

# BACHELOR REPORT

PLAYING WITH MEMORIES



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2016



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## Abstract

This report is an attempt, by words, to describe the creative process and the ideas behind my bachelor project, which has been focusing on questions about memories, identity, and playfulness.

During this process, I have worked with a playful and intuitive approach, trying to challenge myself by not having any defined destinations, and to stay as open as I can for anything that might pop up.

Grayson Perry, Katrine Køster Holst, and Martin Creed are some of the artists I have chosen to refer to in this paper. All of them are contemporary artists, working in very different manners and in diverse materials and medias.

In the end of this report I am discussing ideas and questions that has come up during this process. Hence, some of these questions remain unanswered, allows me to play around with my imagination and speculate about future work and projects.

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## Introduction

*As clay evolves by kneading and sculpting into defined shapes, so do we evolve, shaped and formed by previous experiences, into the ones we are. During time and previous experiences, we are gathering memories, which in turn, creates how we see our self, our identity.*

This was my starting point for my bachelor project, primarily to be an investigation in time, memories and identity. My aim was to show my idea of the similarity I see between how clay is being formed and the way we, as humans, are being shaped through life. But quite soon after starting out to work with this project I realized that this was not really my main focus anymore.

Something else had become more interesting for me at this stage, namely, being mindful and aware of the sculpting in itself, focusing on one sculpture at a time and not on the outcomes or the results. I tried not to think so much, be playful and spontaneous and keep an open mind and an uncontrolled approach while I was shaping the clay. This meant not planning too much in advance, no sketching or trying to get any ideas of how the sculptures would look like, but to stay as honest and open as possible for all new opportunities that might pop up.

The idea of time, memory and identity was still there but not as significant as in previous projects. I have worked with this subject before, but back then it was more focused of showing it in a more illustrative manner.

This idea came up in an installation I made of a metal construction suspended from the ceiling, a mobile, from which I hung threads and on the threads I made sculptures out of porcelain and my own hair. The installation went on for a month and during this time I was sculpting more and more and documenting the process. When the first parts made of porcelain dried, I added more and because the previous parts were so dry and fragile, some of them crumbled and fell down onto the floor.



I wanted to show memories and time, and by leaving my fingerprints and involving my own hair, show my own identity, which I believe is created by the memories and former events I have experienced. I still find this very interesting, but now I felt like I wanted to broaden my views, involve others and not be as vivid in the physical work as I have been before.

In this project I have still been working with memories but in a different way. Working in a more intuitive manner, I believe, my own memories are being transferred into the body of clay. It works in a holistic way, when sculpting the clay I am letting my fingers transfer memories into it, and in turn, by creating a new sculpture, gives me a new experience and new memories.

I tried not to be judgmental while I was building my sculptures, I wanted to see them individually for what they are and not place them in any categories. Not deciding if they are good or bad or if they work together as a group. This would come later in the process.

In the reflection, at the end of this report, I am explaining my thoughts and ideas and presenting new questions I have gathered along the way.

I see the sculpting as one part, the glazing as the second and finally the installation as the third. All of them are thoroughly described in the next chapter.

## METHOD AND PROCESS

### SCULPTING

*"I wanted to do something without knowing what I am doing."*

Martin Creed, 2015

In the beginning I was really excited about this project and started to work with the sculptures right away. At this point I was mostly focused on time, memory and identity and tried to figure out how I could express this in clay. But shortly I realized that something else was capturing my attention more. This time I decided not to plan too much, be more playful and work more intuitively.

By not planning too much, I wanted to avoid putting too high demands on my work and myself. While I was making the sculptures I wanted to be as clear in my mind as possible. I didn't want to have any ideas or make any sketches before I started, but what I really wanted to do was to keep a conversation with the clay and together, step by step, decide where we are heading. Soon I understood that it is impossible to be absolutely clear in the mind and not have any ideas at all of what I am doing. I was always one step ahead, thinking of where the next part will go.

