

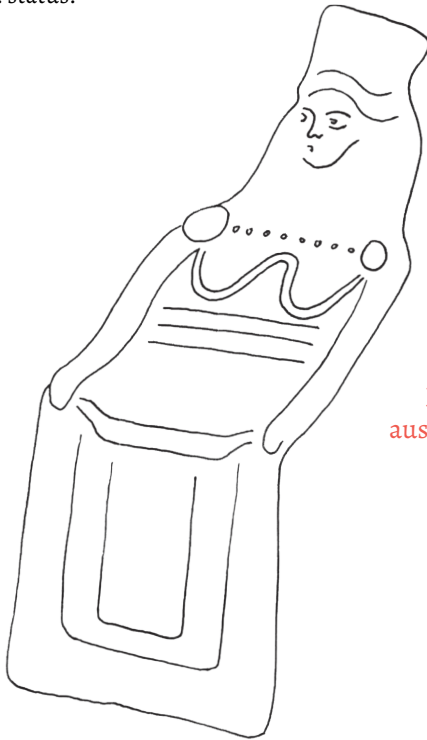
A Working Alphabet

Guest Artist: Talk

Katie Cuddon

A Abbreviation

A piece of clay is rolled out to form a flat surface approximately 5mm thick. The outline of a woman is drawn and cut out. She's given a face, arms, headdress and breasts, by adding a little more clay. She's left to dry out a little, to what's referred to as leather-hard, and then folded down into the shape of a chair. A temporary prop holds her while she dries fully, perhaps even while she's being fired in a kiln. The prop is then taken away leaving the woman and throne as a single form. The object was made in Athens about 530-600BCE and now lives in the British Museum. For me this is an example of sculpture getting ahead of words. Material and form have come together to describe with one simple, abbreviated gesture, a complex abstract concept: status.



Eine neben der Anderen, aus der Anderen,
auseinander entstanden, aneinander gereiht.
Aus der Einen entstehen Andere,
welche Ausgang der Nächsten sind.

(ATP 20W)

Ein serielles, rigides Objekt, wie es
der Hohlkammerziegel ist, beschreibt
das Ausgangselement weitreichender
Formenvielfalt.

(TO ZOW)

B Base, Basic, Beginnings

Clay is base, basic, beginnings. In its purest form, it's the ground under our feet. I have a fantasy of stripping bags of clay of their plastic covers and using them like tiles to cover the entire floor of my studio. Any work that's created will grow straight up and out from this thick wet clay floor. Our relationship to clay begins basically. If I walk on this wet clay floor, I'll create a map of my movements with footprints. If I use my hands, I can pull out shapes. It is a beginning, not dissimilar to the first experiments of shaping matter we engage in as a child; perhaps not with clay, but with Play-Doh and plasticine, which were made to mimic clay.

C Complex

Complex seems an unlikely adjective to sit alongside base. But even in its most elementary form clay's material composition, characteristics, functions and associations, present a panoply of contradictions, idiosyncrasies and possibilities. You need only look at the huge range of clays available for purchase to see how subtle its composition is. Changes in percentage of its basic ingredients can shift clay from being a material used to pinch out shapes in a classroom to manufacturing aerospace machinery. Physical complexity is a given but so too is clay's position socially and culturally. Basic terracotta is ubiquitous inside and outside our homes where it's used to create garden pots, crockery, hardy floors and not least bricks. Fine porcelain is more rarefied and occupies a very different place in the social hierarchy of ceramics. Porcelain is ornate Sèvres and Meissen ornaments, Ming dynasty pots. Artists working with clay must be alive to their predecessors' use of different types of clay and ceramic glaze.

D Dense, Detail, Decoration, Drawing

Clay is dense. Its denseness has been used to create dwellings: troglodytic and contemporary, but it also has a capacity for detail used to create decoration. It oscillates between the two within a single object. Some decoration is created by, literally, drawing with clay. Pinched, carved, coiled or extruded lines lead towards an illustration or pattern. I'm picturing the lines of decoration that adorn an ancient Greek pithos or the relief pots that have emerged from Africa, in the ancient past and recently, by artists such as the Nala family; four generations of women potters from Zululand, South Africa who adorn their traditional shaped vessels with both inherited and invented motifs. Reliefs on their pots are complemented by incised markings; essentially, drawing. This, creating marks in the surface of clay, is perhaps the simplest visualising gesture we can make. On the roof of the caves at Rouffignac in the Dordogne are traces of fingers that travel for miles. They are a form of pre-historic cave painting, known as Finger Flutings. If I were to make a piece of work titled Finger Flutings, it would resemble a finger stroking and feeling its

way across an opening – a mouth perhaps – feeling for the vibrations which may precede a sound, anticipating what noises this opening might release.

