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Integrative Project Thesis

## **WELCOME TO DUDELTOPF**

“What do you mean, ‘doodling’? Weren’t you guys working with clay?” my friend asked. We had just spent the afternoon at Seinenryo, a facility for cognitively challenged adults in Shigaraki, Japan. I had been in the ceramics studio, one of several creative spaces there. We sat side by side with the Japanese residents, grabbed a handful of the rich, black clay, and set to work. There were no rules, expectations, or directions. Just make. I squished and transformed my chunk of clay into little figures with buggy eyes, superfluous limbs, and quizzical expressions. I began calling them doodles.

I’ve done my fair share of two-dimensional doodling, filling sketchbooks with pages of mindless swirls and patterns. But then I would close the cover and sit down to do my “real work.” Yet when we were at Seinenryo, the only “real work” we had to do was doodling. This was a startling discovery for me. I had always thought of doodling as a largely pointless and frivolous activity. But the Seinenryo residents didn’t shrug off the work they made. They were proud of it, and rightly so. As someone educated within a history of traditional art establishments, I found my time at Seinenryo refreshing and challenging. I had always assumed that as an artist, my work is supposed to serve a greater purpose, address a problem, or highlight a tangible issue. There is supposed to be a focused end-product. On the other end were my clay doodles, with no inherent design or purpose. Yet I was drawn to these so-called useless objects more than any other finely-crafted project I had ever made

before. Over time, my focus had been whittled down to the objective of a singular art-object. But now, I have realized a love of making for the process and exploration. *Dudeltopf* returns to this re-discovered source, indulging in the act of doodling.

## **CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION:**

### DOODLING

Wherever there have been paper scraps and pens, there have been doodles. Doodling as we know it today is rooted in the 1930's fad of "reading" celebrity doodles. The popular image of doodles being a link to the subconscious emerged, as Freud was publishing his psychoanalytical theories around this time. It was considered an idle activity that allowed the latent subconsciousness to bubble up. Newspapers such as *The Evening Standard* would publish doodles, along with a psychologist's interpretation of the person's perceived character traits. In addition to featuring celebrity scribbles, papers solicited entries from the general readership (Toub, 474). The doodles they received were typically pen drawings, most often pen on scraps of paper, envelopes, grocery lists, and office memos. In the case of celebrities, these "readings" usually revealed, or rather reinforced, them as brilliant and multi-talented. However, the act of doodling was, and is, commonplace enough that it was also read as a mark of normalcy. A 1929 edition of *The Evening Standard* featured a prominent reproduction of a doodle by President Hoover, with the headline "Everybody Does It!" and an article titled: "Scribbling by President is Held Normal" (Toub, 475). While doodling did undergo a phase of attributing deeper meanings and psychological interpretations, it has ultimately settled into a definition of mindless mark-making.

The editorial sensation of it has passed, and doodling remains as something most everyone does. Sometimes it is a half-attended-to activity, while your higher faculties are focused on something such as a phone call or biology lecture. Or perhaps you cross the line and space out altogether: doodling becomes the thing you do when you should be doing something else. This sense of secondary importance serves to underline the way we perceive doodling today. The cliché image of the artist who fills sketchbooks, napkins, and memo pads with doodles comes from a place of truth. These artists may even refer back to their notes as inspiration for a future project. However, it is never designated as the primary activity. The marginal space that it occupies keeps it from stepping into a space of intentional importance.

## **OUTSIDER ART**

It does shine, however, in the realm of outsider art. Outsider art was defined, beginning around the early 1900s, as work made by clinically insane people, eccentrics, and self-taught artists. In the early part of the century, outsider art was adopted by modern artists such as Jean Dubuffet. Outsider art offered a new, unencumbered world for these artists trying to escape the confines of art establishments. Dubuffet himself coined the term *art brut*, describing it as “works produced by persons unscathed by artistic culture,” who source their inspiration “from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art” ([outsiderartfair.com](http://outsiderartfair.com) 2018). The allure of *art brut*, or outsider art, was that it was specifically *not* included in mainstream circles. It held a secondary status in the art world.

Unfortunately, the dominant culture is the one that gets to define how the stories of those who cannot speak for themselves are told. The term “outsider art” itself shows clear other-ing that we must be mindful of when talking about this art and the people who create it.

