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A Show of Hands: The spectacle of apprenticeship

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Introduction

In 2013, Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates presented *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* as part of a group exhibition at London's Whitechapel Gallery, in which he invited skilled potters to train apprentices in a working pottery studio in the exhibition space.¹ This was not the first time that Gates (2014) had exhibited what he describes as 'an ever-evolving corporation that values makers, designers, and skills'; the work had previously been installed at Locust Projects, Miami (2012); and the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia (2013).

Swiss-born sculptor Urs Fischer's installation *YES* at the Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) provides something of a contrast to Gates's quasi-pottery. Fisher's work solicited direct audience contact with clay: 1,500 people were invited to the gallery over a four-week period, and encouraged to work with the artist to create a vast clay tableau; the only condition was that no clay was to be fixed to the walls. In an interview about the

¹ *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* (2013) was exhibited as part of *The Spirit of Utopia*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 4 July – 5 September 2013.

exhibition, the artist called it his ‘biggest collaboration yet: free, fearless, instant fun and very direct. And inclusive as a way to subvert museum exclusivity’ (Dalton, 2013).

These two projects certainly find a place within the expanded field of ceramics: they evoke participation and performance, and install an economy of learning and apprenticeship within the gallery. The emphasis on learning and direct physical engagement with clay in both works provides a potential way forward for participatory art in general: towards active and meaningful experience for the audiences involved, instead of an encounter in which they are rendered passive agents, expected to conform to an artist’s choreography.² Gates’s and Fischer’s artworks could be read as *spectacular* in their unequivocal mobilisation of craft as performance. However, the notion of apprenticeship in both projects is at odds with conventional definitions of the term that are based on the time-consuming and usually intimate process of skills-transfer from master to student. The new contextual setting for these apprenticeships – the gallery – creates an entirely novel entity, somewhere between an environment of learning and a participatory artwork.

By framing Gates and Fischer’s works as different iterations of this ‘spectacle of apprenticeship,’ this essay explores the different social and pedagogic environments each artist facilitates, and the limitations and potentialities of inviting audiences to engage with clay. Gates’s project aims to highlight the importance of apprenticeship, understood in the conventional *linear* fashion, with masters passing on a number of skills stipulated by the artist to inexpert students. Yet while the tuition takes place in full view of the public, there is a seeming lack of reflexive exchange in

² For a discussion on the politics of audience participation in contemporary art see Claire Bishop (2012, pp. 30–40).

the teaching, with the kiln in this quasi-pottery arrested behind Perspex. Although Gates's *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* utilises entirely abnormal conditions for teaching, it is nonetheless capable of fulfilling his intention to create a 'temporary economy' (Miami Design District, 2012). By contrast Fischer's work shows no sign of linear apprenticeship but instead a socialised, or *horizontal*, understanding of learning that emerges through 'handling' the world (Wenger, 2014). Fischer directly invited participants to make with clay and he relinquishes any kind of control, apart from the broadest possible parameters to guide his participants. We use these two conceptions of apprenticeship to assess the work of Gates and Fischer in an effort to understand what the mix of spectacle, participatory art, apprenticeship, and learning about clay can add to the development of an expanded field for ceramics.

Context

Due to its plasticity and transparency of expression (de Waal, 2004), clay has proved particularly attractive to contemporary artists in an attempt to directly engage their audiences. In Amsterdam in 1972, clay artist Jim Melchert and five of his colleagues dipped their heads into a bowl of slip in a work titled *Changes: A conceptual performance with drying slip*, a performance that profoundly altered the field of ceramics practice as 'it shifted the idea of ceramics from gallery to performance space and beyond' (Figueiredo, 2014, p. 52). In a more participatory vein, British artist Anthony Gormley has elicited the help of a number of participants to fashion thousands of miniature terracotta figures that have subsequently invaded gallery spaces across the world. *Field* (1989–2003) has been installed as far afield as Porto Velho, Brazil (1991); Guangzhou, China (2003); and most recently at the Tate

Liverpool (2004).³ ‘From the beginning,’ asserts Gormley, ‘I was trying to make something as direct as possible with clay: the earth.’ (Gormley, n.d.) For Gormley, the affinity between history, material, and the body takes shape in the visceral qualities of clay.