E Elasticity, Enwrap, Envelope

Elasticity makes clay a joy to handle, shape, and form. Clay stretches, bends, flops, squeezes. You can roll, pull, and draw it out to make long worms of material: thick strands of hair, rope, stems, and stamens. Thin slabs of clay can flop over objects to become enclosing skins. One of clay's earliest uses was to form envelopes to hold clay slabs inscribed with confidential information. Its elasticity enwrapped the object and enabled the sender to mark the envelope with a seal, perhaps something as basic as a thumb print.

Modelled upwards clay wraps, waves, and wobbles. You can push out from the inside of a clay object as well as in from the outside. It needn't be a solid lump you work into. It can be stretched and pushed back and forth. Moulded it can be pressed into fine folds and creases, pulled and bent when removed. Its elasticity is finite just as any living thing's energy is; there comes a point where enervation causes clay to fail. It collapses, breaks, tears, and cracks. It doesn't like trying to be resuscitated, either. For it to regain its elasticity it needs to be completely reconstituted.

F Fragile

The image of a fine piece of china dropping on a hard floor is a powerful one. Clay in its fired form, ceramic, is a word that sits closely alongside fragile in most people's minds. At no point is clay more fragile though than in its drying and dry unfired state. Tiny forces both within the clay itself and in the environment it sits within, challenge the unfired clay object. As water escapes, the clay shrinks. It's transitioning. It's neurotic. It doesn't like disturbances. Structural props must shrink with it and if it's re-exposed to water it fizzes hysterically like aspirin. But once fired, clay is hard and strong. It withstands weight, it withstands weather. Any vulnerability, sadly, lies with us, the handlers.

G Gravity

Gravity may be the weakest force but it's never far away from my conscious mind when I'm making something. Clay will sink onto a surface, creating, whether you want it or not, an imprint. For me this surface is usually the flat plaster slab that I build on. There are two little bowls in the British Museum, one with the imprint of a leaf underneath, and one with a mat. They are the surfaces upon which these bowls were made or placed when wet. Gravity and elasticity put them there. They speak of context and they enable the bowls to carry a world in their surface as well as things, liquids, or whatever in their form. But if you would rather the bottom of your clay object did not slump onto the base that it's made on, then gravity becomes a bother.

Das Interessante am Arbeiten mit diesen Skulpturen ist, dass diese organischen Formen nicht nur durch meine Hände, sondern auch durch das Mitwirken der Schwerkraft und der Materialeigenschaften bedingt werden.

(CESH 20W)

H Hand

When I reach what feels like the end of a group of works, I'll often make a hand, or it may be a glove. How I make these hands is important: I clad my hand and fingers in clay and then slowly try to remove it without tearing, too much, the envelope of clay. Like a snake shedding its skin, I'm liberated and able to move on.

I Instinct, Intimate, Imitate, Impatience

When presented with a lump of clay many people will instinctively feel their way into it, within it, around it, with their hands. We intuit how it will respond; it intuitively shapes expression. It's an intimate relationship and I wonder how much this has to do with clay's capacity to imitate. We might expect 'intimate' and 'imitate' to share an etymological root, but I haven't found one.

The relationship isn't always reciprocal and harmonic however. It is also a struggle. Another 'I' interferes: impatience. Where does this impatience live? Is it in me, the artist, or is it the image I'm holding on to in my mind that's impatient to be visualised? Or is it in the material, clay?

J Joinery

After 20 years of working with clay I hold it responsible for some restructuring of my understanding of the world and what materials can and can't do. Clay allows you to add and take away as you wish, leaving no evidence of any amendment. This must be the most fluid, seamless, magical form of joinery there is. It's hard not to curse with frustration when other materials aren't so accommodating. Joining leather-hard clay with slip (watery clay) also holds some magic. The two compositions of clay imitate card and glue, giving way to a simple job of paste and stick. Paper clay builds on this equivalent. Paper fibres in the clay suck up the slip and in turn the adjoining section of clay. This is as close to clay-crafting imitating paper-crafting as you'll get.

