

Hyperlocal Materialism

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For a long time, we've been working in parallel ways in our studios, separated both by medium and by distance (Nicole in Los Angeles and Kate in Chicago until a recent move to Southeast Ohio). While our materials are different, we share a deep interest in the unique properties and locational identities of those materials, and so what began as a conversation about our individual approaches of foraging for materials has become a collaborative practice where we share both our material knowledge and our sense of place with each other through the materials we find locally.



Coal fallen from train cars leaving Buckingham Coal Mines, the last operational coal mine in Southeast Ohio

KH: Hyperlocal Materialism is the idea grounding this work—it's a form of hyper-site-specificity, in which locally-sourced materials inform the process and practice of making. We're approaching our collaborative work from this perspective, with a project that brings together our two very different practices—both interdisciplinary and invested in materiality. Working together, we're able to reconsider our materials in order to bring in the performativity and the site-specificity of being here now.

What we're proposing is an aesthetic of place that goes beyond the current ethos of material studies, where materials and objects might typically be understood through their making, their use value, their historicity, and their associations with particular markers of identity such as race, gender, class. In all of these ways, materials are necessarily political.



Collecting peppercorns from a tree on Kinney Street, Los Angeles

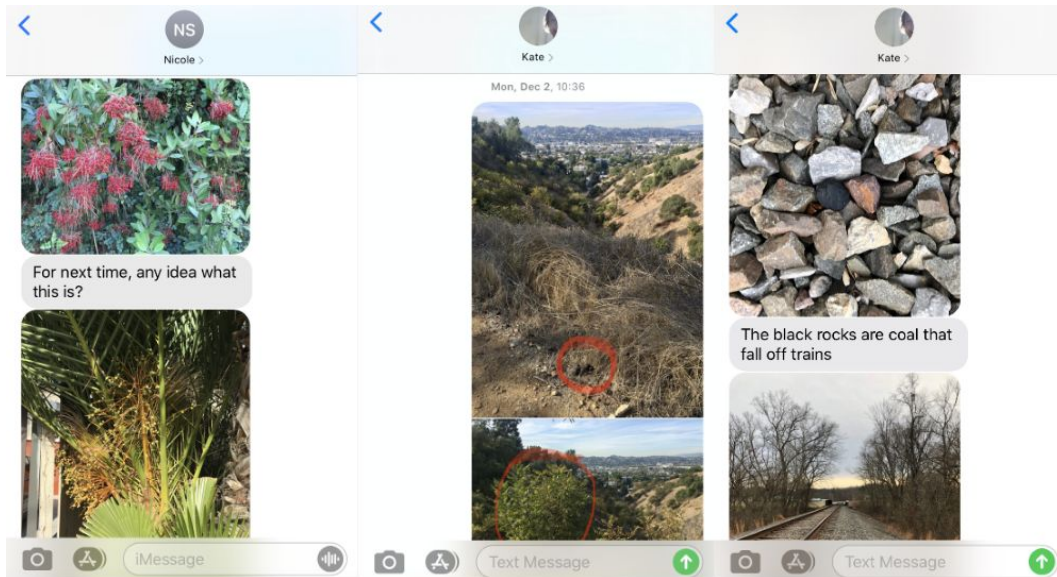
Place, and our travel through it, is also political, and so we propose that questions of sourcing—which may include proximity, accessibility, seasonality, abundance, lack of preciousness, etc.—be understood as another essential component of materiality, bridging the gap between material studies and site-specific art.

Lucy Lippard talks about this in the context of site-specific installations and public art. In her 1997 book *The Lure of the Local*, and I love how neatly it dovetails with what we've been thinking:

“Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.”¹

This reads, to my materialist sensibilities, much like the way artists in our fields talk about their materials. Certainly place can be context, content, and material, but in developing our collaborative project our question has been: how can this align with a materials-based object-making practice? The answer we are currently working through is to let place-based materials lead the way.

NS: We are investigating this through a mutual exchange, where we go for walks in our neighborhoods to forage materials that we don't have access to in our own locations (Los Angeles and Appalachian Ohio), and then mail these materials to each other. This more deeply connects us to our own places and bridges us into each other's neighborhoods. We are able to transform each other's materials, and thus each other's localities, in ways that we individually could not.



