128). Raw clay, and the ceramic vessel form were beginning to be seen more and more in the context of fine art (129).

Dr. Sequoia Miller is chief curator and deputy director at the Gardiner Museum which was founded in 1984 by George and Helen Gardiner to showcase their ceramic collection ("Museum History"). He explains that the domestic, everyday relationships viewers have to ceramics is simultaneously what excluded them from fine art exhibitions in the past, and what has in recent years become part of their appeal. As Miller notes:

> Within the last 30 years, this notion of these liabilities or these connotations have really transformed from being the baggage of ceramics to being the value of ceramics […] that it's every day, it's the earth, it's our bodies that prevented it from being a real or legitimate or high-status artistic medium for the last 400 years, is now exactly what gives it its strength and its meaning. In a way the vessel in particular follows some of that trajectory.

Miller's statements highlight the exclusion of everyday experiences, feelings, and materials from the field of fine art and the space of the gallery. In *Thinking with Things*, art historian Esther Pasztory describes how the built environment or human made things are categorized into "high end" – that which is housed in a museum – and what is considered "low end;" that which is all around us (13). Ceramic vessels have often been relegated to the status of "low end" and considered less-than in the hierarchy of fine art forms. However, ceramic vessels' connection to daily life does not need to be rejected in order to produce meaning beyond their tangible form. Their value is derived from their connection to our bodies, our emotions, and experiences. Miller continues:

> Vessels came into the conversation about what constitutes sculpture in the Avant Garde movements of the early 20th century. […] Within the realm of ceramics, vessels really took on new registers of meaning in the later 1960s, but especially in the 1970s through the

> 1990s, when a number of artists who were working with clay began to make what's now called the *vessel-oriented sculpture*. […] The idea that a vessel could stand on its own as a sculptural idiom is a relatively new idea.

The ceramic vessel embraces the connotations of sculpture when displayed in the museum, while simultaneously bringing with it associations of the everyday and the domestic. Equally important when thinking about museum display is the ceramic vessels' intrinsic ability to evoke the past. As de Waal writes, "the clay is the present tense and a historical present" (4). The ceramic vessel is an object which can easily be overlooked because of its prevalence, considered inconsequential, but embedded within the tactile material language is a sense of loss; an embodied awareness of past lives is constantly present when looking upon objects and ceramics housed within the museum. Someone who lived hundreds if not thousands of years ago used their hands (just like mine) to make something that has survived long enough for me to see it. There is an almost unquantifiable, overwhelming sense of the passage of time, the presence of ancient vessels and archeological objects carries with them the implication of the maker's death. As Pasztory puts it, "the great museums are vast repositories of the nostalgia that such things will never be made again – their sad and funereal nature has often been noted" (12). It is noteworthy that the Gardiner Museum's permanent collection consists of contemporary as well as archeological objects, in that contemporary ceramic practices behest contextualization with the past. This feeling of melancholy, an awareness of the finite nature of life, is amplified when the ceramic vessel is broken.

Lastly, in *On the Transgressive Nature of Ceramics*, art historian Laura Gray describes how the universality of the ceramic vessel lends it the ability to occupy multi-spheres simultaneously, existing somewhere within/between the realms of sculpture, craft and art, traversing and trespassing "across the boundaries of fine art" (101). Gray explains that "the

tension between function and non-function as a dividing line between art and craft is bound up with debates over the artistic status of the clay vessel and its potential to function on a semiotic and metaphorical level" (101). Quoting Emmanuel Cooper's *Contemporary Ceramics,* Gray writes, "Contemporary vessel makers make work that takes on more metaphorical or symbolic qualities - the vessel as a signifier, container of meanings and ideas. Such work occupies territory between the pot and the object. Expressive forms that engage the eye and head" (101). If the ceramic vessel is a signifier, then the broken ceramic vessel is a related but distinct signifier in and of itself. Ai Weiwei and Azza El Siddique are engaging with that which is signified by the ceramic vessel, and then turning these understandings on their head, shattering the expectations of the vessel form, abstracting the object and the space occupied by the broken vessel's material and immaterial elements. As Pasztory asserts, "As soon as there is form, there is a message" (10), thus a shifting form necessitates a shift in meaning.

"Non-Art" & The Super-Object

In the preliminary stages of my research, I thought destroying a functional object such as a pot or bowl automatically transformed said object into "art," removing the vessel from the realm of craft and design. However, I now disagree with this sentiment. Here, I would like to call upon the voices of art historian Esther Pasztory, and writer and craft theorist Louise Mazanti to bring into resolution an alternative understanding and contextualization for the broken vessel.

If I were to define what I think of as *art*, I would describe something that exclusively poses questions, versus that which poses potential solutions (design). The role of art and the artist is not to directly solve problems, but rather to act as a mirror, reflecting the world back onto itself. Given this, *anything* can be considered art depending on the context. As Pasztory humorously states, "sometimes I wonder if aliens went through my apartment what things they

would classify as art […] Maybe the aliens would like my Tupperware" (10). Any object or thing, whether it be hand or machine made, can act as a medium for communicative exchange beyond the sum of its tangible matter. Ultimately, Pasztory argues that "it is not possible to separate art from non-art, there are only things of various sorts, functions, forms and meanings" (10). The ceramic vessel does not stop being craft when contemplated as an artwork; it remains an object of craft rather than being fully absorbed as an art object.

The issue arises when the broken vessel's intrinsic relationship to craft is disregarded and it becomes wholly redefined as a work of contemporary art. Pasztory explains that "the term 'art' hinders rather than helps our analysis of the world of things" (13). She explains that its extremely difficult to separate "art" and "non-art" objects, in part because of what she describes as western epistemology's stark separation of aesthetics and function; "it has to be either one or the other" (11). Within this context, assuming that when the vessel is destroyed it transforms into "art" isn't surprising. However, the joyous duplicity of the ceramic vessel is that just because it can take on a functional form does not mean it is intended to be used. I am reminded of the decorative plates mounted on the wall of my parent's dining room, painted with scenes of barns and wispy grass. The crystal ash tray displayed on the mantel despite no one being a smoker, or the small black pot I purchased on a studio tour because I liked the way it felt in my hands. The ceramic vessel can be divorced from function even before it is broken and rendered "useless." Pasztory says that "thinking of things as having cognitive rather than purely visual value is to release them from the low position in which technologies such as writing have placed them" (24).