This made me think of the Reith lectures I heard on BBC Radio 4, with the famous ceramic artist Grayson Perry. In one episode he talked about a student coming up to him after a lecture and asking him how he decided what to do his art about?

*"And I was like 'Oh ...' I said, 'Well' - and I was sort of struggling to say something - and I looked at her hand and she had her iPhone, and I said 'Well I didn't have one of those.' Because she has every image, access to all information in her hand. When I started, I had none of that and I think it's a challenge for young people today."*

Grayson Perry, 2013

I can really relate to this. The constant flow of always approachable images in my hand, scrolling and scrolling and scrolling in infinity, and constantly being overflooded of images and information have such a great impact on me. I get really fed up of all the things I have available in this small device, always within the reach of my hand. This, in turn, also makes me doubt my own making and my ability to get into the heart of my own creativity and the way I express myself in.

I did not really want to choose any specific methods in which I wanted to work in, but be spontaneous to whatever came up. By using different building techniques I have achieved diversity in scale with the different objects, which I find interesting. The combination of smaller objects together with bigger ones creates an interesting tension.

I have been using a lot of different methods like squeezing the clay in my hand, throwing it on the table so it became flat, rolling small sausages and putting them together into grids, leaving my fingerprints, smoothing out the surfaces, building forms while they were hanging on a string. The majority of the sculptures I made were coiled, a method I feel most comfortable working in.

Coiling makes me to work quite slowly, putting one coil on top of another, not knowing exactly where we are headed, the clay and I. Previously when I have been sculpting I have had a clear idea of what I am doing, the sculptures have usually been quite illustrative so it has been easier to get attached to them. Now, as I did not know how it was supposed to look like, it was hard to know when the sculpture actually was finished.

My intention was to lose myself in the making

and just transfer whatever I was thinking or not thinking about into the clay. Working intuitively feels like whatever is going on inside me at the time is, through my hands, being transferred into the clay. A couple of times I was surprised when I took a step back and looked at what I had done. It felt almost like it wasn't myself that had made the sculpture and I was surprised over how detached I felt from it.

In my project description I mentioned that I see the different clays as different individuals, almost as if they had their own personalities and identities. Different clays behave differently, some are very plastic and flexible, some are drying quickly and crack easily and some are too soft and wet and you need to give them more time to harden before you continue sculpting.

As I was working in several sorts of clays, I could clearly see a difference in how they were responding to the way in which my hands were handling them. I see this as a nonverbal conversation, the clay has its own language and however I shape and form or press, it has to get a chance to respond to it before I can go on.

There are many things and aspects that you have to take into consideration to be able to have it exactly your own way as a potter or a ceramic artist. This could be that it shrinks, first when it dries and then again in the kiln, it may crack or break, bend and deform in the firing. I was aware of this, and instead of trying to control the clay in every step, I tried to give it space and allow it to take part and let it do its own thing. I am taking one step, the clay is answering by taking another. Sometime it cracks sometime collapses. In this game this is allowed as long as we communicate with each other along the way.

I left all the cracks without repairing or smoothing them out to show the conversation I had with the clay. I see them more as a response I get from the clay rather than a failure or a mistake. Whatever the clay does on its own, whether it is cracking, breaking or getting deformed in the firing, I see as a part of our interaction and, a memory of the time when it was created.

Clay has an ability to capture memories and save them within the shard. A moment gets

captured in the clay and as it dries and then fires in the kiln the memory stays embedded within the body of clay. An example of this is that sometimes, when a potter throws cups and then puts handles on, at a first sight, it looks perfectly straight, but after the firing it comes out completely off centre. This happens because the clay, which has been spinning around on the potter's wheel, has been forced into a spiral form. When the clay dries and is fired, it slowly turns backwards in the direction it was turned, and the handle gets slightly skewed.

This is the first time I am working in this intuitive way and, at first, it felt odd not planning anything and basically not knowing what I was doing. But then I thought, no matter what I make, it would certainly become something. I did not want to be judgmental and decide if the sculpture is good or bad, that did not matter. The important aspect was the process of sculpting and not the finished pieces in themselves.

