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# 'Reconstituting the Four Quarters: Porcelain Surfaces and Embodied Identities'"Reconstituting the Four Quarters: Porcelain Surfaces and Embodied Identities'DMU Leicester3-/-0/20183-/-0/2018

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RCA Fashion Research Network

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# APPARITION

## the (im)materiality of modern surface

An Interdisciplinary Symposium

Friday 9 March 2018

Leicester Castle, De Montfort University, Leicester, U.K.

**Quinn Davis, P. (n.d.). 'An Interdisciplinary Symposium APPARITION THE (IM)MATERIALITY OF MODERN SURFACE 'Reconstituting the Four Quarters: Porcelain Surfaces and Embodied Identities'' 'Reconstituting the Four Quarters: Porcelain Surfaces and Embodied Identities' DMU Leicester 3-/0/20183-/0/2018. In *APPARITION THE (IM)MATERIALITY OF MODERN SURFACE***

This one-day symposium examines the contemporary fascination with the surfaces, surveying the (im)material surface qualities of our everyday environment. It brings together scholars and practitioners from a range of disciplines—creative arts and design, architecture, performance, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies and social studies of science and technology—to discuss the construction, dissolution and deconstruction of the surface. Siegfried Kracauer wrote, in the 1920s when the Western world was captivated by technology and mechanised production, that urban mass culture was defined by surface affects and described the experience of modernity as being that of a surface condition.<sup>1</sup> Modernity's obsession with the surface was revealed most clearly in built, designed and manufactured everyday things. The 'surface splendour' filled picture palaces<sup>2</sup>; glass architecture alluded to utopian milieu that breeds revolutionary subjectivity<sup>3</sup>; Josephine Baker wore her naked skin like a shimmering sheath<sup>4</sup>; factory spaces full of gleaming machinery were worshipped like a temple; the sleek surface of Bakelite signalled a new era of consumer goods. Today, almost 100 years on, in the midst of another technological revolution, the creative industries are again preoccupied with the surface and its dissolution, disintegration or efflorescence, accentuating the surface's function of mediation or passage, rather than that of separation or boundary. The surface evaporates, percolates, become blurred or spectral in Diller and Scofidio's Cloud Machine; Bill Morrison's Decasia; Bart Hess's Digital Artefact; Sruli Recht's translucent leather collection Apparition. James Turrell's light architecture is simultaneously material and immaterial, and the surface seems to disappear altogether with Surrey Nanosystems' Vantablack. If the everyday surface can be regarded as a site for the projection and display of psychical, cultural, social, and political values, what is the implication of the dissolving surface? How does the (im)materiality of surface affect our experience of the body, self and society today? What is our attitude towards these surface qualities? In what forms does surface materiality exist in the virtual age? What kind of moral, functional, aesthetic values does the surface conceal or reveal? We welcome papers for 20-minute presentations on themes including but not limited to: • Material, processual, affective and symbolic aspects of the surface; • The conflation of diverse surfaces: the surface of the body, garment, product, furniture, interior wall, digital screen, painting, architectural façade; • Immaterialisation, fragmentation, corrosion, decomposition, disintegration of surface; • How contemporary art and design express the disruptive potential of surface; • The ways in which surface conditions can influence surrounding space, going beyond physical structure; • the (im)materiality of

an artistic/technological medium and its potential to create a transgressive surface quality or atmosphere.

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**APPARITION THE (IM)MATERIALITY OF MODERN SURFACE ‘Reconstituting the Four Quarters: Porcelain Surfaces and Embodied Identities’ ‘Reconstituting the Four Quarters: Porcelain Surfaces and Embodied Identities’ see [www.quinndavis.uk](http://www.quinndavis.uk)**

**Abstract:** Surface is one of the most intensely debated topics in recent arts, humanities and social science scholarship. The changing technologies which manufacture the actual and virtual surfaces of today are radically altering our perception of thresholds and borders. In contrast to the responses to preceding industrial revolutions, contemporary concerns with surface seem preoccupied with its function of mediation or passage, rather than with that of separation or boundary, this paper explores a different meaning and function of the material and immaterial qualities of 'surface'.