Given Pasztory's and my own working definitions of what art is or can be, I want to turn now to Mazanti's notion of the super-object and argue for the definition of the broken vessel as a

super-object rather than an art object. In "Super-Objects: Craft as an Aesthetic Position," Mazanti defines the super-object as:

> […] a framework to describe the role of craft as a position that draws on both visual art and design discourses while still acting as an independent practice with an independent meaning. A super-object is an object that exists parallel to the object category of design commodity, at the same time as it contained (super-) layers of meaning that relate to visual art. (62)

She argues that:

> One can find a position for craft that is defined by its relation not to a specific material but rather to the role that it performs in the world of objects. In other words, the position shifts from the "making" to the "doing" of craft. (60)

Mazanti explains that a key component of the super-object is the relationship between art and life, as it "simply materializes what could be called the dichotomy between art and life, referring to both spheres at the same time" (65). The craft object, and in this case the broken vessel, does not shed all associations with craft once it is placed within the context of the art museum. Rather, it brings with it all associations with design, function and domestic, daily life.

Manzanti further emphasizes this point, "[y]et it is important to note that such projects only gain their intended meaning when contemplated as 'art'. Without the platform of being an artwork, the project does not communicate" (67). The point is not to define the broken vessel within the museum as "better" than say, the vase that gets knocked over at home, or a shard of pottery dug up from the ground, but rather to provide the viewer with the opportunity to see the broken vessel in a new, conceptually grounded way.

By placing the ceramic vessel in the gallery, it becomes acknowledged as an artwork in the mind of the curator, and the minds of (some) viewers. As soon as a craft object or ceramic is

declared as art by a curator, it *is* art, because the viewer's relationship with the object has shifted through its contextualization; the space of the gallery acts as a non-verbal declaration.

The broken vessels present in the works of Ai Weiwei and Azza El Siddique are rightly considered to be super-objects, directly engaging with the broken vessel form, the materiality of fired ceramic and raw clay respectively, and invite conceptual interpretations. As Miller explains, "They're both using destruction as a creative principle. They're seeing clay and ceramic objects more broadly not just in a unidirectional path, but that it's nuanced and complex so that as something comes apart something else is made." The craft-ness of the vessel is not erased when the intended function is destroyed, and that destruction of function does not position the object solely in the realm of art. The broken ceramic vessel is a super-object which equally draws on art and design.

SECTION TWO: Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995)

Ai Weiwei stands defiantly front of the camera, facing forward, feet hip width apart. His expression is blank as he dubiously holds a small ceramic urn. His figure is repeated three times, the tryptic of black and white photographs shows frame-by-frame the loose cradling, blasé release and shattering of the urn on the ground. The repetition of the bricks behind him and the shallow creases in his pants are unchanged; his sleeves hang loose, his fingertips splayed and his face emotionless. His posture underscores the fact that this gesture, this performance, was an intentional act of iconoclasm. This moment captured on black and white film emphasizes the contours of the urn's body and neck as the vessel is precariously presented to the camera, released – captured mid-free fall by the camera – and finally devasted by its impact with the concrete. The only discernable form in the third photograph is the neck and the fluted edge of the vessel's mouth – decapitated from the explosion of shards which now lay at and around Ai's

feet. Not a freak accident or mishap in the studio, but rather an intentional, staged display. The shadows around Ai's face and neck mirror that of the ones cast upon the urn. In the third photograph, the dispersed fragments of the urn lay at Ai's feet. The fragmented shards of the urn produce a new space which did not exist prior.

Ai's expansive, interdisciplinary artistic-activist practice spans from the late 1970s to present, and while he does not exclusively work with ceramics, his use of the medium acts as a catalyst for thinking about the relationships between materiality, the vessel form, acts of destruction and loss. In "Catalogue" for *Ai Weiwei: Libero*, Palazzo Strozzi's General Director, Arturo Galansino, and author Ludovica Sebregondi, describe how "[o]ne is struck by the artist's aloof expression which underscores his awareness that his action is barbarous, but on par with the destruction of China's historic heritage during the Cultural Revolution" (120). The act of breaking the urn erases its "historical and cultural value" while "simultaneously turning [it] into [a] contemporary work of art" (120).

Ai has discussed growing up during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), at which time Mao gave indisputable orders to "destroy old cultural traditions" (Smith 41). *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* can be understood directly in relation to the iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution. Smith describes how Ai would delight in the process of recreating *Urn* in his studio, dropping ancient pots in front of horrified foreign curators (41). Miller, who curated the exhibition *Ai Weiwei: Unbroken* in 2019 at the Gardiner, said of *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*:

> …it's such an iconic work. I'm old enough to remember when it first started circulating in the mid 90s and it was like 'Oh my God!', it was really shocking in a way that's hard to imagine now and just incredibly provocative. […] *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* can be seen as or read as a critique of the Cultural Revolution where there's this premise that you have to destroy your past, destroy tradition to be liberated by it.

Dropping A Han Dynasty Urn remains one of Ai's most widely known works.[3] The documentary *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* details Ai's return to China from New York City and that due to his growing love of antiques in the early 1990s, he would collect ceramic objects from flea markets (*Never Sorry* 1:00:40 – 1:00:32). Inevitably, these objects would become part of his art practice when he started smashing pottery. In reference to *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, Ethan Cohen, Ai's first gallerist in NYC stated, "He wanted to shock you, so when you see Weiwei taking a Neolithic pot and ceremoniously dropping it, and dropping it in front of the camera, he's saying 'I love the culture, but I want to break from that line, I want something new'" (*Never Sorry* 1:25:48 – 1:25:31). Ai Weiwei is literally – and metaphorically – destroying the past to create something new.

