Clay Bodies as a Space for Habituation: Can Building Habituation Structures Relieve Displacement?

The tension of contemporary life exists as a paradox: in an era of increasing migration, both forced and chosen, we are at once radically global and yet culturally divided. My research question investigates whether clay bodies, habituated structures and ritualistic actions can function as a coping mechanism for global migratory displacement. To fulfill this, my research implements methodological approaches inspired by divergent concepts of nativity and otherness. Only clay extracted from the territory of a piece's exhibition is used. My work affords my material the opportunity to be viewed and molded within its own territorial context. Ritualistic action supplements these aims, with the goal of positively amending the environment where my work is displayed. Further removing barriers between artist and audience, executing a public, participatory function, I strive to design a new system artistic investigation and intervention.

My research begins with testing local, English clay in my studio. After developing a better working understanding of the material's composition, I can begin making the habituated clay structures themselves in the most effective and technically sound way. Testing English clay will be an extensive process, one which will build fluency with my principal material. The testing phase will be divided into two distinct segments: one based on technical and scientific material testings and the other more subjectively artistic and emotional gauging. The clay's plasticity, moisture levels and temperature requirements when firing are tested, so to achieve the best hold. Microscopic evaluations are will be conducted to determine the chemical makeup of the principal material.

Furthermore, the very use of local clay helps to assemble my research methodology in a philosophical sense. Personally inhabiting the role of immigrant demonstrates the need for habituation, along with a need to attain the familiar within the unfamiliar. Using local materials helps to overcome these distinctions, and allows artistic practice to appropriately synthesize with artistic reception. Clay itself is of the earth, our elemental home. It adheres, yet it can be broken apart. In this way, the very material used acts symbolically as displacement, and simultaneously, its solution. Doing this allows me to leave my personal imprint in a place once alien to me. Understanding these points is crucial to my research and its methodological implementation.

A significant public element informs my methodology, also, as does cultural relevancy. Not only does my methodology require me to extract material from public spaces, it also sees me conduct preliminary degrees of testing in public, as well. Eventually, when the pieces are finished, the participation of viewers concludes this the execution of making art through publicly-centered
ideals. My work is exhibited and shared with immigrant communities, uniting audiences in a common experience of displacement.

I invite my viewers to engage their own senses of foreignness, when encountering my work. I design my work to perform as a method of public service, delivered through my own Korean cultural frame of reference. These habituated structures afford viewers opportunity to engage with new identities, while cloaked in the dust of their own memories. In these ways, I seek to utilize not only the public function of art, but to uncover and make possible a bidirectional relationship between the artist and public sphere. To date, my habituated clay structures have reflected my own process of overcoming cultural isolation, yet I am eager to extend the same benefits I have received through sculpture to others experiencing displacement. At first, this arises as an isolated exercise. My pieces are designed to provide private spaces of reflection for individuals. Yet, the act of secluding oneself within the clay structure built from the very materials of a new territory, helps situate displaced individuals in conversation with that territory. Moreover, adapting the actions of Korean rituals for the purpose of using clay also places me in conversation with whatever land I now find myself in and artistically operating on.

In order to execute my research thoroughly, I will institute research benchmarks, evaluative tools, and scholarship, extending my artistic goals into academic and political discourse. Scholarship related to displacement will factor in my methodology and framing of results. Maurice Merleau Ponty’s work, namely the “Phenomenology of Perception” (1945), continues to inform my research interests. Considering how one is positioned against unfamiliar, external environments, Ponty’s commentary that “nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but, on the contrary, because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world.

Once testing is completed, I will be ready to make and install my primary work(s). The habituated structures will be displayed in both galleries and spaces provided by the university. Additionally, I will be conducting workshops inspired by my installations for the educational and artistic benefit of third culture person. While completing my work in London, my research will continue to be advanced and contextualized with the completion of additional international residencies, by replicating these research practices and methodologies done here in London. This affords me the opportunity to continue sharpen methods and exploring themes of cultural displacement on a global scale.