Yet it is worthwhile to investigate the mainstream's interest in their work. There was a vein of artists who recognized the facade in officially sanctioned art. In Dubuffet's words: "everyone immediately sprinkles it with champagne, and lecturers lead it from town to town with a ring through its nose. This is the false Monsieur Art." ([outsiderartfair.com](http://outsiderartfair.com) 2018). At this time and place where Monsieur Art had become too painfully big for his own britches, outsider art was the perfect antidote.

## **CLAY & CRAFT**

Clay has become my antidote. The significance and implications of this material are rooted in the history of art and craft. Craft objects are typically understood as handmade objects that have a utilitarian aspect and fall under one of the five traditional craft mediums: ceramic, fiber, glass, metal, and wood (Ramljak). Craft is something that is physically handled and created, "endowed with their maker's aspirations" (Ramljak, 24). Found objects can be situated as art, but are too impersonal to fit into categories of craft. Aside from the overt functionality of craft objects (ceramics pots, for example), Ramljak suggests that they serve purposes of pleasure. Superfluous decoration and ornamentation are often associated with craft. The stigma associated with this has put these arts "on the defensive, forced to uphold their honor against accusations of frivolousness or indecency" (24). Yet the guilty pleasure we often take from these kinds of objects does serve a purpose: they provide "sensual and humane antidotes to an often insensitive and impersonal environment" (25).

My doodles are made out of clay, one of the five craft materials, which roots them in that tradition. However, their lack of an overtly useful function or purpose puts them in conflict

with that category. There is a connection, though, to the frivolousness of ornamented and decorated craft objects. "Frivolous" is the very word I used to describe doodling for myself. It is through that frivolousness that they come to possess a purpose. Like those kinds of objects, my doodles act as an antidote to the "impersonal environment." In conceiving a direction for *Dudeltopf*, I specifically abandoned the goal of a singular, discrete art object. My process of doodling and material exploration becomes the content of the work, without a facade or conceptual veil to be penetrated. The doodles themselves are analogous to rudimentary human forms, formed from the very elements the earth and our bodies consist of. What could be more personal than this kind of ceramic object with my own fingerprints visibly embedded into the fired surface?

#### **METHODOLOGY:**

My creative research for *Dudeltopf* began when I unearthed a handful of old sketchbooks, dating back to when I was between three and seven years old. I had always been prolific with pen, paper, and image, and my mom had the foresight to save quite a few collections of scribbles. I was struck by the way I drew without inhibitions, scribbling and covering page upon page with boldly rendered faces and impossible creatures. As I looked through these notebooks, I was sitting in my studio at the end of my four years of formal art education. Technically and stylistically, I had come a long way. I had honed my realistic drawing skills, and reigned in the reckless abandon I had employed during the first years of my life. For all the artistic abilities I had since acquired, however, I wished I could access the freedom living inside my childhood doodles.

I set out to reinterpret these childhood drawings in clay, my medium of choice. Yet my initial forays into this scribble-to-clay translation felt forced. I found myself simply trying to make copies of the drawings. I thought this project would help me access that freedom, but instead it just highlighted its inaccessibility. A reproduction is inherently non-authentic. I had to turn elsewhere.

It was then that I looked to the the scribbled “texts” that accompanied the pages of my childhood drawings. This “writing” was made with the same strong, assured lines as the drawings. It was asemic writing, holding no semantic meaning. It is not really “writing” per say, but rather visual forms that allude to what we recognize as writing. I was intrigued by the push and pull between meaning and nonsense. I remember reading aloud to my mom and sisters the stories I had “written” down. I could look over these seemingly random scribbles and decipher the meaning in them. I couldn’t revert back to the crayon-wielding toddler-artist I had once been. And I can’t just forget my formal artistic training. I have also since lost the ability to read back the narratives embedded in those “texts.” I imagined an inaccessible freedom in my childhood “artworks,” which I had somehow lost along the way. But had I? Perhaps the realization I had in Japan, that doodling could be my work, was me reaching back to my childhood freedom. Or better yet, connecting to the freedom that was inside all along. I had just been ignoring it. I moved my project away from direct drawing-to-clay interpretations. Instead, I took the process of doodling as my tool and clay my medium. I hadn’t given up doodling and in its various forms in the time since my childhood drawings. It had just gone underground. Now I am bringing it back and placing it center-stage.