In a way, this project became an investigation in trying to make something from within. Trying not to be controlled by other things around me, like, what I think, other people want to see. As I didn't even want to be affected by the sculptures I had already done, I put them away so I could not see them while I was staring out with a new one. However, this turned out to be very difficult. We have already so much images in our minds, and it is impossible not to get affected by them. By constantly being bombarded with images makes it very hard to "shut off" your brain and work straightforward.

During this process and looking into the way of working intuitively made me think about the way in which children play. I can vividly remember the horror I felt when I realized, after a summer break in primary school that I had lost my ability to play. It was almost as if a door, to this magical world, had closed itself behind me. I couldn't lose myself anymore, pretend and, above all, really believe that the two chairs with a blanked over, was really a magical cave. I remember it being very confusing, and the feeling of being lost.

Then, came the time of being a teenager and growing up and the last thing I wanted, at that time,

was to be childish and playful. But then again, a few years later, I started to realise that I actually was really missing that place. I wanted to find a way in into Play-sphere again. And I think, in this process I have started to slowly, slowly find something similar. Grayson Perry, in the BBC 4 lectures, talks about the same thing in a very interesting way. He talks about himself and finding out that he cannot loose himself in the playing anymore and he also mentions a quote of Pablo Picasso.

*“But ironically, about the same time as I made that decision to become an artist, I lost my ability to play. And I can remember almost to the day, my brothers had left some of their toy cars... my younger brothers left some of their toy cars out and I can remember trying to play with them and I couldn't lose myself in the game anymore. When I was younger, I used to have very elaborate games and I would, you know like children do, they sort of whisper under their breath, “... and then the aeroplane flies over and then teddy rescues ...” I couldn't do that anymore and it was quite a shock to me. I'd lost that ability to lose myself.”*

*“And perhaps the most famous quote about becoming an artist is from Pablo Picasso and he said, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.” And I think what he's trying to say is that you know a child has this unselfconscious joy of creativity and they're always playing and painting and making things without a thought in the world, and then as we get older of course we become aware of art history and that what we're not doing might not be very good and so it makes it harder and harder and harder as we get older. That self-consciousness is crippling.”*

Grayson Perry, 2013

Thinking about play and keeping a playful approach in my work and also having fun while making, led me to think about the fact that play is not always fun. I think playing for children can almost be a therapeutic way of dealing with all kinds of things, whether it is a fun thing or a rather more serious thing. I remember playing with my classmates' one particular game, which was about us being orphans, running away from the orphanage into the woods and living there with our horses. Back then it was a fun game but thinking of it now, from an adult's perspective,

in a more rational way, it seems rather serious. I tried to keep this in mind while I was making my sculptures because it was not always fun. Sometime I did not feel anything and sometimes I even got pissed off while I was sculpting.

Somewhere halfway through the process I got stuck and started to questioning my idea. I thought I could keep this playful and spontaneous approach all the way through sculpting to glazing and finally playing around with the fired, finished pieces. When I was sculpting this approach worked, even though it was hard and an element of planning of the next move was inevitable. At first, this intuitive way of working felt really playful and fun. But ironically, trying not to put any demands on my work and myself and being intuitive became a demand in itself. And after a while came the question why, and with it, other questions like:

What am I actually doing?

Is there any sense of making these abstract objects?

Further on came questions like:

Should I fire them or just leave them raw?

Is there a point of not firing them?

Is there a point of being able to destroy them afterwards and recycle the clay?

But then, what is the point of making them at all?

And if I fire them, why would I do so?

And then came also the question:

What the fuck am I doing?

Why am I playing around with clay when there are a lot of better things to do in this world!