Bei meinen Objekten gehe ich von einer vordefinierten Masse Ton aus, der nichts hinzugefügt oder weggenommen wird. Im Laufe des Arbeitsprozesses wird durch manuelles Ziehen, Streichen und Aushöhlen die Oberfläche maximiert und somit ein dreidimensionaler Rauscheffekt erzeugt.

(CESH 20W)

K Kasper

Kasper, the play by Peter Handke, has often entered my mind since first reading the script in 2010. Based loosely on the true story of Kasper Hauser, the teenage boy who after growing up in a dark enclosed space walked into a small German town knowing only a single sentence. The play presents words as formless media, which are impressed upon Kasper, through intimidation and repetition. Gradually the words are reorganised into a structure familiar to us. I was reminded of it again recently as I watched my two-year-old approach a puzzle she has done 'correctly' dozens of times. The puzzle consists of an alphabet made up of wooden letters which are inserted into their corresponding holes. Today she wanted N to go where M should go and C where O should, etc. There is a moment in the play, *Kasper*, approximately halfway through, when language sits poised between a position of power/authority and vulnerability/

openness, or form and formlessness. This place is where my work lives. It is attempting to articulate something very specific, and simultaneously, ineffable.

L Learning

Most people feel able to leave their mark in a lump of clay. It seems to put us in touch with a time when materials were sites of exploration, interaction, and play. But the restraint we establish in adulthood isn't so easily dismantled. What I observe as a teacher is how many people want to turn clay into the mass manufactured products we find in our homes: a flat, square tile or a perfectly spherical bowl. It's as if to control clay, by creating something uniform and recognisable, is a safer route to achieving something successful than allowing it to be fluid and open and ourselves adventurous. There are basic principles it's helpful to understand: not too thick, not too thin, not too wet, not too dry. Over time, a material as close to our bodies as clay imprints itself on our hands, joints, muscles, skin to the point where working it becomes quite instinctive.

Zufall und Intuition spielen während
des Arbeitens wesentliche Rolle und
bestimmen Form und Oberfläche mit.

(TO ZOW)

M Masticate

Masticate is my preferred word for conveying how I make things with clay. I use it for its relationship to the mouth and chewing something into form, perhaps words which don't quite fit. My hands masticate the clay into shape, but as you would expect from a material you knead and gnash, the story of its creation becomes embedded in its form. 'To masticate' spotlights clay's connection to language and communication. The earliest known forms of written language were created with the help of clay. Cuneiform script was inscribed into clay tablets with a wedge-tipped stylus. The fact that masticating in the infant, biting and chewing when babies wean, exercising muscles in the mouth, can help the development of speech, links with clay. Its baseness and denseness, may in a sense be preverbal, but it also propels the verbal. It makes way for words.

N Nearly, Not

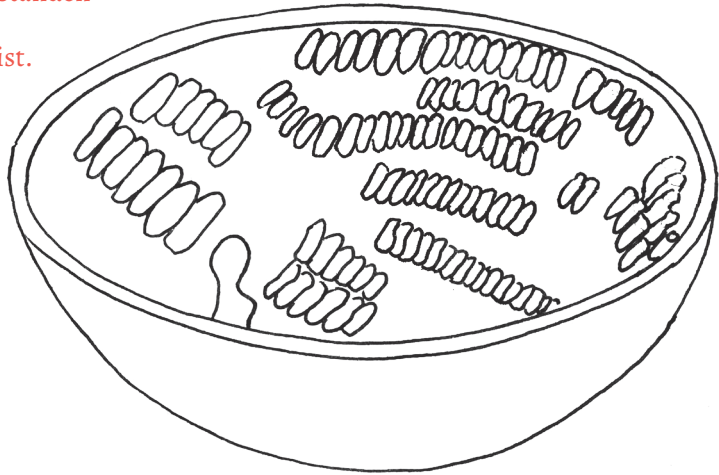
"I want to write a novel about Silence," says Virginia Woolf's character, Hewet, in *The Voyage Out*; "the things people don't say." In a similar way I want to make sculpture embodying that which challenges representation. I have the sense that what I have to say is specific, but it does not lend itself to an obviously defined form. My making is a process of nearly visualising so many things, but not to the point that the sculpture becomes any one of them. It's nearly this, but not. It's nearly that, but not quite either. Much of this jostle goes on within me before I even touch the limbering body of clay. In Jan Svankmajer's animation *Dimensions of Dialogue*, two heads face each other caught in an endless struggle to communicate. Speech is represented as material that is repeatedly broken down and reconstituted. The subjects are unstable but the image is one of exactness.