*Dudeltopf* took several forms before I settled on one in particular. My initial doodles were closely related to those I made in Shigaraki; human-like forms (Fig. 1), with simplified and stylized features. Some were mere blobs that roughly resembled the human figure (Fig. 2). These intrigued me the most. I could go quite far with my abstraction, yet you could still recognize something human in them. Much like my asemic writing, there was an interesting play between meaning and abstracted non-meaning. I wanted to see how far I could take this with my clay doodles.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

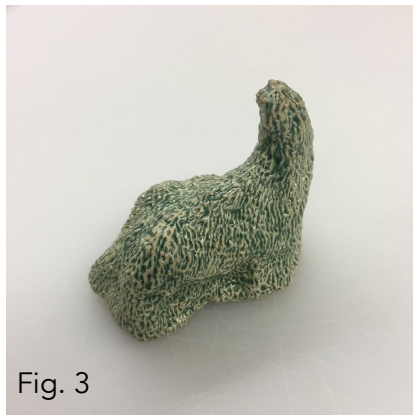


Fig. 3

After this batch of came out of the first firing, I tried a variety of glazing methods. While some of them produced interesting surface effects (Fig. 3), I realized that glazing was working against my doodle-y intentions. Glazing halted and stilted the process, making each one of them a finished product. While I was making individual doodles, they lived together as a community. Glazing served only to separate them. I therefore abandoned this in favor of smoke firing. This is a process where I pack the once-fired bisque into an old grill with sawdust, light it on fire, and let it burn down over the course of several hours. Instead of each getting their own individual treatment, they were now all imbued with the smoke from their communal walk through fire (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4

The final collection of doodles that *Dudeltopf* is comprised of are connected through the material they are made out of and the firing process used to complete them. The red clay offers more tactile malleability than the original white clay I was using. The soft reddish-orange of the fired clay also offers a warm contrast to the marks imbued by the smoke-firing (Fig. 5).

The final form of the project (Fig. 6) was discovered through a process of exploration.



Fig. 5

I was not aiming for a particular form, look, or style. Rather, I allowed myself to be open, responding to what each step in the making process presented me with. When doodling with paper and pen, you don't start with a clear idea of what you want your doodle to look like.

Rather, you start by scribbling a line, which then suggests something else. Then you build off of that line with more lines and dots. It is like driving at night with headlights that only reach 30 feet in front of you. You can't see your final destination, but you can see each stage along the way as you arrive at each 30-foot stretch.



Fig. 6



I tried glazing, to see what new information it would present me with. I eventually decided to discard it. I responded to the initial clay forms with a question: what would glazing do? Once I saw what that created, I responded by moving away from it. I was not attached to these glazed objects that I had invested my time, energy and resources into. I saw it as part of the larger process of arriving at a more resolved final form. The old me would have held on much tighter to the products of each step. However, doodling has allowed me to become more open and exploratory in my entire creative practice.

## CREATIVE WORK



Fig. 7

At first, exhibiting *Dudeltopf* in a gallery felt antithetical to the spirit of doodling. I did not want the work to be stifled by a white-wall gallery setting. Yet placing it within that space created a contrast that further highlighted the aspects I had been afraid of overshadowing. In the end, *Dudeltopf* was

comprised of approximately 1,500 hand-formed figures. The doodles were placed throughout the entire gallery, on everything from pedestals to floor corners, tops of door frames, water fountains, and urinals (Fig. 7-8).

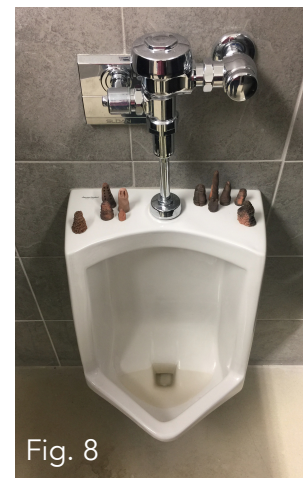


Fig. 8

Approximately one third of the doodles were placed on pedestals, with dozens trailing onto the floor. Others were peeking down at gallery-goers from the top edges of the moveable

gallery walls. Hundreds of doodles were placed on window ledges (Fig. 9) that make up the exterior of the gallery, visible from the street outside. I invited other artists in the space to take some doodles and place them on or near their work at their discretion, which at least four artists did. *Dudeltopf* thus came to inhabit every nook and cranny of the gallery, refusing to be caged in and sequestered to a single display space. I had doodled in the gallery with my doodles.