The immediacy of shared material knowledge

Through this process, we ask: How can the hyperlocal be a way of sharing experience across distance? How can the hyperlocal enhance and expand connections beyond our primary locations and into a global realm?

Kate has been sending me local clay bodies that I have added to my collection of foraged clays (I keep ziploc bags in my car just in case I encounter clay in my travels). I have filtered these clay bodies, removing organic material like rocks and sand, in order to make the clay more homogenous and more workable, and begun testing their firing ranges.



Local clay bodies (filtered and wedged)

*Top row: Mills College, Oakland, CA; El Sereno, Los Angeles, CA; Glouster, OH; Chicago, IL
Bottom row: Seattle, WA; Joshua Tree, CA; Glassell Park, Los Angeles, CA; West Side, Oahu, HI*

The elements that I filter out of the clay are equally as important in terms of forming an understanding of and connection to place. The relationship between the maker and material may change when there is less material with which to contend and the clay body becomes more familiar. Localities are rarely homogenous, so why should a clay body be? Why favor the familiar workability of the material over the experience of navigating its complexities?



Non-clay materials filtered out of local clay bodies

Ultimately, I am using these local clays to make small pieces of text that will become part of a large Venn diagram about the ways in which we locate ourselves. How do the places we live and work shape our sense of self; how do we come to know more about ourselves and each other; how is this understanding transferred through material? The text that I stamp into the clay bodies is based upon the physical experience of the material, personal and imagined memories, assumptions, and guesses. Working with a clay body that I dug myself is different than using one from a place that is otherwise anonymous to me.



Before and after firing local clay samples from California, Ohio, Illinois, and Hawaii

The clay that Kate foraged for me has a high level of plasticity. After working with it in my studio, I drove home, and as I exited the highway and placed my foot on the brake pedal, I had the overwhelming sensation that the resistance of the pedal was the same as the resistance of that Ohio clay body. This leads to a primary question: Is it possible to have an embodied experience of a place through a clay body?

KH: I've also been working with site-specific and found materials for some time, from bricks collected from demolition sites in Chicago, to foraged and seasonal natural dye materials that I tend to collect wherever I happen to be (like Nicole, I often carry bags with me to collect odds and ends). Through the process of gathering, meandering walks through the local landscape have become part of my practice.

In addition to dyestuff I've been fascinated by the objects I've found in the woods—there's an element of anthropological investigation into often-unknowable old parts, rusted-out bits of metal, household items no longer useful to the people who once lived here.

Miwon Kwon has written extensively on site-specificity, and in *One Place After Another* she outlines the dematerialization and deaestheticization of site-specific work from the 1970s on.² I would actually say through this practice I am re-materializing the site and bringing to life its tangible, sensual qualities. I wouldn't go so far as to say I am re-aestheticizing it, though, as one of the key elements of relying on found and foraged local materials is that I give up some of my control.



I'm following the materials, and following the local, by letting them dictate some of the formal qualities of the work. The most obvious of these is colour. I've found since focusing on natural dyes and specifically those that I can find and collect around me that much of the resulting colour palette is a lovely sort of cosmic beige—also known as Big Bang Beige or Cosmic Latte, the average colour of the universe. I actually don't consider this a limitation, as for me locally-foraged materials are not a means to an end but an end in and of themselves. The significance the dye colour has in my work is that it's particular to place and time, and to bodies moving through space.

The work includes ropes made from cotton t-shirts that I've purchased at local yard sales and thrift stores, that are cut into strips, dyed, and replied. The shirts are another way I both rely on the local and allow the materials to lead the way, as they embody the lived experience of my community and neighbours, and also bring their own chemical makeup to the process of dyeing. You'll see in some of the later images of student projects that wool yarn tends to take dyes much more readily, while the cotton takes colour much more subtly. In looking at the ropes side by side you see the shifts in tone between the one dyed with black walnuts and the one dyed with peppercorns from Los Angeles. The walnut harvest in Southeast Ohio was epic last fall, by the way; it really turned into a family affair.