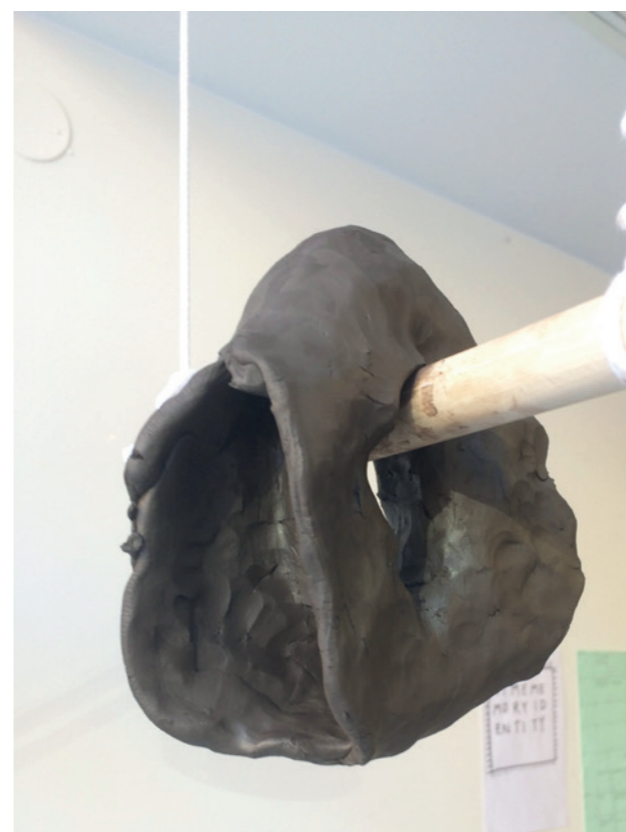
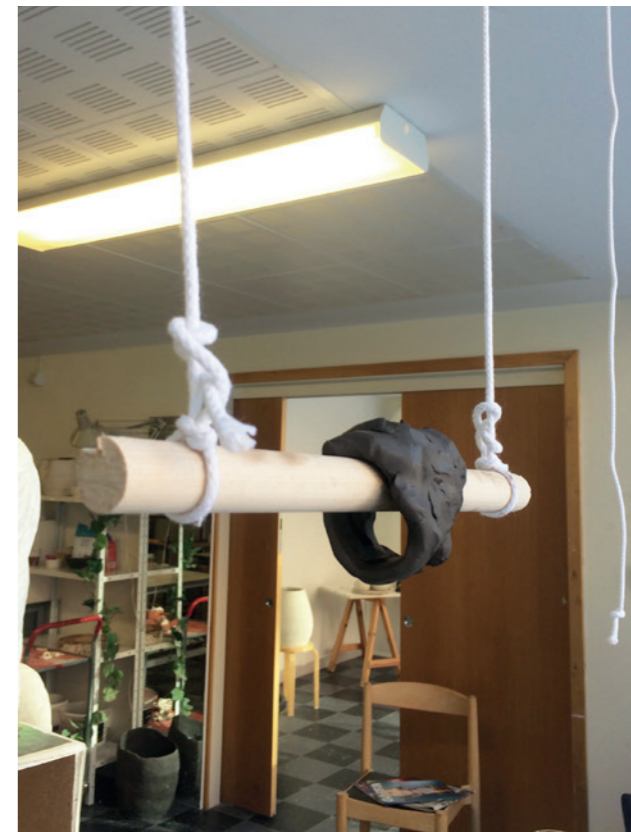
*“Playing is an important thing because you know you've got to kind of let yourself go to be creative and you've got to allow the ridiculous things to happen. You know one of my favourite quotes about creativity is from Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, and he [Robert M. Pirsigs] says ideas are like little furry creatures coming out of the undergrowth, you know, and you've got to be nice to the first one. So you've got to kind of play and be a bit ridiculous and be non-judgmental about it and just sort of like oh, this is such fun; and then suddenly that ridiculous idea that you're having, that's like your next ten years of really serious money making work.”*

Grayson Perry, 2013

I thought a lot about the question whether to leave the sculptures raw, to be able to destroy them and recycle the clay or if I should fire them. As in this project the main idea was to concentrate and be aware in the process of the making and the finished sculptures were not supposed to get any specific values, I thought I might as well leave them raw. I would still have been able to show the result and show what came out of this way of working, and because they were more of a by-product, I thought that I should not be focusing on them anymore.