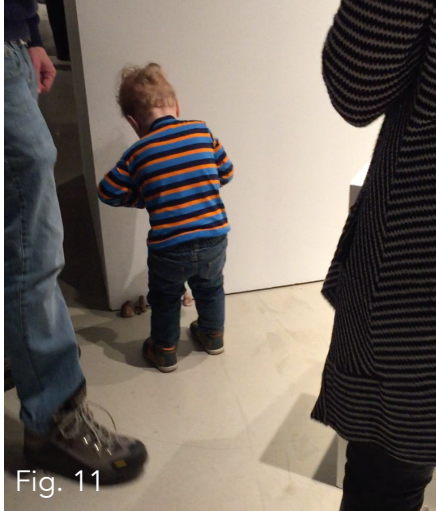
Fig. 9

In addition to the display, I wanted the visitors' experience of the work to push against traditional gallery experiences as well. In the days leading up to and during the gallery opening, I invited people to touch and take the doodles. This would break the traditional gallery-driven divide between the viewers and the work. It took some time for people to



Fig. 10

warm up to this idea. Even though they had the artist's (my) explicit consent, they were still hesitant to violate the law of the gallery that states "Thou Shalt Not Touch" – let alone take. However, after a couple of visitors started to, others jumped in as well (Fig. 10). One toddler-sized visitor needed no prompting whatsoever. He jumped right in, stooping to pick up a queue of doodles and deposit them into his shirt pocket (Fig. 11). Under the guidance of their tiny caretaker, the doodles



would leave the gallery and take up a new life somewhere else. The way he reached out to engage with *Dudeltopf* embodied the way we as humans desire to interact with such objects in our environment, before we are conditioned to restrain ourselves.

Many of the people I observed engaging with the work had a smile on their face. They would pick up an individual doodle, turn it over in their hands, look it in the “eyes.” The doodles’ smoke-fired surfaces and simple yet highly individualized expressions made each of these moments a kind of encounter. For me, this fulfilled the notion of an “antidote to the impersonal.” Every time a visitor interacted with the work they were experiencing it in that present moment, but also in the moment in which it was created.

*Dudeltopf* lives as a community of doodles that can now engage with a community of humans. Doodles have spent decades living in the shadows, hidden from view. With *Dudeltopf*, people are able to access my solitary moments of doodling as I bring the artifacts of this process into the light.

## CONCLUSION

In Shigaraki, Japan, I had the chance to work in a ceramics studio alongside individuals who could be considered outsider artists. The residents made things because that is what they loved to do. I was envious of their seeming lack of inhibition. I was inspired by the joy with which they worked. But I was wary of the way artists like Dubuffet had created a “naïve

genius" figure out of these people. I didn't want to romanticize them as a kind of ideal artist/maker for my own inspiration.

But there was something in their work that I was attracted to. I spent time with these outsider artists, who had never attended a university art class. And I wanted what they had. I was the one with all of the art credentials, yet I was drawn to work that existed specifically outside of that world. My previously narrow focus on a singular art-object was the product of my formal art education, and it had unintentionally inhibited me. My time with these makers in Shigaraki broke the spell.

*Dudeltopf* has shown me the multiple ways that doodling can manifest itself. Doodle, as a noun, is a discrete tangible object. Doodling, as a verb, is the way you make by responding to marks and forms as they appear. Combining both of these perspectives, I found I could reframe my understanding and appreciation for doodling, and the ways in which I can bring that to a larger audience. I get to indulge in a process I love, while also letting others in the fun that I have found in doodling.

Lastly, doodling can also be applied to a studio practice, as the process by which you let go of preconceived notions of what your work should be and do. I never imagined that my brief time in Shigaraki would so drastically shift my perspective in how I approach my art. Usually, the artist makes the doodles. But it turns out my doodles have made me.

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