

William Cobbing: Dialogues with Clay

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Clay is one of the oldest materials used in the production of art, although this does not prevent some from regarding it as extremely contemporary.¹ According to art historian Monika Wagner, this material, which is produced by the erosion of feldspathic rock, is a modest substance that exists in countless colours and consistencies.² Earth in general is taken for granted to such an extent that in the everyday sphere it makes little impression on our consciousness; yet in the urban space it appears on streets and squares on a daily basis in the form of dirt.³ Unfired clay, which will be the focus here, has its own status among the arts. It is found in many parts of the world, and when combined with water creates a supple, malleable substance. This material, as the architect and art theoretician Gottfried Semper put it in 1863, could in its protean plasticity be described as the *Urstoff* of artistic creation.⁴ Clay can be moulded with hands, feet and any other body part; equally it can be poured into casts. As art historians Georges Didi-Huberman and Dietmar Rübel have shown, this plasticity should be understood here in all its ambivalence. Derived from the Greek *plássein*, this word literally indicates the formability of a material used in a work of art. At the same time, it signifies a lack of solidity, a flexibility, and the polymorphous ability of a material to be reworked again and again as long as it does not dry out,⁵ as Rübel writes: ‘This is the moment when materiality becomes an event and obtains its own conceptuality. In short materiality is intended for consumption, for being used up, and in spite of this – or precisely because of this – it becomes a disrupting remnant’.⁶

Social Substances

This quality is highlighted in William Cobbing’s œuvre and especially in his *Social Substance* cycle (2023) consisting of seven films – *A Mess oʻ Help* (p. 10), *Slap & Tickle* (pp. 30–31), *Phantom Limb* (pp. 32–33), *Stuck in the Middle* (pp. 34–35), *dumbmud* (pp. 36–37), *The New Flesh* (pp. 38–39), *on and on* (pp. 40–41) – as well as a live performance called *So You* (pp. 96–97), where the artist used clay to model portraits of participants blind. Cobbing has been following his chosen material in its many variants for a long time, and it is his aim ‘to throw clay back into the world again’.⁷ For his activities the artist works with shop-bought, cheap fine clays; one can spot grey, brown, pink or yellow variants: ‘They are often a mix of different types and colours of clay – I don’t have to be precise about the purity of their ingredients as they don’t have to be fired in the kiln. I have a few buckets of this wet clay in my studio, and I just add in recycled clay when I get it, and return the clay back to the bucket after each video/performance’.⁸



Fig. 1. William Cobbing, *Desiccare*, 2011, video



Fig. 2. William Cobbing, *Exsiccare*, 2011, video