At this point I decided to take a brake from sculpting as I got stuck and I felt like there was not really any point of doing anything. I am totally aware of the fact that this is a common part of my process, so I thought I would change the environment for a while and keep myself busy with something else.





Different coiled sculptures in the making. The two last ones, on the right, was an attempt to built something while it was hanging. Unfortunately I was a little too eager and was building them too fast so they collapsed.



Bisque fired sculptures waiting for my next move.



## Glazing

After having all these thoughts and after I had made several sculptures I started to be critical. I realised I had, after all, developed a certain attachment to the sculptures, maybe not so much individually but more as a group, which led me to the decision of glazing them.

Now they were not just by-products anymore, they had also become a result of a specific way of working and, during time, I had developed an affiliation for them and they became precious to me. They were, after all, loaded with memories I had transferred into them.

I had a tutorial with one of my tutors, David Carlsson, where we discussed how I could go about the glazing. As I still wanted to keep a spontaneous approach and play around, he suggested that I should try to work with the glazes in a similar way to the way they were built. Perhaps I could use them as glaze-tests? Not having any ideas of what will happen, not planning anything, not taking it so seriously. If the focus was on the process and way of working and not on the result, why not just go crazy and mix random materials in the glazes and see what would happen?

I did not like this idea. It made me scared.

What if I do not like the outcome?

What if they do not look nice?

It became very clear to me that I did not want to spoil my sculptures. I realised that here came a different side of myself up to the surface, I started to be judgemental and more controlled. But I thought, that's okay. I had decided to listen to whatever came up and this was also a way of being spontaneous. At this stage I decided to make glaze tests of different glazes and then experiment with them and work by putting two or three layers of different glazes on top of each other and letting them merge even more in the kiln.

Glazes are made of mixes of different amounts of materials such as, oxides, feldspars and alumina. Depending on the different quantities of the materials, the temperatures in the kiln and the body of clay it is applied on, the result differs a lot. By applying different glazes on top of each other, allows them to mix even more during the firing and the outcome might be completely different from the way, either of them, would look like on their own.

I mixed around fifteen glazes and then made experiments with them by applying them on top of each other. Some of them turned out terrible and some of them I was really happy with. As the glaze-tests are very small and an unfired glaze looks completely different from the fired result, it is hard to anticipate how they are going to look like in a bigger scale. It is like peeping through a keyhole and catching a little glimpse of something, never really knowing how they will turn out.

I choose some of them and started to glaze my sculptures. Having a palette of colours and glazes made me feel more confident. I still didn't have a complete idea of how they would turned out, but the small glaze tests I made gave me some kind of idea. Some of the sculptures have different glazes on the inside and different glazes on the outside and by having these small tests I could easier imagine which colours might go well with each other. What interests me, when I make glazes, are the different surfaces they get when they are fired. Matte glazes are definitely what I prefer or the combination between matte glazes with a shiny detail.

At first, I thought, I would not like to make glazes, as I usually struggle with numbers, and when you are making a glaze you have to follow a recipe and measure the proportions very precisely. But this time I actually enjoyed it. Applying several layers of different glazes on top of each other, stacking them in the kiln and waiting to open it and see the results, were almost unbearable. It is hard to describe the excitement. Some

ceramic artist compare it to the excitement you feel before opening Christmas presents, but for me it is something else, something much bigger. The excitement when I open the kiln is usually so massive that I almost cannot stand up straight, but after looking inside the kiln, almost every time, the feeling of excitement immediately switches to disappointment. It is really funny that I still feel this way after all these years of working with ceramics.

Usually after putting my pieces away for a day or two, I tend to change my mind and I start to like them. But it happens that some of them I choose to re-fire. It can be because I feel that the layer of the glaze is too thin or I want to add one more glaze on top. Some sculptures has been re-fired three or four times.

As I mentioned earlier, in this process I have been working with several different clays. I have used white stoneware and a mix of different white stoneware clays I had since before. Some pieces are made in black stoneware I had mixed with a glaze. Then I have also been working in terracotta and black earthenware. The two mentioned in the end are so beautiful just on their own, without any glaze, so I have only glazed some details on them with a shiny transparent glaze.