While these two projects revel in clay’s receptivity to the imprint or mark of the maker, few processes are more captivating to the uninitiated than throwing. Several major figures in twentieth-century ceramics – including Bernard Leach and Peter Voulkos – have engaged in public throwing demonstrations; and, of course, demonstrations are common practice today in craft fairs and open studios up and down the country. Demonstrations have the characteristics that Anne Sophie Lehmann described as central to the genre of ‘showing making’: they document tacit knowledge, which is otherwise hard to record; they are instructive; and they are arresting, evoking pleasure ‘through embodied identification’ (Lehmann, 2012; Gell, 1998). Lehmann was also alert to the magical element of ‘showing making’ and the paradoxical notion that craft processes become more beguiling – not less so – when they are shown to the public: a point well made, in Glenn Adamson’s *Invention of Craft* (2013, pp. 56–7).

Theaster Gates, Soul Manufacturing Corporation, 2013

In *The Spirit of Utopia* exhibition held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 2013, the throwing demonstration took centre stage. Theaster Gates, the Chicago-based artist,

³ *Field* was exhibited as part of the group exhibition *A Secret History of Clay: From Gauguin to Gormley*, Tate Liverpool, 28 May – 30 August 2004. The exhibition centred on the ‘little-known history of the use of clay in modern and contemporary art’ (Tate, 2004).

had installed a fully operational pottery studio, complete with drying racks, three throwing wheels, and an electric kiln as a part of his work titled *Soul Manufacturing Corporation*.⁴ For the duration of the exhibition – over two and a half months – three master–apprentice pairings inhabited this studio in the gallery, creating Gates’s ‘temporary economy’ by building simple mugs, bowls, and bricks to the artist’s specification, in full view of the public.

[Insert Figure 9.1 here – portrait]

Figure 9.1 Theaster Gates, *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* (detail), 2011–, *The Spirit of Utopia*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2013.

Courtesy Whitechapel Gallery, London. Photo: Dan Weill.

This was not the first time the Whitechapel Art Gallery had been home to a temporary pottery studio. In the early 1920s the studio potter Denise Wren ran a number of demonstrations as a part of a series of exhibitions organised by the Knox Guild of Arts and Crafts.⁵ The demonstrations drew in local audiences, who were captivated by the performance, but were run under the now familiar logic of craft fairs: they were used to promote the values of the Guild, and its handmade products.

[Insert Figure 9.2 here – portrait].

Figure 9.2 Denise Wren giving a pottery demonstration at the Knox Guild Exhibition, Market Place, Kingston, 1912.

Oxshott Pottery Archive, Crafts Study Centre, University for the Creative Arts.

⁴ The nearby Sir John Cass Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design (the CASS) lent the equipment used in Gates’s installation.

⁵ The Knox Guild of Arts and Crafts was set up by a group of art students at Kingston Art School in honour of the Liberty designer Archibald Knox. The group formed in 1912 after Knox left the institution. It was claimed that Kingston sacked Knox on account of his unconventional teaching, but Kingston records do not corroborate this. (Coatts, Wren and Roscoe, 1984)

Ninety years on, the throwing demonstrations of *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* continued this fascination with observing the transformation of wet clay. Fred Gatley (2014) – one of the master potters employed on the project – noted how audiences were ‘transfixed’ by the pottery, describing Gates’s project as the ‘hit of the show’. A visit to the space confirmed Gatley’s assessment; groups of schoolchildren were struck into silence upon seeing one of Gates’s apprentice potters tentatively throwing a form.

Throwing demonstrations clearly have broad appeal. They provide a rare opportunity to interact with makers and making, to understand how things are made, and to explore the visceral nature of matter, in a world where information is often mediated by screens. Yet to those more familiar with the ceramic process, *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* made a show of the notion of apprenticeship. Gates’s ‘temporary economy’ brought unusual conditions to bear on the processes of running a pottery and the master–apprentice relationship, on account of its placement in the gallery.

For a start, Gates gave instructions as to what the master–apprentice pairings had to make – ‘poorly thrown examples of “Japanese” pottery’ according to Gatley – and the potters were never clear as to why they had to make bricks. Where all this output from the quasi-pottery ended up was also unclear at the time, compounded by the fact that the mastermind of the whole operation, Gates, was absent from the show. The lack of clarity as to the destination of the work is important in the context of this discussion. Wren’s throwing demonstrations produced work that was for sale. Her pedagogic zeal and motivation for bringing handmade techniques into the gallery environment was underpinned by economic imperative. Teaching pottery skills and selling pots was her livelihood. By foregrounding workshop tasks – throwing,

wedging, and trimming – Gates’s project was less forthcoming about the networks of exchange in which the output would circulate and his own position as a well-known contemporary artist.