As I write, what strikes me is that this urn is not in front of me, but rather there is a laptop screen made of pixels, with a digital image of an action which took place 25 years ago, upon a pot which was made thousands of years ago. Even so, I feel an intimate connection with this urn, because while I have not and cannot touch this particular vessel, I have touched ceramics, I have touched clay. My fingers have been dirtied with dried slip, and on more than one occasion, I have dropped my coffee mug on a sleepy morning. When I look at *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, I can *hear* it. The fragmentation, the sound of the clattering ceramic is integral to the material's language. The smashed vessel produces shards of pottery, these sherds[4] can be read as visual texts in relationship to the fields of archeology and anthropology. As Pasztory explains: "Even pot sherds communicate a great deal to the archaeologist – when and where they were

[3] Two notable occasions of *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*'s continued influence include Ai's direct reference back to the tryptic as recently as 2015, when he recreated it in LEGO bricks. Additionally, in 2014 an exhibition of his works was vandalised in Miami, Florida when a local artist picked up and smashed one of the painted vases ("Florida").

[4] A shard is defined as a piece of broken material with a sharp edge, including ceramic, glass, rock or metal ("Shard."), whereas a sherd refers to a piece of broken ceramic specifically found on an archeological site ("Sherd.").

made, whether they are coarse and thick or delicate and thin, how the designs vary. Whole cultures, people and periods, have been built up on the basis of broken crockery" (11). The fragmented shard holds knowledge which cannot be accessed while the ceramic vessel remains intact.

The specific tactile interaction of smashing a ceramic vessel may not be the one which is typically associated with clay – often tactility is discussed in relationship to raw clay in the studio, or the careful handling of a fired ceramic object. But the relationship between touch, the fragmented vessel and its shards are integral to the material's knowledge and speak to the amorphous, non-linear states of matter which clay can take on. In *The White Road: Journey into Obsession*, de Waal details his journey to three white hills, historic kiln sites. He describes his experience of visiting Jingdezhen, China, the capital of porcelain. De Waal pays particular attention to the shards of ceramic which he encounters here, writing about them with an excitement and reverence one might more readily expect for a seemingly more precious object, or a pot within a museum's collection. He describes his utter amazement at discovering a shard of porcelain on the ground, only to have his local guides laugh at him and direct his gaze upwards to the hillside dense with shards:

> This is my grail moment and I'm holding it reverently and they are laughing at me with my ridiculous epiphany, for on and up is a hill-side of shards, a tumbling landscape of brokenness, a lexicon of all the ways that post can go wrong. It is not a spoil heap, careless but discrete, it is a whole landscape of porcelain. (24)

Fragmentation and the ceramic shard are key elements to unpacking the material and metaphoric meanings attributed to clay. There is space to learn from breakage, to learn from how and why something breaks in the way that it does. De Waal's descriptions of ceramic shards presents them as lively, desirable objects in their own right, in spite of their indexical relationship to loss:

> There are dozens and dozens of people with piles of shards, each kind separated and zoned, by size, by dynasty, by color […] broken spouts and foot rings of bowls and pots still in saggars [..] [a]nd because shards come from vessels and so are all slighted curved these swathes of brokenness ripple across the concrete like a piece of cloth lifting in a breeze. (66-67)

As a kid, I fantasized about burying my mom's serving platter in the yard, smashing it into chunks and hiding it in a hole behind the shed. I imagined someone digging it up in forty years (a very long time, I thought) and they would wonder about its origins and history. It must be remembered that Ai is not breaking a pot he himself made, he is smashing the pot of another, from another time; the vessel's destruction cuts off the present's connection to the past, including any tangible evidence the maker's life.

Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* hurls the historic object into the present, bringing it into the contemporary consciousness moments before its obliteration, its potentiality realized in a single moment, and captured forever on film. The object is no longer relegated to a glass shelf or stagnated, but rather becomes new through its act of breaking. The pot's body experiences a type of death, longer after the death of its maker.

In contrast to the smashed Han Dynasty urn and its relationship to archeological shards, raw clay denotes that which is ephemeral, fleeting. The exhibition text for *RAW*, curated by Miller at the Gardiner Museum in 2020, states," Raw clay has the singular ability to transform, becoming sticky, dusty, and powdery as it absorbs and releases water. As such, clay becomes a time-based medium, embracing the performative over the permanent." The fired ceramic vessel's characteristics are often juxtaposed with the material qualities of raw clay; timeless versus time based, stable versus ephemeral. As outlined in the *RAW* exhibition broadsheet, raw clay became associated with abject art in the 1980s-90s, and was used to denote bodily organs, excrement and secretions. It should be noted that in spite of their traditionally opposing meanings, raw clay and

fired ceramic are not so different. Originating from the same source, both have the potentiality to be destroyed, despite any perceived illusion of permeance ascribed to fired ceramics. Indeed, the fired ceramic is not an object which can "transcend death" while the raw clay vessel symbolizes a rise from and return to earth (Breen 195). If anything, the destruction of the fired clay vessel is all the more shocking and disturbing because of this assumption of infinite resilience and immortality. One must remember that both can be destroyed. The unfired clay vessel within Azza El Siddique's *Measure of One* exemplifies the other extreme of clay's material capacities.

Azza El Siddique's *Measure of One* (2020)

The central air hums in the background, the Gardiner Museum's restaurant a rumble of espresso machines, forced air milk foamer, and cutlery persistently clattering against pristine dishware. The gallery is quiet aside from myself and the occasional footsteps of servers or gallery docents. I look across the room at Azza El Siddique's *Measure of One,* a tall altar made of steel, raw clay, bricks and water. The irrigation system almost indetectable, as the pool of what appears to be stagnant water is pumped up and sprays down over the raw clay vessels. They've already started to crumble – fall apart, crack, falling every which way, their bodies deteriorating. Nine shelves of metal mesh hold each row – another crash and muttering from the kitchen, echoing sounds of commercial domesticity; they (the vessels) must hear it too. Every element of this work is in a state of decay, it disappears, evaporates. the lights cast down on the crumbling vessels and further abstract their forms into shadows on the back wall – even as projections, they still have a sense of volume, they still have a form. Laughter from the kitchen and droning music. The AC fan rattles. Many of the vessels have fallen over, laying on their sides like wounded sheep. I imagine their breaths would be laboured, coupled with darting eyes. I wish I could fix them.

