

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Westminster		
Unit of Assessment: 32 Art and Design: Theory, History & Practice		
Title of case study: Ceramics in the Expanded Field: Ceramics Research Centre UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2000 – December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by UoW:
Phoebe Cummings	Research Associate	03/2017 +
Tessa Peters	Senior Lecturer	09/2010 +
Professor Clare Twomey	Professor of Art Practice	09/2005 +
Professor Christie Brown	Emerita Professor of Ceramics	1993-2016; Emerita 08/2016+
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Since the late 1990s, the work of the Ceramics Research Centre-UK (CRC-UK) at CREAM has been central to the re-evaluation of the position of ceramics in contemporary art and museum culture. The members' practice-based and theoretical investigations of ceramic installation and the associated dialogues around museum intervention, curatorial practice and audience engagement have had an impact on gallery and museum policy, generated new ways of thinking, created new forms of artistic expression that have had influence beyond the academy and increased public engagement with contemporary ceramics. Specific recent impacts include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing the Tate Exchange's approach to public participation, to the benefit of the institution and its associates. • Transforming the curatorial strategies of major art institutions to the benefit of visitors and emerging ceramics artists. • Diversifying the audiences for craft-based arts, through raising the mainstream media profile of such arts and through direct engagement with underserved communities. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Established by Christie Brown and Edmund de Waal in the late 1990s, CREAM's Ceramics Research Centre has produced an original body of work – both written and practice-based – that has challenged the position of ceramic practice within the wider visual arts, leading, through a cumulative process, to new understandings of ceramics and ceramic installation. The CRC-UK's AHRC-funded project <i>Behind the Scenes at the Museum: Ceramics in the Expanded Field</i> (2011-14) built directly on this legacy, asking how historic museum collections could be animated through interventions by contemporary ceramics artists. Through publications and research-based artwork for exhibitions worldwide, the project explored new forms of cultural engagement, and demonstrated the pluralism and contingency of this area of ceramic practice and its imbrication with other forms of artistic and social practice. Its detailed research findings are published in <i>Contemporary Clay and Museum Culture</i> (2016), a collection of essays edited by Brown, Clare Twomey and Julian Stair (Principal Research Fellow at UoW; 2012-14) [1]. The AHRC project laid the groundwork for the CRC-UK's more recent research into participatory, site- and time-based ceramic practice. The following outputs, selected from amongst many and building cumulatively on CRC-UK's earlier research, underpin the specific impacts detailed in Section 4.</p> <p>i) Twomey's research practice focusses on ways to challenge the conformity of museum display: she installs dynamic content that undergoes a process of change through participatory engagement. For instance, for <i>Piece by Piece</i> (2015) at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto [2], she produced an initial collection of figurines which were then reproduced by choreographed makers (local ceramics students) working at a bench within the gallery space. The collection of artefacts expanded to over 2,000 during the course of the exhibition, giving visitors a unique experience each time they attended. The stability of the typical exhibition format was also challenged through the dispersal of the collection – visitors were invited to take a figurine home at its end.</p> <p>ii) Building upon the notion of the gallery space as a site of production rather than simply display, Twomey undertook a large-scale two-week installation, <i>Factory: the seen and unseen</i> (2018), in which the Tate Exchange (TEX) space was transformed into a participatory 'factory' for the making of everyday objects from clay. Visitors were invited to clock in, join the 30-metre production line, learn the skills of working with clay, and exchange what they made with one another. The installation encouraged audiences to explore ideas around the concept of production</p>		

and how we connect to ideas of labour, value, and exchange. The other stages of this broader, twelve-month-long, artistic-research project – *Production* – involved directly working with TEX Associates (see Section 4) to produce further collaborative artworks that would engage the public in this theme while building their own artistic and conceptual skills.