In its presentation of the master–apprentice relationship, the project veered strongly into the realm of the spectacle. Working in a goldfish bowl is ‘not the sort of way anyone should learn’, Gatley later admitted. To respond to this pressure, and showing all the hallmarks of a good teacher, Gatley protected his apprentice from public scrutiny and suggested that the difficult job of throwing be done at quieter times, leaving the easier tasks of wedging clay and making bricks for when gallery numbers increased. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, this ‘goldfish bowl’ phenomenon is common to ceramicists-in-residence,⁶ who have been known to try to hide from their audience in a corner as if it were an actor’s dressing room – a refuge from the demands of performance. The messy process of learning a skill and developing ideas is not always compatible with performance, interaction, and spectacle.

Apprenticeship learning under the guise of spectacle is far from conventional for a trainee potter, but what impression does this new form of apprenticeship leave on the audience? The work received a generally positive reception, but the project nevertheless represented a reduced, or abbreviated, version of apprenticeship. As such, *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* was in danger of reinforcing a simplified image of craft education: the old romantic typology of the good, honest craftsman, with skills and training passed down from generation to generation within a workshop

⁶ The ceramics residency at the Victoria and Albert Museum (2015), London, was initiated in 2008. Clare Twomey, Phoebe Cummings, James Rigler, and Nao Matsunaga are among those ceramicists who have been residents.

context. This idealised education involves affective relationships between makers within a non-alienating working environment. We could term this a linear apprenticeship, with craft skills handed down from an all-knowing authority to a receptive student, an impression that has received substantial ideological investment in the modern era. We have William Morris, John Ruskin, and in the twentieth century, Bernard Leach and Soetsu Yanagi, who advocated apprenticeship forms of learning. More recently Matthew Crawford's celebration of the motorcycle repairman in his book *Shop Class as Soulcraft* (2009) and Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2008) clearly position apprenticeships as the only genuine pathway to mastery, with skills transmitted from one individual to another.

The spectacle of the master–apprentice relationship presented in *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* pays homage to the ideal learning environments imagined by these well-known literary figures. Linear apprenticeship offers a seductive narrative of romantic anti-capitalist escape – *the way it should be done*. The presentation of this environment of learning is enticing for audiences in the context of urban Whitechapel, in particular, and is perhaps what Gates is aiming for when he states his desire to create a ‘temporary economy’. This is a popular image of how craft, and pottery, should be learnt, but it does not communicate the full complexity of the potential and challenges of learning pottery today. Just like the perfectly produced replica of the White House in the Lyndon B. Johnson Museum in Texas – which, according to Umberto Eco (1987, pp. 6–7), is ‘hyperreal’, more perfect than the original – *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* creates an iteration of the pottery studio that encourages the audience to treat it as an advanced form of installation art. The criticism levelled at *The Spirit of Utopia* exhibition by Jonathan Jones (2013) of *The Guardian* backs up this argument. Jones characterised the show as a ‘fascinating

aesthetic playground’, a tongue-in-cheek, comical poke at utopia’s grandiosity, rather than a helpful or practical guide to new forms of production and living. Indeed, he lamented the exhibition’s ‘depressing political insight’.

It is the economics and politics of ceramics education today that seem to be ignored by the spectacle of apprenticeship in *Soul Manufacturing Corporation*. With ceramics instruction amalgamated into 3D-design courses within universities (competing with other media for students’ attention), and the popularity of evening classes, residential courses, and ‘craft holidays’ on the rise, the image of a devoted master–apprentice relationship seems anachronistic, or, at best, a form of education only a few can afford and only at specific times. Nevertheless, Gates’s *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* provides a space in which this romantic fiction of linear apprenticeship can exist, in the ‘temporary economy’ of performance and participation-orientated contemporary art.

Throwing demonstrations may engage audiences and communicate something about the material with which ceramicists work, but it is critical to be aware of how the dynamics of spectacle fundamentally change the process of learning and the interaction between the artists and participants who take part. In *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* the audiences watch the captivating spectacle of linear, hierarchical apprenticeship. It is an imagination of the *ideal* form of craft-learning that is strikingly different from the realities of education today. The audience assumes a passive role; similar to the classic display of a pot in a vitrine, we are asked to look, but not touch.

By contrast, Urs Fischer portrays a different approach to audiences working with clay, one that engages the full gamut of their capability.