A draft gently blows through their crumbled sides, their homogenous forms fall apart in different ways, their corpses displayed along the lower steel shelves. I am reminded of my grandmother when she died, we had to get rid of all her belongings, all the physical things, the *stuff*. Still, I wonder when the other vessels will crumble. Will they give in to their demise in the middle of the night, in the morning? How much water makes them unstable, how much until they break? Some of the pots/vessels could pass as usable. I would believe they could hold water until it was actually attempted and then they would just turn to sludge, dissolving in my hands. Some of the pots have a scaly coating on their surface, dropping off the vessels from the shelves above them; drops of mud and debris from other bodies. The water pump clicks on. The steel frame looks immovable, in contrast with the crumbling pots. The faint audio from the other side of the room buzzes. Water drips out of the bright red nozzles at the top of the structure, like blood rushing through my veins. I am reminded of standing in the shower, pressing my eyes and ears closed, bowing my head down and under the stream of water. The rushing, all-encompassing feeling of being enveloped in water, crashing down on my skull. I only come up to gasp for air; I wish I could live there. If the goal of the work is destruction, then it is not broken at all, rather it is a form of continuity, completion, wholeness – the act of breaking, of being dissolved is simultaneously the state of being whole. Both states exist simultaneously, they coexist, and when the vessels are intact, they are in fact, incomplete. Yet, I am filled with a profound sadness to see the vessels' bodies fall apart.

Having the opportunities to see *Measure of One* in person while the Gardiner Museum was briefly open this past fall, and to speak directly with Azza El Siddique, were invaluable (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). I became struck by *Measure of One*'s presence, and how it employs the use of the raw clay vessel within the space of the gallery, tapping into the materiality of clay and an

iterative process which typically takes place within the privacy of one's studio. The work is not a failure of materials, rather it is making use of clay's lexicon; its capacity to be moulded into form, dried and then slowly liquified once again. In reference to *Measure of One*, Miller explains:

> In Azza's work, there are different layers of meaning where for Azza, part of the metaphors that she was trying to draw out specifically relate to the idea of the body and the vessel's tie to the body to the human body, so we get that through the idea of, like humans being made out of clay is part of mythical origin stories and many cultures.

El Siddique is engaging with the material potentials of clay, turning the typical process of producing fired ceramics on its head. Through her use of mould making, the pots begin as homogenous forms, slowly acquiring individuality through their disintegration. Like the firing of a kiln, the installation facilitates a transformation of the raw clay, however it is not changed into a hard, fired vessel, it is transformed through water, as Miller describes:

> The aspect that really blew my mind was that it felt like she had made a kiln, the works had been fired in the sense of being transformed through air and water, rather than through heat and it's amazing to me. […] [T]here was absolutely a transformation of the object where it became a different kind of thing in relation to being exposed to something, but instead of extreme heat it was exposed to time and water and air and that gentleness I just found very, very poetic.

In conversation with El Siddique, she elaborated on the influences of reading – especially fiction – and material investigation on her practice which encompasses tactile as well as intangible and cognitive explorations. Through the repetitive process of mold making, the rhythmic humming of the irrigation system, the evaporating of the water and the crumbling sides of the vessels, time becomes an essential (im)material element of *Measure of One*. American author and activist James Baldwins' words are used a framing device for El Siddique's work:

Well.
Time passes and passes.
It passes backward and it passes forward
and it carries you along, and no one in
the whole wide world knows more about
that than this:
it is carrying you through an element you
do not understand into an element you
will not remember.
Yet,
something remembers –

James Baldwin.[5]

El Siddique explains the significance of Baldwin's articulations on time, stating "there's something within it that really speaks to the idea of entropy, and also within it memory. The part near the end that's like *yet something remembers* I am thinking about histories and lineages." Her work speaks to the passage of time as a transformation of energy, there is "an aspect of entropy which is energy; energy that never disappears, but transfers. Eventually it ends up liquefying into this substance, […] where transformation/energy can reach equilibrium." Entropy is defined as the amount of order or disorder within a system, a movement towards chaos, towards transformation; energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed or transferred (Farabee). The raw clay vessel in its state of brokenness is in a transitional space of becoming, slowly engulfed by the liminal space between resolution and dissolve. This underlines the notion being

[5] Formatted by Azza El Siddique, from the Gardiner Museum *RAW* Exhibition Broadsheet.

explored within El Siddique's work that the vessels are going through a transformation, or change of state, rather than being obliterated.

Everything is always undergoing change, even if it is undetectable on a human scale. There is no state of stasis for the clay body. The raw clay vessels in *Measure of One* speak to the passage of time and memory in a way which is ephemeral and transitory. In thinking about ideas of entropy, transformation and changes of state, the perceived loss or destruction of the vessel form is a change of state, a transformation and creation of something new, yet not independent from the previous form.

The clay is dissolved, mixed with water, then evaporates, the particles from the clay vessels intermingle with oxygen we breath into our lungs; the human body become intertwined with the dissolved vessel. To witness the destruction of the vessel is to witness the destruction of something which has become a part of my own body. Further to the connection between the human body and ceramic vessels, El Siddique explains that "The reason why I gravitate to the vessel is that in ancient Egyptian and in African mythology, *the god that created humans was a potter*." To be born from the Earth is to be born from the same matter which comprises clay vessels. The type of breakage seen in El Siddique's work is related to the one which is present within Weiwei's, however the mode of destruction and dissolution is different. The raw clay is dissolved through the slow dripping of water, trickling down and slowly saturating the vessel forms until they weaken and begin to crumble. The water gently washes away the forms over time, rather than in a single, catastrophic impact.

Further, in speaking about the relationship between ceramics and the body, El Siddique speaks to the homogenous mould making process in contrast with the way the vessels fall apart in different ways based on their position within the steel scaffolding:

Fig 2. Azza El Siddique. Measure of One, 2020. Steel, expanded steel, unfired slip clay, water, slow-drip irrigation system. Photograph of central shelf. Photograph by author.