O Openings

Openings bring together space within and space outside. I build pieces around openings as much as I break into pieces with openings. It's a peculiar thing that an opening that exposes an object to be a skin also presents a vessel and in turn an interior world. In the Heraklion Archaeological Museum in Crete there is a Minoan bowl which was part of a ritual offering to a deity. Within it is a simply modelled scene of a shepherd and his flock: the sides of the bowl become the gentle slopes of a hillside and the bowl's base becomes the valley into which the sheep are led. We see an opening which leads us into a pastoral narrative, but if we imagine not just looking at it but drinking from it, we would be exploring another way of ingesting the landscape. In this way, openings give our bodies access to objects and the stories they carry.

Das Entstandene, das nur durch
das Aushöhlen der Einen entstanden
ist und jetzt die Andere,
der Andere neben der Einen ist.

(ATP 20W)



P Proportional

I keep returning to the symbiotic relationship between clay and body. Sometimes I'm asked what sized sculptures I make. It's interesting that this is often the first question people ask. They must immediately feel the need to establish how their body might exist alongside the body of a hypothetical sculpture. It's unlikely the same person would ask a painter "What size are your paintings?"

Das Verhältnis von Energie zu
Widerstand bestimmt Rundungen,
plastische Oberflächen und
Durchdringungen.

(TO 20W)

If I were to say 'monumental' would they feel something different to if I said 'minuscule'? They haven't yet asked me what my works look like or what materials I use, so there is no means of picturing this monumental or minuscule object. But establishing how this new object in the world relates, proportionally, to their body is fundamental to their approach to the work. I always reply by saying that the sculptures never extend beyond my wingspan. In other words, I don't like making work that through scale loses

touch with my body. The photograph of Pino Pascale getting the measure of his enormous spider sculpture comes to mind. I read this image as a sculptor trying to grasp what he has made through imitation and as realigning his body with his work.

Q Quick

Clay can be quick and this immediacy is fundamental to its expression. Even a child can take advantage of the speed with which clay can be shaped into something recognisable. It's an enigma that a material is able to move and record gestures created in milliseconds and at the same time hold them within its form for millions of years. The speed of destruction can also be very quick.

R Repetition

I've talked of exploring a personal relationship with clay but little of its industrial (and more common) production. Clay as a mass manufactured object is how we encounter it day in day out. Bricks, tiles, slip-cast crockery. The imprint of the machine into which clay is pressed and discharged shapes our built environment. I find its regularity remarkable; I encounter clay as it yields, day in and day out within my studio. I do not engage with processes where I know the outcome exactly, but there is still, within the eccentricity of studio activity, routine and repetition. When the body mimics the machine and reproduces, and reproduces, and reproduces, objects become logged time, a register of a period of making. As a student I made hundreds of thumb sized shapes over a period of a few weeks. The process of repetition coupled with time propelled the objects in a particular direction. Interventions and influences arrive unexpectedly but repetition, perversely, seems to foster change.

S Shadows

The sculptor Medardo Rosso once remarked that while taking a stroll in a park, the shadow of a passing couple had made a stronger impression on him than the persons themselves. He could not have grasped the shadow he so admired with his hands; the figures he certainly could have. Medardo Rosso interests me because he felt it was an artificial exercise to represent something in the round because this isn't how we experience objects with our eyes, just as we don't view objects in isolation either: they connect to other objects and a surrounding environment. The story of his stroll, reflecting on shadows, intimates how important this relational material was to his thinking and making. It also evokes the way an artwork might emerge from an artist, if we think of this as another process of refraction. I think of a sculpture appearing from me in front of me and I think of a poem by Yvor Winters, *The Shadow's Song*: "You are beside me, now."