Urs Fischer, YES, 2013

In the summer of 2013, MOCA placed an advertisement for participants to take part in a ‘collectively realized clay sculpture’ under the tutelage of sculptor Urs Fischer. The brief: to create a vast clay tableau within MOCA’s sister gallery, Geffen Contemporary, as part of a major Urs Fischer retrospective. ‘No previous knowledge of working with clay is necessary,’ stated the advert, ‘just an interest in working in three dimensions.’ (MOCA, 2013) Their call for participation was quickly answered: the advertisement went viral and sparked a huge amount of interest among a broad demographic. One journalist wrote, ‘Missed your calling as an artist ...? We’ve got the solution!’ adding wittily, ‘Looks like all those pottery classes at summer camp are finally going to come in handy!’ (Zech, 2013)

Fischer’s installation, later titled *YES*, took just over three weeks to complete. Participants were encouraged to use as much clay as they wanted – all 308 tonnes of it – and instructed simply to build. Footage of the installation demonstrates the gradual colonisation of the space by countless clay outbursts. One journalist described

the sea of bodies, hands, feet, open mouths, noses, ears, octopuses, sharks, penises and vaginas, mermaids, captains, Napoleons, chained and entangled figures, rats, mice, foxes, tigers, snakes, worms, walls, coral reefs, crying babies, caricatures of, for example, Rodin’s *The Thinker*, or things completely abstract, geometrical and even convulsively distorted, mass-miniaturised or monstrously magnified. (Curiger, 2014)

Fischer called it, ‘my biggest collaboration yet: free, fearless, instant fun and very direct’ (Dalton, 2013), while a critic declared it ‘fantastic and mundane’ (Wagley, 2013).

[Insert Figure 9.3 here – portrait]

Figure 9.3 Urs Fischer and various artists, *YES*, 2011–, installation view, dimensions variable, unfired clay sculptures modelled on-site by multiple authors, Urs Fischer, The Geffen Contemporary, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2013.

© Urs Fischer. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: Stefan Altenburger.

Indeed, many artists have celebrated raw clay and the spontaneity of making by hand (Groom, 2004). Most recently, artist duo Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s installation for the Venice Biennale presented over 200 ‘seemingly unfinished maquettes’ made from unfired clay (Chin, 2013). Artists Daniel Dewar and Grégory Gicquel built a hefty clay hippo in the gallery space at London’s Raven Row that bore the marks and gouges of its inception.⁷ However, Fischer’s installation is different: it is transformational – not simply in the way it seizes hold of the space, but in the activation of its volunteers as artists and apprentices.⁸

Fischer’s choice of title for the installation could be read in number of ways: as the affirmation of allegiance to the project; as a clear-cut ‘YES!’ to any question of content; or simply, as an expression of pleasure. In this vein, a subsequent review of the exhibition by *Tate Etc.*’s Editor-at-Large Bice Curiger referred to the collective invention of the installation, although she cast Fischer in the same mould as other

⁷ *Unto This Last* exhibition, Raven Row, London, 20 May – 25 July 2010.

⁸ Claire Bishop (2006, p. 12) maintains that the three concerns of participatory art are activation, authorship, and community.

contemporary artists – among them Damien Hirst and Anish Kapoor – who outsource their work, yet take the credit for its completion.

It is a matter of presenting the artist as we know him as a part of the ‘art world’: a solo player with a studio and maybe assistants, but also a highly professionalised creature who, if he or she is successful, has arisen out of the majority of the many, embodied in us all. (Curiger, 2014)

Despite these allusions to the totalising force of the artist, Fischer’s intervention appears to be both instructive *and* inclusive. MOCA ‘recruited’ 1,500 participants – students, children, amateurs, and artists – over the four-week installation period, who in exchange for their time were offered free admission to the Museum for the duration of the show. Furthermore, theorist Ulrich Lehmann has pointed out that Fischer’s work is so often about the reverence for specific materials, and techniques of making. As an artist, he is constantly shifting his material focus – from clay, to plaster, wood, and cast aluminium, photography and resin, and back to clay – but the material is always integral to the idea. Lehmann (2013) writes, ‘Urs Fischer ... displays “work” in his work. ... [He] inquires into working methods: artisanal, industrially manufactured, mechanized, or handcrafted, to bring forth a materiality of making.’ By calling for participation, Fischer is extending this invitation to investigate the dynamics of the artist–material relationship in the heady world of contemporary art; and his volunteers all have a hand in the construction of

the work.⁹ This begs the questions: why clay? what was the drive behind this particular installation? and what can this tell us about participation more broadly?