Taking my sculptures out of the kiln made me realise that I had manage, completely unconsciously, to create a really appealing scale of colours and a quite pleasant group of objects. Now came the time for the third part of this project, playing around with the pieces and compiling them together in different constellation.



Glaze tests on different clays



GLAZURE

A1, TBT med barium  
 A2, 309 + 170  
 A3, 170 + 309  
 A4, 112 + 79  
 A5, 79 + 112 + 112  
 A6, 170 + 112  
 A7, 170 + 170  
 A8, DICK + DICK  
 A9, DICK + DICK  
 A10, 309 + 170  
 A11, 309 + DICK  
 A12, 79 + 112 + 112  
 A13, 101 + 112  
 A14, DICK + DICK + 309  
 A15, TBT + DICK  
 A16, 79 + 101  
 A17, 79 + 112 + 112  
 A18, DICK + 79 + 112  
 A19, TBT + TBT + sul  
 A20, 321 + DICK  
 A21, 79 + 112 + 112  
 A22, 321 + TBT

Glaze-tests and a notebook



Packing the kiln with some of the objects I made. On these two pictures you can see some kiln-stands I made out of clay and a kanthal wire to avoid the sculptures from getting stuck onto the kiln shelves.





## Installation

The third part of this project is an installation. Even though I did not want to plan anything and tried to be open for whatever could come up during this process, I had the idea of assembling all the pieces in the end into an installation. All the different components would create a whole composition.

In this part, I feel, the possibility of being playful and spontaneous is almost unlimited. I see the different colourful parts as toys, which can be stuck upon each other, suspended from the ceiling and tied together. Playing around and putting them up together, I see almost as a collage in 3D. The possibilities are really boundless.

In the firing some of the sculptures got stuck together, something I would normally see as a failure, but in this case, as I see this process as a conversation with the clay, I saw this as a way of the clay doing something on its own and responding to my previous actions. Two of the big ones got stuck and were almost tipping over. In my last tutorial with my tutor Britt Ignell Karlbrand, we came up with the idea to make a little plinth for one of them so that they could stand straighter. This was my answer to the sculptures and to their naughty behaviour in the kiln. As in the end of the day, I have the last word. I decide how they are going to be presented, whether they like it or not!

For this part of the project, I have been thinking a lot of the way in which one of our previous guest teachers, Katrine Køster Holst, is working in. In the end of the first year we had a course with her that was all about the process in it self, rather than the outcomes. We were working with clay outdoors in

the forest and the main purpose of it was to document the whole process and later use the material for an exhibition. This was an interesting way of working and made me understand that, for me, the process in itself is really the main part of making anything.