Fig 3. Azza El Siddique, Measure of One, 2020. Steel, expanded steel, unfired slip clay, water, slow-drip irrigation system. Photograph of right-hand side shelving. Photograph by author.

> The vessel is like the body, and so just thinking about this industrial line, of pumping out these vessels that are like bodies and humans, and then thinking about the way as humans we have our own experiences. The ways that they are positioned within the structure and how they end up transforming or not. Thinking about how as humans […] we're not made from the same cloth, but then also thinking about these structural institutional systems and political systems, and how these bodies are within these spaces. They're essentially stand ins […] pawns within a white western heteronormative capitalist system, especially pertaining to minorities.

Just as it remains important to consider what "everyday" means to us now, it is important to consider *whose* body is being evoked through destructive processes. Within the North American context, more focus is beginning to be brought to the experiences and works of black and racialized makers through groups such as Crafting the Future which connects BIPOC[6] makers to opportunities, supporting their successes and "diversify[ing] the fields of art, craft and design" ("Who We Are"). In "Red Dust and Black Clay," Professor Nathalie Batraville, and interdisciplinary artist Shaya Ishaq, discuss the materiality and tactility of clay from an abolitionist perspective, centering the practices of black thinkers and makers. They write, "[b]orders, police, prisons and courthouses foreclose touch by isolating people from their loved ones and sometimes, as in the case of solitary confinement, from any other beings. Touching clay can help us reach each other and recentre both connection and transformation as we build abolitionist futures together." Further research and focus on the experience of black makers is crucial.

Thorough the raw vessel's decay, it becomes open to conceptual understandings and interpretations. In the following section, I will discuss in more depth some of the key conceptual elements which are invoked through *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Measure of One*. The metaphoric connection between the vessel form and the human body will be explored further,

[6] Black, Indigenous and People of Color ("The BIPOC Project").

positioning the broken ceramic vessel as a symbol of memento mori. The role of melancholy as it relates to loss and geological time will be considered, in addition to the simultaneous destruction/dissemination of the empty space within the vessel when it is broken, and the role of photographic documentation in communicating – if not amplifying – the loss which is evoked.

SECTION THREE: Memento Mori & Touch

Ai's and El Siddique's works can be interpreted in relationship to memento mori, reminding the viewer of their own death through the destruction of the vessel. Latin for "remember that you must die," a memento mori is defined as any symbol – in this case an object – which is "employed to remind the viewer of the transitoriness of human existence" ("Memento mori."). In part due to the ceramic vessel's relationship to archeology, and in part because of the tactile nature of handmade ceramics, the surface of the vessel captures a record of a touch and a body which has since passed. Being confronted by the broken ceramic vessel leads to the contemplation of one's own mortality by virtue of being confronted with another's. A dissonance arises as well, because how does one grieve that which is immaterial, simultaneously present and absent in its form?

I keep thinking about the remnants of pottery, archaeologies of a past life, or world or motion or love that I can never know, but by proxy of my own humanity I can try to imagine the smells, the shapes of its edges, searching behind my own eyes, embedded in my own skin, trying to dig out some semblance of understanding from under my nails. In Erin Manning's *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* she discusses the transformative, perpetually shifting nature of skin. She writes:

> Touch is intimately linked to the skin. The skin that touches and is touched is continually rebuilding itself from the outer to the inner most layers. To reach towards skin through touch is to reach towards that which is in a continued state of (dis)integration and (dis)appearance. (85)

While Manning's conceptualizations around touch are dealing with interpersonal human touch, I want to use her ideas to think about a touch which takes place across time; the handmade vessel is created through touch by the potter, and then is handled by another. The ceramic vessel becomes a surrogate for the maker's body, becoming a vehicle for the translation of touch across time; there is still a reaching towards and a becoming taking place on a larger scale, however it can never be resolved or reciprocated. To touch a surface that was once touched by another's hands is to reach towards the past as an embodied force, a tactile scrying upon the vessel's surface. As Miller explains:

> The other insane component about clay is that indexicality, that a fingerprint on a vessel made 5000 years ago, you can put your thumb on top of it and it fits. It's like touching somebody's body. It's really odd and disorienting but also just beautiful and can be poetic and clay carries that. Clay has this capacity, it's like a recording medium […] just touching something that was made by a person however long-ago links you back to that person.

In handmade ceramics, the touch of another is embedded into the form of the vessel, the edges molded by another's fingertips. In the creation of *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, this tactile record of human life, the last record of the maker, is destroyed. The broken vessel becomes a space for the contemplation of death and grief, not only for the pot's body, but the life of the potter, a reminder of our own mortality.

Further, Ai Weiwei implements a violent touch within the work. Manning discusses the relationship between touch and violence in the biblical story of original sin, describing how the decision and move towards touch or physical contact is what ultimately leads to condemnation (49). Within this context Manning describes how, "touch represents a certain violence of transformation. Violence, here, is the suggestion not of a transcendental category, but of a rupture within humanity as humanity understands itself, a rupture that induces at once guilt and healing" (50). Manning's poignant words can be recontextualized to think about the violent

touch which is present within Ai Weiwei's work. Is the smashing, fragmentation, and explosion of the ceramic vessel not violent, or as Manning poses "can I touch without violence? Can I think of transformation without being jolted by the violence of change?" (50). Miller highlights that "Ai Weiwei has prevented future generations from learning about that object in any way other than the way that he wants us to learn about it." In reaching towards the handmade vessel, one reaches towards a past which cannot be fully accessed. The maker cannot be contacted in flesh and blood, the vessel becomes the only remnant, the only physical indicator of their existence. When the urn is broken, it compounds the loss of the human body.

Similarly, raw clay vessels – especially ones within the museum – cannot be touched. Not just because they are on display, physically inaccessible to the viewer, but because the surface of raw clay is constantly shifting. The vessel which is presented to the viewer cannot be physically touched without that touch altering the surface of the object. Wet clay will transform from the warmth of one's hands, and even dried, unfired clay can crumble and shed when handled. The space between the vessel that one sees and object one handles can never be closed, evoking a persistent, irreparable absence.