In a recent interview, Fischer described his deliberate structuring of the project as a collaboration. ‘I want them [the participants] to do whatever they want to do. The form is clay, and space and time – that comes from me. ... They are not my outbursts, they are the sub-layer, and each person is his or her own artist.’ (Wagner, 2013, p. 48) This layering of output – a palimpsest of creativity – presents the community as a productive artistic force. With between 20 and 200 volunteers working alongside each other on any one day (Curiger, 2014), the focus is on responding to, and building on, the work that’s gone before. It is a task of negotiation and *correspondence*.¹⁰ The participants are in constant dialogue with the material, the space, and each other; and in this constant flow of making, they are learning, assimilating, and responding. This is an altogether different dynamic to that presented in Gates’s project. Fischer goes on to admit that this collective mode of making – while producing a community, albeit short-term – is both efficient and controlled. He states, ‘Once the people are gone, you look at an extremely disciplined work of art. And that’s what interests me about the project.’ (Wagner, 2013, p. 48)

This is not quite the discipline imposed by institutional boundaries (Foucault, 1995), but rather self-restraint in response to the brief. In his recent treatise on making, anthropologist Tim Ingold has skilfully suggested that ‘making is a

⁹ Edmund de Waal has suggested that perhaps it is craft’s marginalised position – and by extension, that of its materials – that, in fact, can be attributed to the appeal of clay as a medium: ‘It raises the question of whether it is precisely because clay can be seen as practically worthless that so many artists have been able to use it as a material in exploratory and digressive ways.’ (2004, p. 38)

¹⁰ The use of the term ‘correspondence’ refers directly to the work of Tim Ingold (2013), who claims that it is the correspondence between maker, tool, and material that enables something to be made.

correspondence between maker and material’ that involves ‘the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials’, rather than the insistence of a ‘preconceived form’ (2013, p. 31). In much the same way, there is an open-endedness and discursive quality to Fischer’s artwork. Presented with 308 tonnes of clay in the Geffen Contemporary and the simple instruction that ‘Everything is allowed, except that the walls are to remain untouched’ (Curiger, 2014), Fischer’s volunteers shaped and evolved their own social and learning environment. This participatory artwork, we would argue, could be thought of as a horizontal apprenticeship to the extent that the volunteers are engaged side-by-side in the production of the artwork, and in learning what clay can do. This horizontal approach is reified in the monotone grey of the raw clay. There is no distinction to be made between sculptures: they create one uniform whole. Fischer himself admits to being an ‘apprentice to materials’, and describes a process whereby he learns to work in dialogue with his materials, whether he ‘toys with, animates, inverts, abuses, arrests, and leaves [them] incomplete’ (Lehmann, 2013). And it is this same correspondence he has set up for his volunteers. Turning again to Ingold, he celebrates this active and open-ended dialogue in the ‘becoming’ of the artwork, which problematises the notion of the artist as sole author. As with Fischer’s *YES*, the volunteers are working with the material unsure of what might emerge. There is no grand plan, or destination; just clay, space, and time.¹¹

Collaborative artworks, argues art historian Claire Bishop (2006, p.12) ‘emerge from, and ... produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model’.

¹¹ Fischer’s offer of ‘clay and space and time’ closely resembles the requisite form of Nicolas Bourriaud’s (1998, p. 170) relational or social model for art: ‘They [contemporary artists] use time as a raw material. Form takes priority over things, and flows over categories: the production of gestures is more important than the production of material things.’

Through shared authorship, Urs Fischer's *YES* is cemented as democratic; and here, clay – with its innate playfulness and plasticity – is the great leveller.

Conclusion

Both Theaster Gates and Urs Fischer's projects engage with the notion of apprenticeship learning. On the one hand, Gates draws on the traditional notion of learning as a rigorous, temporally bound, and *linear* experience, passed down from master to apprentice; on the other, Fischer's participants, it seems, learn *horizontally*, in correspondence *with* the material *and* each other. It is not that one model is preferable to the other, just that both demonstrate discrete and unconventional modes of learning within the gallery. And while we might bemoan these surrogate forms of instruction, perhaps they are befitting of what Glenn Adamson (2007) refers to as the 'post-studio environment'. New hybrid forms of education-spectacle certainly accord with Gates's intentions when he talks of *Soul Manufacturing Corporation* as a 'stand-in for the possibility of an emerging culture' (Miami Design District, 2012). Perhaps these are the forms of ceramic education that we should start to get used to: partial, abbreviated, surrogate. It may certainly be the only viable economy of learning for the future.

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