iii) **Phoebe Cummings'** research methodology, 'peripatetic making', explores how artistic practice changes according to the environment in which it is made, resulting in art works that manifest the production process in important ways. For instance, *Triumph of the Immaterial* (2017) at the V&A, a sculpture made of unfired clay through which a continuous water fountain flowed, was designed to dissolve as it was exhibited [4]. Directing viewers to the process of the work's destruction, *Triumph* emphasised how we experience art objects over space and time, positioning the piece as a work of performance art. This approach was explored further with *A Ripening Surveillance* (2018), constructed and destroyed by the artist as she worked on site at Tetley Gallery, Leeds, across the show's duration [4]. Cummings' *This Was Now* (2020) further developed her approach to time-based ceramics in the context of museums, exploring the multiple ways in which transient sculpture may be recorded – individually and collectively. Throughout the seven-month exhibition at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, the public participated in the process of recording the changing work through drawings and writings that also grew and accumulated across the gallery wall; these contributions were later edited and bound for the gallery's permanent collection [5].

iv) In her chapter for *Contemporary Clay and Museum Culture*, **Tessa Peters** contextualised socially-engaged ceramic practice within the wider field of contemporary art [1]. Her essay considered how artists' engagement with participants from differing social strata had raised ethical concerns among critics, and featured interviews with curators on how active, rather than passive, involvement from the public can be attained. Acting upon her findings, Peters devised her exhibition *Cultural Icons: remaking a popular pottery tradition* [5] for the 2019 British Ceramics Biennial (BCB) around the active involvement of the public. Seeking to engage local participants, Peters chose to revive an aspect of Stoke-on-Trent's heritage, Staffordshire flatbacks (cheaply made figurines of popular people and subjects), that could connect Stoke's Victorian pottery legacy to contemporary culture. Inviting re-interpretation of this legacy, six leading ceramic artists (including **Brown**) were commissioned both to create new artworks and to develop designs for limited editions. These designs were interpreted, handmade, and painted at BCB workshops across a four-month period by members of community groups from local underserved constituencies; their active contribution was thus integral to the creation of these works, which were subsequently exhibited in museum galleries across 2019-20.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Book: Brown, C., Stair, J. and Twomey, C. (ed.), 2016. *Contemporary Clay and Museum Culture*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. ISBN: 9781315573823. Including chapters by Twomey 'Introduction' (pp.1-4) and Peters 'Ceramic art in social contexts' (pp.97-104).
 - [2] Exhibition: Clare Twomey, *Piece by Piece*. Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada (24 October 2014 to 4 January 2015).
 - [3] Exhibition: Clare Twomey, *Tate Exchange: Production*, 2017-18: Lead Artist for Year 2. It comprised: Stage 1, a large-scale, two-week installation, *Factory: the seen and unseen* (28 September-8 October 2017); Stage 2, work with three Tate Associates over the year, including associated events; Stage 3, a final installation of banners (January 2018). See REF2 portfolio.
 - [4] Artefacts/Performance: Phoebe Cummings, *A Ripening Surveillance - Material Environments* (2020) and *Triumph of the Immaterial* (2017-18). See REF2 portfolio for *Triumph*.
 - [5] Artefacts/Performance: Phoebe Cummings, *This Was Now* (2020) and *Model for a Common Room* (2018) See REF2 portfolio 'Production Line: collecting ephemeral clay practice'.
 - [6] Exhibition: Tessa Peters (curator) and Christie Brown (artist). *Cultural Icons: remaking a popular pottery tradition*, The Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent (14 Sept–17 Nov 2019); Hove Museum & Art Gallery (28 November 2019–1 March 2020). See REF2 portfolio.
- Funding:** AHRC: Behind the Scenes at the Museum: Ceramics in the Expanded Field. PI: Christie Brown & Edmund de Waal (2011-2012); Co-Is: Clare Twomey, Julian Stair (2012-2014). AH/I000720/1 (June 2011 - September 2014). £327,432.

4. Details of the impact

The CRC-UK's research over the past two decades has, in the current REF period, impacted on cultural life, museum and gallery policy, and public engagement. Specific impacts include:

i) Shaping the Tate's Strategy on Public Participation

On the basis of her long-standing, pioneering research in participatory craft practice [e.g., 2], Twomey was, from its inception, invited to serve as an advisor to Tate Modern's Tate Exchange (TEX) project. Over the two years before TEX opened in September 2016, Twomey (i) made active contributions to planning meetings that fleshed out TEX's mission to enable social projects through which 'art, and the ideas inspired through art, can be the catalyst for change and exchange'; and (ii) was selected as Lead Artist for Year Two. Twomey's year-long, three-stage TEX project, *Production* (2017-18) [3], not only brought cultural value to its audiences and collaborators (more than 4,800 members of the public participated in the first-stage event *Factory*), but also, according to Cara Courage, Head of Tate Exchange, **resulted in a significant shift in the institution and its relationship with its 'others'**: 'Twomey's inclusive model of participatory practice has helped re-frame Tate Exchange's approach to its programme and the kinds of creative practitioner it engages [...] [her project] represented a step change for us in terms of how we considered what was possible in terms of engagement, participation, the material object and in the different textures and tenures needed [...] as well as the need in the space to work with artists that have that outward and collective intent to their practice. The "society meets art" outcome of Clare's time with us has gone forward into our curatorial statement for 2019 onwards' [a].

A key element of the TEX programme is that the Lead Artist works with Associates, community groups drawn from across the UK, who bring their ideas, practices, and communities into Tate and out into the world. Tate Director, Maria Balshaw, has highlighted how important it was that Twomey 'stepped out of the institutional space [of Tate] and went to the Associates' [own] locations' in order to develop artworks that would be displayed to the broader public back at the gallery, stating that the results 'speak to me of a human-centered art engagement' [b]. This step **ensured the Associates would excel within the TEX programme**. As Anna Culverhouse Evans of Valley Kids – one of Twomey's three key Associates; an arts organisation that works with people of all ages from deprived areas surrounding former mining towns in Wales – writes: 'It was very rewarding to have the opportunity to work so closely with Clare, she was generous with her time and it was great that she took the opportunity to visit us in the Rhondda Valleys, she could see where and how we worked' and 'was able to encourage the group to have the confidence in their abilities to engage with the public and through some rich conversations was able to tease out their own particular strengths' which 'helped our project develop into something much bigger than it would have done without her input and encouragement' [c].

Through this collaborative work with her key Associates, and her further engagement with a total of sixty Associate groups across three large meetings, Twomey **developed a toolkit that has helped Tate and its Associates align their objectives in a way that enhances the active participation of members of the public** (i.e. the Associates' constituents). Courage confirms that 'Clare's toolkit to evaluate participation has been taken forward' such that 'the model of it has been applied to programming and curation thinking and we have used it to model with Associates ways in which they may want to consider toolkits [...] that they want to create with the public' [a].

ii) Impact on Institutions and Artists in relation to Curatorial Practice

The CRC-UK's innovations in participatory, time-based and ephemeral ceramic practice have contributed to the transformation of curatorial strategies at several major art institutions.

The work of the CRC, and the 'research that has come from the University of Westminster' from de Waal's time onwards, is referenced and described in detail several times by Alun Graves, V&A's Curator of Ceramics and Glass Collections, in his 2017 Peter Dormer lecture outlining how he and the **V&A came to move away from his predecessor's curatorial strategy, focussed on studio pottery, and towards performance and time-based work** [d]. 'Two artists in particular, Clare Twomey and Keith Harrison, seemed to be breaking new ground in this regard' with work that could 'not be assimilated into the museum's collection through the conventional routes of acquisition and display' [d]. Their work 'seemed to determine a different means of engagement: something live and audience focused', directly leading to Graves introducing at the V&A both 'Friday Late' programming (2006; which in 2019 'continue[s] to build on the V&A's reputation for innovative programming' as '[h]igh-profile and well-attended events' [e, p.4]) and their ceramics residency programming (2009; which between Aug 2013 and Dec 2020 has enabled nine artists to utilise V&A resources, exhibit work outside of conventional display formats, and finance their work) [d]. Both Cummings and Twomey were early residents (2010-12) and they

further helped shape Graves' curatorial strategy since 2014 by enabling him to conceive 'the glass fronted studio at the V&A not only as a site for practice but as a container for an environment that might physically be entered', as through their time-based practice 'the studio becomes a form of display case and the artist the exhibit' [d]. Heavily influenced by his engagement with the CRC artists and their methodology ('Objects being freely taken from the museum. Objects self-destructing. [...] All of these strategies have been enriching, enlightening'), Graves now approaches the site-based artist 'as a kind of defacto curator. In a museum context, curation thus becomes a kind of collaborative process [...] working together towards common goals' [d].