These ideas of local sourcing are carried through in my teaching, particularly in Foundations classes as I work with students to think about ways of representing place and space in abstract or performative ways. Here you'll see that wool yarn, and the drastic difference between the black walnut dye on the right and the dye you see coming through on the cotton rope.



*Foundations student exercise: Colours of College Green
(L to R) Sycamore bark, horse chestnuts (buckeyes), red oak acorns, black walnuts*

Student projects have taken this idea in a few different directions, from the student who collected rocks from significant sites to delineate a route that she frequently traveled, to the one who pulled mud for handprints from the local river polluted with acid mine drainage. It's been really exciting to see how these ideas percolate through student practices as they consider their own movement through space.



Foundations student projects considering the local as a source material

NS: These material concerns are central to my ceramics courses as well. In the *Clay & The Practice of Walking* course that I developed at Scripps College, clay and walking are used as a means to make work *in, about,* and *of* public space. The first assignment in this course is Urban Glaze Foraging, where students are asked to make a ceramic object that could be both a tool for collecting as well as a complete sculpture upon firing. We went for walks in Claremont, CA in search of materials that could become a surface treatment or might be capable of acting like a glaze. Everything from metals, glass, pottery shards, and trash were collected.



This created an atmosphere in the kiln that covered the tools/ sculptures in an ashen sheen that alluded to ubiquity, concealing, and revealing. Some students refired their work, resulting in apparently irreplicable results—one blue and white pottery shard that became solid grey in the communal gas firing surprisingly returned to its original blue and white decorative state in a subsequent oxidation firing.



Even when a material is not locally-sourced, it can serve as a conduit to a particular place, an absorber of the local. For an exercise called Functional Site, students used particular sites as the primary tool for making functional forms. This exercise prompts the question, is it possible to access the experience of a place through an object that is directly crafted by that place?



Orange Tree as tool for making a juicer

I ask this same question in my own work, and particularly in the project Hand Pressed Souvenirs, where I use customized field kits to bring blocks of wet porcelain on walks throughout cities and neighborhoods where participants make impressions of architectural details that they feel visually, culturally, and personally define a place. The resulting porcelain objects capture fine-grained details of architecture and design on one side while preserving the lines and marks of the hand that produced it on the other. The space between people and place is literally embodied by the raw clay and, once fired, it is permanently solidified. The growing collection of Hand Pressed Souvenirs maps our global cities and spaces through personal connections, stories, and memories.



In an exhibition format, the experience of this work may be more visceral if it encompasses narrative, images, history, data, etc., but can the material itself be the most powerful conveyor of an experience when the body cannot be present for the primary event? Can the material alone embody an experience? This question is important for viewers as they fit their hand into someone else's hand, wondering who made a particular souvenir and why they chose that detail.



I have the strong belief that clay can absorb everything--we mark it and in turn we are marked by it. But I also recognize that doesn't necessarily suffice to convey the full story of the Hand Pressed Souvenir, the details of a person's choice.



PARTICIPANT NAME: ALEX MEED

LOCATION DESCRIPTION: ¹⁰⁴⁰ Folsom (1) ST.

TIME & DATE: JUN 10 2017 17:58

PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE: I'm pretty obsessed with politics & government, and wanted to capture something related to that. I saw the 1040 building number and instantly thought of the IRS tax return form, a visible manifestation of our government or work. I ~~wasn't~~ wasn't able to capture all or was most of the sign (only a 0, a 4, and a corner of the other 0) due to the relative size of the block and the number. I think that's fitting, given how hard it is for one person to comprehend our full org code. I placed the stamp on the first to mimic tax paperwork.

I have been relying upon story-telling and writing to augment the experience, but what if this project became more hyperlocal? The porcelain is excellent for capturing crisp detail and for acting as a blank substrate into which impressions and local materials can be fixed; but perhaps a local clay body, if unfiltered and not worked into something more homogenous, would be capable of conveying more. Would this deepen the experience of the maker, the participant, and/or the viewer?

Again, we ask: Can sharing hyperlocal materiality share an embodied experience? Locally-sourced materials might serve as—bear with us—haptic hyperlinks between our locations, broadening the possibility for connection and understanding of each other and our places.

¹ Lippard, Lucy R., *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 2007, 7).

² Kwon, Miwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 24–26.