Given the previously established relationship between ceramics and the body, and thinking about the indexicality of touch, what becomes implied when the vessel is destroyed? I cannot deny that there is something horrific and gutting about dropping a vessel, especially one which carries with it a history of the distant past, and yet within this space, there is an element of excitement; there is an element of freedom which can grow out of chaos. The broken ceramic vessel is emblematic of a deeper emotional, transcendent loss. Arguably, there is value in approaching loss, remembering death and destruction, like a potter. The potter has an intimate relationship with breakage, and I would argue that they are more attune to it in daily life; the

potter carries on in the face of breakage. In *The Grain of the Clay*, Allen S. Weiss discusses the beauty of the unexpected, and the kinetic energy of the kiln. He explains: "At times, there are catastrophes, when works buckle, sag, crack, and explode […] occasionally the genius of the fire will create a masterpiece" (43). The simultaneous strength and fragility of clay, and its connection to the physical body, make the broken vessel ideal for ruminations on mortality, as well as discourses of mourning and melancholy.

Melancholy

The broken ceramic vessel can be directly linked to melancholy, its form relates to the decay of the human body, destruction of past worlds and lives. While the destruction of the vessel is required to create *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Measure of* One respectively, this necessity does not counteract the presence of melancholy in either work. While Ai's and El Siddique's works are marked by a transformation of materials which can be seen as generative despite the destruction of the initial form, there is a sadness which is evoked when being faced with ruins or fragmentation. Something which was present before is now lost.

In Freud's definition of melancholia, he distinguishes mourning as the bereavement of a quantifiable loss, whereas melancholia is related while being distinct from mourning due to "an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness" (245). The intangible and melancholic are intimately intertwined; melancholy is, by nature, not easily describable. More contemporary thinking and definitions around melancholy have moved away from Freud's pathologization of the term. In "Melancholy as an Aesthetic Emotion," Emily Brady and Arto Haapala describe melancholy in relationship to the sublime, and its relevance in encountering and understanding works of art (1). It is a deeply embodied, aesthetically experienced emotion. In their more contemporary definition of melancholy, it is described as an emotion which "invites aesthetic

consideration to come into play not only in well-defined aesthetic contexts but also in everyday situations that give reason for melancholy to arise"(1). Similar to the sublime, yet distinct from grief and heartbreak or depression, melancholy is difficult to emotionally locate in the body. Grief arises in my chest, in my stomach, and dull, aching pain that makes me want to curl into a ball. I would equate melancholy to an abyss which arises from the body but cannot be located within it, a feeling of emptiness which cannot be traced to the stomach, to the intestines or the heart.

As El Siddique describes, " the god who made humans was a potter" seems to not only to imply that pots and human bodies are both from the Earth, but also that both contain a raw, intangible emptiness at the core of their being. It is located just out of reach behind my head, something that I can never touch; I can never turn around and see it. In *The Melancholy Art,* art historian Michael Anne Holly describes melancholy as a familiar, quotidian experience:

> Most everybody knows what it feels like to be unsettled by a remnant, a fragment of the past: something that is so replete with memory and meaning that we almost cannot bear the absence of which it so eloquently speaks. Not all these felt recollections, of course need reside in objects, but most do. (xii)

Brady and Haapala go on to describe the ways in which coming across an object, an old building in a ruinous state is evocative of melancholy, explaining that "ruins express the passage of time and more specifically the qualities of impermanence and transience all closely associated with melancholy."(9). In addition to Baldwin's meditation on the passage of time, El Siddique's exhibition statement for *RAW* explicitly discusses ruins:

> We speak of monuments – legacies –
> histories/ yet it is in the //ruins// the ruins
> of self// /the ruins of histories/ //the ruins
> of legacies// that holds an honest
> testament to our past/present/future/ The
> present/ is already in the past/ the future/

is built upon the past/ the past/
remembers the present and the future/

The loss of the vessels in *Measure of One* slows down the critical moment of decay – when the first crack forms, when the vessel topples over, when a visible hole appears – something will be, and is in the process of being lost; each moment the vessel is looked upon it decays more and more. And further, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* creates a literal fragmentation, as well as a metaphoric one; to witness the destruction of the past is to witness the creation of a melancholic object. The shard is a constant reminder of what has been lost. There is a loss of what *could* have been, and there is something deeply tragic when I stop and think about how Ai rescued the urn from the flea market, only to smash it on the ground. The broken vessel is melancholic in its physical form because it denotes that which is missing or absent.

In attempting to viscerally understand this inherently difficult to locate and describe emotion, I moulded mounds of raw clay into small white vessels and passed them off to my ceramic's teacher, Paul, to fire them in his kiln. They were returned to me, heavy and glossed, the fingerprints from my inexperienced hands permanently affixed to the sides. I could not believe what I had made. I held each fired pot in my hands, mulling over the flecks of blue in the clear glaze. They lived on my shelf until the snow melted; I encountered them every morning as I walked into the kitchen. I did not know what I was going to do with them, but I liked having them around, these little inanimate creatures inhabiting my apartment with me… It soon dawned on me, following a conversation with my advisor, that if I were to be engaging in primary, studio-based research related to a body of work focused on breaking vessels, I could not in good conscience leave them "intact." I reluctantly swaddled their bodies in tea towels, packaging them up into a shoe box and brought them over to my studio. Out in the courtyard, under blue skies, I

prepared them for their execution, sitting for a short while with them in the grass before I took out my hammer. It felt like murder, like a crime scene as I laid out the shards I had created, mixing them together until I did not know which pot had been which, investigating with my fingertips the silhouettes of these new forms. I left them on my desk before glumly walking home (see fig. 4).