Dies ist ein dynamischer Prozess, der theoretisch für immer fortgesetzt werden kann. Demnach resultiert die finale Form nicht aus einer vordeniierten Idee, sondern durch den abrupten Abbruch des Prozesses und spiegelt eine Momentaufnahme wider.

(CESH 20W)

Die entstehenden plastischen Objekte, bestehen aus unterschiedlicher Anzahl von Einzelteilen. Zusammengefügt ergeben sie neue schalenartige Objekte oder werden zueinander in Komposition gesetzt.

(TO 20W)

Innen wird außen
wird innen wird außen.
(ATP 20W)

T Time

When you're working with clay you're working with time. It's a paradox that when shaping wet clay time is finite, indeed quite limited. But once you've fired clay its lifetime is infinite. Fired clay survives for thousands of years. Deep within a salt mine in Hallstatt, Austria is a library of ceramic tiles which hold stories contributed by people across the world. Anyone is welcome to contribute. *The Memory of Mankind* (MOM) archive may be the only means by which our contemporary age will communicate itself a million years from now as digitally recorded information has no guarantee of longevity. I have also heard of the ashes of the deceased being used to create glazes, bone ash being a key glaze ingredient. Clay is beginnings but it can also be endings, and where spirituality carries us less and less over the threshold of death, perhaps clay can offer alternatives.

U Unity

There is a seamlessness to the ceramic object. When a piece of clay joins another it becomes a single piece of clay. This capacity gives way to something continuous so clay can be figure and ground; a skin that merges one object with the next. It's alarming therefore when this uniformity is ruptured with a crack. This sense that you are encountering something cohesive is broken. It's something of a mystery why some cracks create a fault line into which the object withers while others enable the object to grow beyond the parameters of its skin. Trying to orchestrate the right break is haphazard. When I've managed successfully, a void opens. Or is it a vessel?

V Vessels, Voids

If we think of the sculpture as vessel, there's a tension when a sculpture becomes vessel to a void. The outer form is there to contain something but it contains a void; the void seems to defy containment and yet there it is contained within the vessel. One illusion is broken, but another created. Clay can add voice to the paradox through its ability to be manipulated from outside in and inside out. Within my own sculptures, it's the coming together of these marks - the pushing out from within and the pushing in from the outside - that energises this relationship between vessel and void.

W Writing

Clay's relationship with writing stretches far beyond its use as a tablet for cuneiform. Clay, like words, can be shaped into anything. Clay can replicate, mimic, transform and carry information like no other medium, except perhaps, words.

In Mesopotamia as early as 7500BCE, clay was used to create what were known as trading tokens. Small pieces of clay were shaped into a limited range of shapes, some incised with simple markings, others

embellished with clay dots and then baked in the sun or hearth. It's believed the tokens were used to express numerical quantities of goods. They carried vital information within their form, just as words do. Outside of the human body, clay was the medium within which words existed.

X Xenial




Xenia is the Ancient Greek sacred rule of hospitality, especially to visiting strangers or travellers. Clay traverses disciplines, cultures, countries. It's ubiquitous. It's abundant. But it's also swathed in inhospitable prejudice. For every clay object created there are multiple audiences poking and prodding that object into a category: craft, sculpture, architecture, design. Such attitudes are the opposite of xenial and inimical to great work.

Y Yourself

"You can only make the work you make" I remember being told. This frees you up to make all sorts of things you don't feel likely to be viewed well in other's eyes.

Z Zero

With Zero, or o, we come full circle. It would be tempting to say nothing here but to do so would be to say something. I am reminded of the difficulty of not attaching a title to a work. *Untitled* has become so concrete as a title that many artists now prefer *no title*. Perhaps a preferable alternative to both these options would be to visualise the footprint of the artwork defining its existence and parameters just as o does for zero.

Once I photocopied the bases of some of my smaller sculptures. These images appear as distorted 'o's' – they rarely have a solid bottom – more like  and  and . In this sense, something emerges out of nothing.

Um Raum zu bewohnen braucht man Leben.

(KCH 20W)

Den hohlen Raum erleben.

(TK 20W)