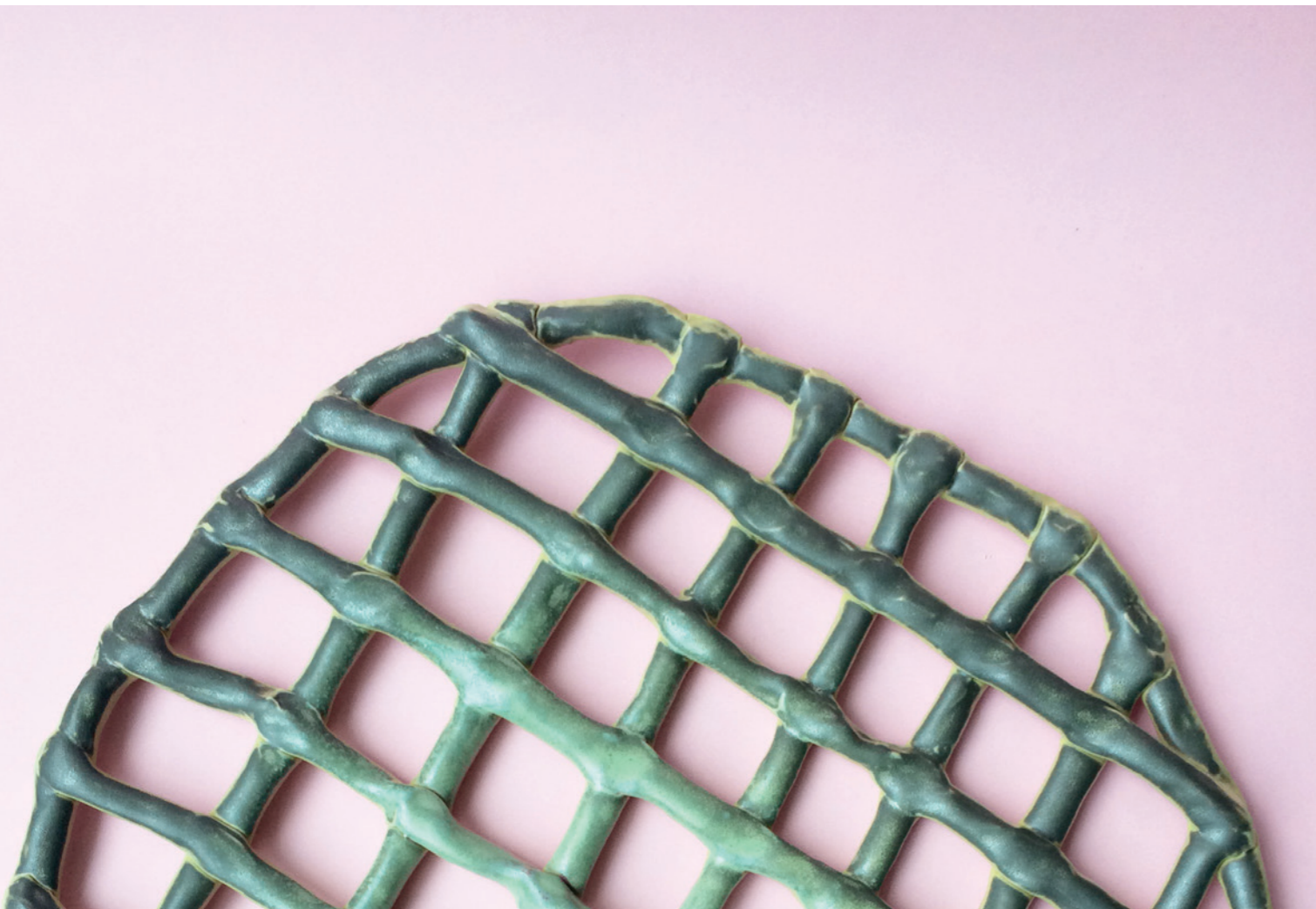
Ever since I started out with this project, the idea of working towards an installation was there. I have played around with the different pieces taking pictures and rearranging them into different constellations, trying to figure out whatever works best.

For the examination, I have thought of showing all of them, arranged on one big plinth, to show the variety of the objects and the whole group of them together. Here it is important for me to show the process. I want to show them as a result of a way of working, a memory if you like, or even as individual memories, which together creates a whole image, an identity. For the exhibition I might want to do a selection, as I think they look better when they are not so crowded and there is more space between them.

*"What you put into work is not necessarily what people get out of it"*

Martin Creed, 2015

By this quote, by Martin Creed, a fine artist based in London, said during a lecture at Public Art Fund Talks at The New School, I want to emphasize that my process and the thoughts around it are not necessarily anything I want to show in the exhibition. My title and a short description of the work may direct the viewers in a certain direction, but what I would like is for people to feel free, associate and interpret my sculptures by themselves, perhaps based on their own previous experiences and memories.





## Reflection

How did it feel to work in this more intuitive way? By setting up a plan *not* to plan anything has come with mixed emotions. But I have felt more relaxed and not as stressed as I usually do.

I knew I had a certain amount of time for this project and I have managed to fit everything, even with a small margin in case I had to re-fire something and build plinths. During this process I have gone through different phases, sometime being on top and sometime down at the very bottom. Overall, I feel like I have gained a clearer idea of how my creative process works and how to deal with different dilemmas. There is always this part in my process when I meet obstacles, and start to question everything I have done so far.