Space & The Void

Bathrooms are good places for emotional breakdowns, a private space where you're expected to expel unwanted waste and emerge rejuvenated. In the days following my father's hospitalization, I returned to the shower again and again, trying to wash off my skin and relieve the feeling of emptiness inside myself. As steam fogged the mirror, the water poured down from the rainfall showerhead, cascading over me like a little vase in *Measure of One.* My sides hurt from retching stomach spasmed, gasping heaves in place of tears, as salt and saliva mixed with the water, washed away as quickly as they poured out of me. Suppressing guttural wails, an indefinable feeling of loss, the agony of undulating between catastrophic grief and not knowing what had been lost, if anything. Words that I had no prior relationship to swarm my brain: "Broca's area," "aphasia," "ventilator," "stent," "sedation." There was stillness, a chasm, a fissure inside me. Something in proximity to death, a grieving of normalcy, of routine, of everyday life.

The void which is present in the creation of the vessel can be viscerally felt within the body, intermingling with feelings of melancholy and intangible loss. When the ceramic vessel is destroyed, the empty space which is needed to create the initial form is also destroyed. In speaking about de Waal's work, Gray writes about his conceptual engagement with pots, using "porcelain vessels to articulate space" (103). The void within the vessel can be understood in a

literal and metaphoric sense, and both are simultaneously intangible – the void is the absence of material, a lacking *something* there. In relationship to the body, "emptiness" is associated with loss, grief, mourning. A deep sense of melancholy, or an emotional, cognitive emptiness that cannot be relieved.

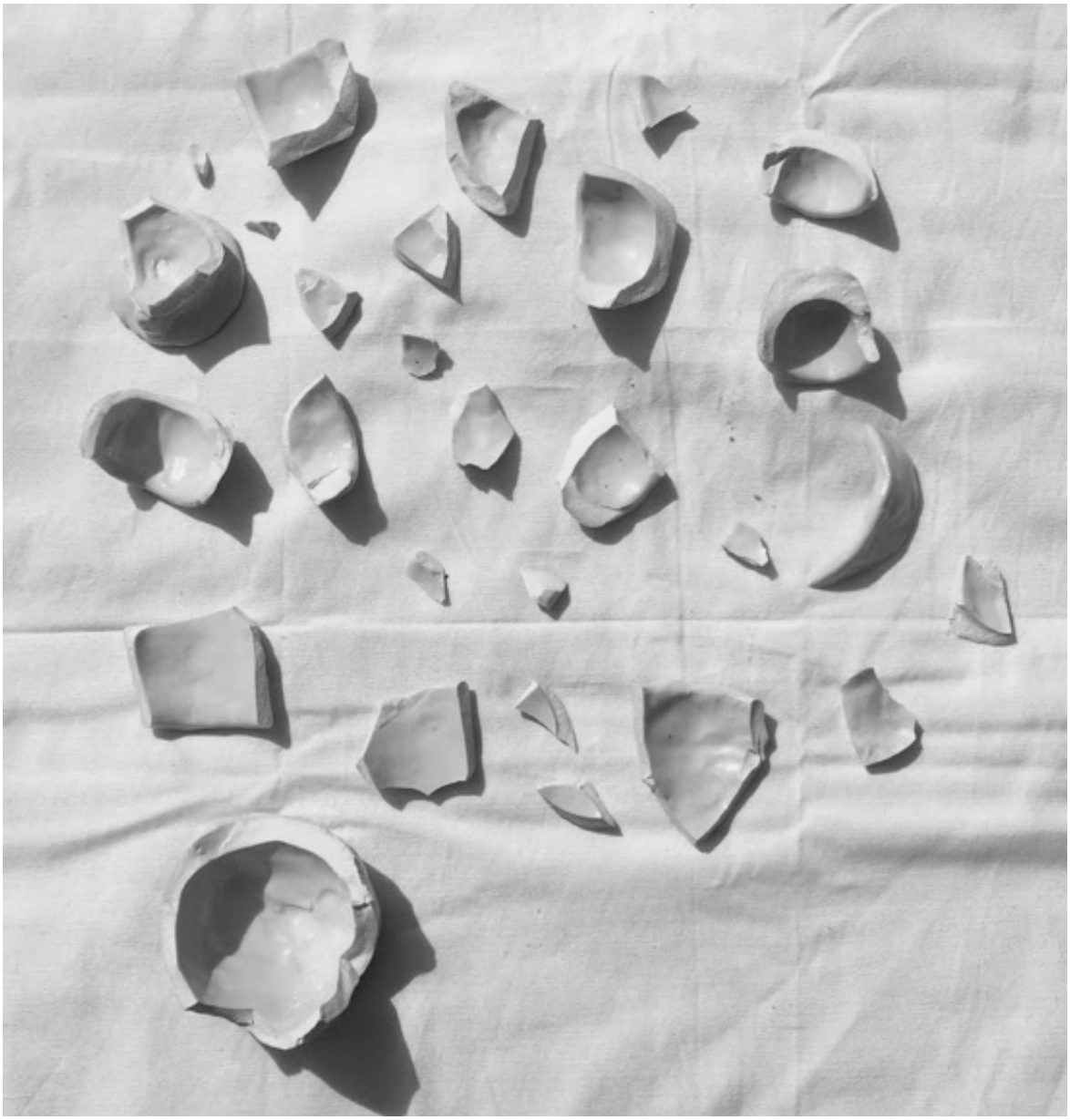

Fig. 4. Shards from the ceramic vessels smashed by author.

The emptiness which is present inside the pot ultimately is what defines it as such. As Weiss explains, “take a lump of clay and thrust your finger into it. With this single gesture you have created a cup” (43). Additionally, In *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, Peter Schwenger states “indeed, hollowness is […] the heart of the vase; the potter builds around a hole” (31). The pot is seemingly the embodiment of contradictions, seemingly disparate elements all at once; the pot is “inside/outside, concave/convex, container/contained” (Weiss 44). The presence of absence is what distinguishes the vessel from other objects; the space is an immaterial component in the creation of the vessel. In trying to grapple with the empty space inside the vessel, I turned to the works of Rachel Whiteread and her use of concrete to create castings of empty space, attempting to make the intangible tangible to better understand that which cannot be seen (“Rachel Whiteread”). I poured concrete into a dark blue vase reminiscent of the vessels in Ai’s and El Siddique’s works, breaking apart the glass once it dried (see fig. 5). The casting of empty space which remained in the aftermath felt unfamiliar and strange. A dissonance occurs in holding an object which was created by virtue of a material absence, to hold an object which materializes space.