Graves describes how Cummings' work has also resulted in **significant changes to the archival practice of galleries**, who have innovated their approaches to respond to the challenges of preserving ephemeral ceramics. As 'a sculpture that enacts its own destruction', the exhibiting and archiving of Cummings' *Triumph of the Immaterial* [4] at the V&A led Graves to recognise that 'significant additional challenges [in preservation] are posed by artists working in clay's expanded field. For them the significance of concept and of materiality are more balanced and interdependent' [d]. The V&A decided to fire sixteen fragments of Cummings' previously unfired work, enabling them to stay relatively fixed in form for [archiving](#) purposes, while Graves states the display format in which such time-based works are first shown to the public 'might be considered to "collect" these works and performances in the moment', given that the 'poignancy that stems from the temporality of Cummings' work is predicated on the experience of its intricate modelling and its fragile beauty' [d]. Addressing a similar problem, Wolverhampton Art Gallery's acquisition of *This Was Now* [5] involved creating: 'An album of th[e] public responses' collected during the exhibition 'as a permanent trace of the project, whilst the sculpture itself will be recycled and the clay taken forward in future works' [f].

Cummings' process-focused sculpture, *A Ripening Surveillance* [4] – 'the centrepiece of the [*Material Environments*] exhibition, creating a micro environment both in the show and the building which changed and developed over the course of the exhibition' – inspired new directions for the Artists' Research Centre's ([ARC](#)) curatorial strategy [g]. According to ARC's Director, who commissioned the piece, 'the **experimentation involved in creating the required infrastructure as well as the work itself were central to the curatorial strategy for the show**' [g]. He adds: 'Cummings' approach to both the work and engaging with audiences was invaluable [...] **the opportunity for visitors to discuss working processes in this live context was valued and commented on and is certainly a model that has informed future thinking**' at ARC [g].

This transformation in the curatorial strategies of exhibiting institutions has also **widened opportunities for younger practitioners**. Tana West, winner of the British Ceramics Biennial Awards 2017, comments: 'Through the visibility and precedence set by ceramic artists such as Phoebe Cummings and Clare Twomey, commissioning bodies are more open to process driven projects without predetermined outcomes. It has become easier to frame a more open-ended response to working with galleries and museums as a result and I have been given the space to explore, fail and develop' [h]. This is corroborated by Icelandic visual artist Erna Skúladóttir, who states: 'I also believe that her [Cummings'] way of working has opened up the clay community to become more welcoming to different styles and approaches. [...] [M]useums and galleries are now more open than they were a few years ago. [...] I now also exhibit in places and contexts that do not only focus on clay and ceramics, or craft' [h]. Rosy Greenlees, Executive Director of the Crafts Council specifies that Cummings' *Triumph of the Immaterial* [4], and the exposure it gained as winner of the Woman's Hour Craft Prize in 2017, was significant to this shift in the perception of ceramics by a broader range of exhibitors: 'Since then there has been **a growing interest by the contemporary art world in ceramics and craft related processes** of which (sic) Phoebe Cummings' selection as the prize winner undoubtedly contributed' [i].

iii) Diversifying the audiences of ceramic art

The awarding of the Woman's Hour Craft Prize (WHCP) in 2017 to Cummings' *Triumph of the Immaterial* [4] has **generated a growing interest in ceramics within general audiences**. This is demonstrated by an unsolicited email to Cummings from a 54-year-old who 'was so inspired by your work. I walked through the V&A and I thought "maybe I'm a crafts person." [...] Fast forward and I'm now in yr 3 of a part time 5 yr fine art degree. I wanted to share this as it's a very clear trajectory for me from that day standing in front of your work, to now. It was [...] life changing' [j]. Karen Dalziel, Editor of Woman's Hour and Late Night Woman's Hour, BBC Radio Four, explains