One thing that has been particularly hard was that I felt afraid of messing something up, most of all, when I was glazing. But then I realised that if I let myself be stopped by this and not take the risk, it won't be fun and spontaneous, which essentially, was my main concern in this project.

By taking the risk, all sorts of things are possible. Britt Ignell Karlbrand said that things that are impossible in real life, become very real by drawing or sculpting. It is possible to achieve incredibly silly things and it is a huge relief to loose yourself in it and play around and be ridiculous.

Most days, I actually felt like I trusted myself, I knew it would become something, I just did not know what. But this also made it more interesting and exciting, because without knowing where I was heading and without having a clear image of it in my head, it stayed a surprise for me until the very end. But even though I felt much more stress-free during this time, some days, felt awfully uncomfortable not having control and not knowing exactly where I was going.

Is there any point of making abstract art? Is there really any meaning of sitting in a studio and producing more stuff in this world?

I thought a lot about this and came to a conclusion

that it is not about producing things but rather taking my right to enjoy the creative process of making. I have a right to loose the pretensions and to loose myself and play in any way I want!

I love working in clay and the fact that it gives me a bodily experience. It is as if the sculptures I make out of clay, reminds me of the fact that I have a body too. Sometimes, when I loose myself in the sculpting, I almost feel like we get a mutual body, I become one with the material. It is a physical experience on a bodily level. Whatever I am trying to express, goes through my hands and into the body of clay.

It becomes this conversation I have mentioned earlier, a communication with the clay. I form and shape the clay in one way, and give it time and listen to the response it is giving me. Afterwards I can go on and make my next move.

I believe that art has a language of its own. A clash occurs between letting clay talk for itself and trying to explain it with words in a report. I feel like the clay has a language of its own, it speaks for itself, in relation to the text. This report is more meant to speak about the process and the ideas around my project and the artefacts speak for themselves.

Mårten Medbo, a ceramic artist based in Sweden, made an allegory where he compared an explanation with words of an artwork to someone telling a funny story and then immediately explaining it. By doing so, the story is losing the whole point and so is art if you are trying to explain it with words. And the same applies to when someone asks you what you are trying to say with your art. Well, if you could explain it with words, there wouldn't be any reason of making it?

Talking about languages made me think of the massive impact language has on our personalities and identities. Our personalities are expressed



in the way we talk. Not mentioning our body languages. I have recently experienced what a great influence our language has on us, by moving to another country. Last year I moved for a year to Cardiff in Wales and, at first, struggled a lot with the English language. But even though I made myself understood, I felt, as I was a completely different person. Dry and without humour, compared to the way in which I express myself in Swedish. I think my body language helped me out a lot.

By saying that art is its own language makes me realise that this process has also been a searching for my own identity as an artist and my own way of telling something with clay. And here comes the question again, about what is purely my way to create something and how much I am affected by all the images surrounding me?

The work I make currently has a certain meaning for me now, but in 6 months or in 10 years time I will have a different perspective and, perhaps, see other aspects of it. I do not see this project individually; it is a small part, a link in a much longer chain in a life long process. Everything is linked, what I do in the studio is being influenced by my life outside of it and the other way around. Later on I will be able to look back on this and see in what way this is connected to the comprehensive image of something much bigger than just a bachelor degree.

Many of the questions that came up during this process I have not found any answers to. What I have found out though, is that working in an intuitive manner has helped me not to get as worked up and stressed out by the pretensions and demands I usually put on myself. When I am trying to control everything and decide too much, something in the process of the making dies. By allowing the material to communicate with me, not planning too much and be open for whatever might happen, made me find something I will definitely take with me further on. This applies on the way I work creatively in with clay, as much as it applies on my everyday life.

During this process I have learned to trust in my own ability to work but also in general to keep a playful, more relaxed approach and remember that I cannot really predict anything. It will be what it will be and the most important thing is the awareness and the intention during the process itself.

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