When the ceramic vessel is broken, its fragments are understood as once being part of an intact form, however the containment of space is completely destroyed. The hole which was once present at the center of the vessel disappears; this integral yet intangible element of the pot cannot be located among its shattered pieces. And yet, much like the transformation and transfer of energy occurring, the void cannot be destroyed. The void is instead disseminated outwards, engulfing the space of the museum, and the space occupied by the viewer in its entirety. The body becomes encompassed by the void, and the walls of the museum become the new edges of the container. To be in the presence of the broken vessel is to be absorbed by the void, further

interconnecting the human body with the destroyed body of the pot. The broken ceramic vessel, and the intangible space it occupies, reminds us that we too – our bodies, our institutions, the things we create – are all temporary, in transition, moving towards a greater state of chaos and disorder.

The Camera & Documentation

The presence of the photograph and digital documentation add an additional conceptual layer to *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and *Measure of One* respectively. In works which are by nature ephemeral and transitory, documentation plays a key role in perpetuating the existence of the vessel – documenting the process before, during, after its destruction – while underscoring the melancholic absence of the form. Pastness is embedded within the photographic medium, whether it be captured via a film or digital camera.

In Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, he states that "what the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (4). This notion is distinctly present in *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn.* The black and white triptych captures the moments leading up to and immediately following the vessel's impact with the ground, this momentary force of gravity and the vessel's fragmentation preserved through the captured image; the urn only exists as an unbroken object only through these images. This translation of mediums, from ceramic vessel, to performance, to photograph, to digital image highlights the rapid pace of human time, or time on a human scale, and our changing relationship to objects, their changing value.

Fig. 5. Concrete casting of the space inside a now broken vase by the author.

There is a sense of loss and pastness embedded in the photograph. Barthes goes on to poignantly describe how even when a photo is captured, documenting a moment in time and arresting its subjects in the picture plan, it does not stop their bodies, their memories, or their lived experiences from being lost with time:

> What is it that will be done away with, along with this photograph which yellows, fades, and will someday be thrown out, if not by me – too superstitious for that – at least when I die? […] In front of the only photograph in which I find my father and mother together, this couple who I know loved each other, I realise: it is love-as-treasure which is going to

> disappear forever; for once I am gone, no one will any longer be able to testify to this: nothing will remain. (94)

What will become of our objects, the things that hold sentimental value to us, when we die? This cold, depersonalization via the medium of photography compounds the melancholy evoked by the destruction of the vessel while creating the vessel in the mind of the viewer, with each subsequent viewing. In looking at the photograph of the fragmented vessel, it and the indexically intact vessel are created in the mind of the viewer simultaneously. Thus, underscoring the fact that the vessel has not only been destroyed, but that it can never be physically grasped, and the viewer is left to contemplate a new object, the photograph of the destruction.

Within El Siddique's work, the importance of the digital image is underscored in documenting the artworks. Through the destruction of the vessels and the documentation of the installation, something new is created in the process:

> I feel like documentation is a pretty big part of my practice. But there was something when I was an Artist-in-Residence at Harbourfront Centre, where I would use this empty gallery space that I would have for four days and I just pulled all-nighters where I created these installations in the space and then document them and then put them away. They would end up on my website at the time, and that's kind of essentially how I envisioned the rest of my artistic career, is that I would just find a space to create these installations and document them and then tear them down.

The point isn't for the installations to last, nor for the vessels to be preserved forever, but rather for their creation and destruction to facilitate the creation of another artwork. El Siddique describes the material components as modular, explaining that she "would like to create this system and inventory where […] vessels can join to create a different structure and the metal shelving can work in different ways and with each other." The photograph becomes a necessary component in documenting the destruction and generating the artwork itself. Ephemerality is embedded within the works on multiple levels which must be grappled with.

Conclusion

Undulating between material and immaterial, the physical and the intangible, the broken vessel is both that which is destroyed and that which is created. When contextualized as a super-object within the museum, the broken vessel acts as a catalyst for a deeper contemplation of clay's materiality and theoretical connections. Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* and Azza El Siddique's *Measure of One* speak to the ways our bodies interact with the world around us, leaving evidence of our lives. While neither is a ceramicist in the traditional sense, their material choice of ceramics is intentional, tapping into the vessel form's craft-historical and anthropological associations.

The vessels become anew through the act of breakage and fragmentation, and the shift from function to inquiry is emphasized through its exhibition in the gallery. There is a fracturing of materials, of time and of space; the empty space within the vessel is destroyed, but these vessels are not spaces to be filled, they are in a state of transition, transformation and creation. As Miller describes, the broken ceramic vessel is synonymous with our everyday life:

> At a time when I think we're rightly very critical about the idea of universality, there's the undeniable experience that most people on the planet touched something ceramic most days of their lives, and it's ubiquity in the world, from being sewer pipes to space shuttles to cooking surfaces, it's all of this stuff, and it has this huge, broad range of applications, so the idea of bringing decaying ceramics or unfired ceramics or broken ceramics into that conversation is part of this ubiquity.

To run one's finger along the contours of a shard, to see the once invisible seams where the vessel fell apart, is to forge an intimate and generative relationship with loss. I see this act of tracing ceramic fragments with one's fingertips or in one's mind as an attempt to grapple with the totality of an impact, attempting to make sense of, to cope with destruction and to allow space for the creation of something new in the process. Like the body's skin marked by stretch

marks across hip bones, scars from childhood accidents, or that particular tattoo which seemed like *a really good idea at the time* …ceramic vessels remember, document, archive the forces exerted on them. To be confronted with the broken vessel is to become aware of the past, of one's mortality, the impact of the destructive-creative force, a transformation of materials. Nothing is stagnant, nothing is forever. In all its sadness and bereavement, the broken vessel creates a space for pause and deeper contemplation instead of racing forward towards repair or restoration.

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