that Cummings' work 'challenged how many of our audience viewed craft [...] Phoebe's work specifically questions the concept of longevity in finished pieces – as her work disintegrates. This was very new to many of our audience and an interesting area for on-air discussion' [k]. Dalziel also highlights that the WHCP programming was **'particularly popular with our Instagram audience, which is a younger cohort than the traditional Radio 4 audience'**, specifying that 'Phoebe's work was an influential part of this' engagement, which involved young women listeners sharing their work with the programme makers: 'Woman's Hour was able to access and celebrate this vibrant community, in terms of guests but also as listeners, and this also **served to elevate the status of craft in the mainstream media'** [k]. That Cummings' unique work was particularly influential in drawing a greater audience to craft is confirmed by a Producer/Director at BBC Ideas who made a short film about the artist's work for International Women's Day 2018: 'The impact of Phoebe's work is **a change in public understanding of what can be done with clay** [...] taking ceramics away from stereotypical expectations of pots and traditional associations with women and bringing it in to the modern arts sphere' [l]. This film was broadcast on BBC Arts which 'covers a broad demographic for the BBC', and has 'a digital reach of around 200,000 [...] with an audience aged 16-55 and of mixed ethnicity', demonstrating that Cummings' work **allowed crafts to reach a broader audience than usual** [l].

Further diversifying the audience for ceramic art, Peters' *Cultural Icons* project [6] involved directly engaging a range of community groups representing underserved constituents of Stoke-on-Trent at the British Ceramics Biennial (BCB) workshops. These included mental health service users, refugees/asylum seekers, and an LGBT+ social group. Many of these participants were new to making ceramic objects and it is notable that 'learning the skills, practicing, [and] understanding why', **produced a sense of pride in the makers, amongst other therapeutic effects**: 'I have been going through a rough time in my home life. This has given me a way to vent positively', stated one participant, adding 'Clay = Therapy' [m]. Another claimed they had gained 'skills, kindness, knowledge and compassion for sense of community' [m]. The BCB reports that at 'the celebratory event for the community makers / exhibition opening [...] there was **a true feeling of community, sharing and support amongst the makers** many of whom didn't know one another before' [m]. This is confirmed by feedback from the makers, with one describing the workshops as a 'wonderful inspiring environment to spend time in', and others emphasising that they 'really enjoyed team working and exchange between members' [m]. The **educational benefits** of this project were evident in both the feedback of the makers ('I now understand much more about [Staffordshire flatbacks] and why they were so popular at the time') and responses from visitors to the exhibition, 92% of whom claimed to have 'learned something new' from their visit [m]. Indications of **a continuing engagement with both clay and the BCB** have also been expressed by the participants (e.g. 'It has made me want to continue with sculpting'), further demonstrating the strength of the positive impact this project has had [m].

In Canada, Twomey's *Piece by Piece* [1] brought new audiences to the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, leading to its repositioning within public cultural discourse. Rachel Gotlieb, Curator at Gardiner, states: **'The media attention was higher (double) than most of our contemporary exhibitions**. The performance nature, and the fact that the exhibition increased in size over time attracted repeat viewers which was also unusual for the Gardiner. It was the first time that the Gardiner "gave away" or "freed" the art to the public after the exhibition closed and the participatory engagement particularly resonated with the public; another first, visitors snaked outside the building waiting patiently to select their figurines' [n]. Writing in July 2019, Gotlieb adds: '*Piece by Piece* has a permanent impact on the Gardiner for the very simple reason that it elevated the museum's profile as a national and international institution of contemporary ceramic art' [n].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[a] Testimony: Cara Courage, Head of TEX; [b] Talk: Maria Balshaw, Director of Tate, Talk at Verbier Art Summit, Switzerland, Feb 2019 [\[link\]](#); [c] Testimony: A.C. Evans, Valley Kids; [d] Lecture: Alun Graves, Senior Curator at the V&A, Peter Dormer Annual Lecture 2017 [\[link\]](#); [e] V&A Annual Report 2018-9 [\[link\]](#); [f] Website: *Wolverhampton Arts*, "Phoebe Cummings: This Was Now", 3/7/20 [\[link\]](#); [g] Testimony: Director of ARC; [h] Testimony: Tana West and Erna Skúladóttir; [i] Testimony: Rosy Greenlees, Executive Director, Crafts Council; [j] Testimony: unsolicited email to Cummings; [k] Testimony: Karen Dalziel, Editor, BBC Radio Four; [l] Testimony: Tui McLean, Producer/Director, BBC Ideas; [m] Report: BCB & The Audience Agency report (2019); [n] Testimony: Rachel Gotlieb, Curator, Gardiner Museum.