Case studies include various surfaces from computer screens, 'artisanal' engines to gauzy veils. This is related to archival practices and accounts for how the material and the immaterial draw attention to each other in both their everyday and artistic practice. The paper highlights particular systems (from the human body to manually operated tools and machines); materials (for instance clay) and through scanning, modes of attention, movement and engagement. 'Surface' therefore functions as a multidisciplinary method for attending to critical issues concerning human creative and technological endeavours.

## **Introduction**

This project started when the Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery, who are undergoing a major redevelopment project, invited me to collaborate with them in the redevelopment process, by selecting neglected items from their collections and thinking how they might be innovatively displayed and interpreted in the new gallery spaces. As you will appreciate, one of the advantages of being in a design department is the opportunity to combine theoretical and historical work with practise-led research, and this is the approach I have taken to this project, with myself leading the documentary research into the original artefacts, and engaged in the practise-led reinterpretation.

## **Reconstituting the Four Quarters: Porcelain Surfaces and Embodied Identities.**

What I want to do is to give you a little bit of background about the objects themselves, thinking about the role of surfaces in their historical contexts, before thinking about how I have worked with these surfaces to recontextualise these objects for a contemporary audience, and that's why I chose these two images to introduce you to the work, as they encapsulate the two different sides of the project.

Created in Plymouth in 1768 or 1769, these figurines were the work of William Cookworthy who, having started his professional life as a chemist, made it his mission to try to create the first truly 'English' porcelain in the latter half of the eighteenth century. At this time, there was a sharp distinction between the fine porcelain produced in China using 'kaolin' clay, which was called 'hard paste' and the imitation 'China', which used a different type of clay, and was worked using a 'soft paste' method in European centres of production. Cookworthy's experiments, using a body of clay found in Cornwall that was similar to the kaolin used in Chinese porcelain production, resulted in a

successful patent application to produce English porcelain at the founding of the Plymouth Porcelain manufactory in the mid-1760s.

Made at the Plymouth Porcelain Factory, this set of four figurines, probably intended as decorative tableware, are supposed to represent the four continents, often called the 'Four Quarters' of the world, known to Europeans at the end of the eighteenth century. They illustrate, from Left to Right, Asia, which at this time, was seen to encompass everything from the Middle East to China and which was largely defined by the products which it traded with the Western world, Europe, seen as a bastion of civilization and order, with an artist's palette and armour at her feet, and laurels in her hair; the Americas, a land inhabited by primitive warrior cultures, and Africa, embodied by the sub-Saharan Negro and seen as a land of unexploited natural wealth.

In this context, using the word Negro is both historically accurate and also emblematic of the problematic nature of displaying these figures for a modern audience, in that they represent a world-view that is not only historically removed from our own, but also politically and emotionally charged.

It is also worth noting that this regimented division of the world, and the visual characteristics of the Four Quarters, was a well-established and popular visual trope of the eighteenth century. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's monumental mural in the Residenz in Würzburg *Allegory of the Planets and Continents, painted in 1752* has four figures of the continents around the edges. Here you can see the figure of America, and here Africa.

It is also important to note that its translation into porcelain figurines was not the brainchild of William Cookworthy, or of the Plymouth Porcelain company. The figure on the left of this slide shows a figure of Europe produced in the Derby factories, roughly contemporaneous with the Cookworthy but copied from an earlier figurine designed and produced by the German Meissen china manufactory, and the one on the right was made in Vauxhall in the early 1760s by Nicholas Crisp. It is identical to the figure of the Americas in the Plymouth collection, and Cookworthy historian Brian Adams has established that Crisp sold Cookworth a number of moulds, including those for the Four Quarters, when the Vauxhall factory closed. These figurines, then are working to tropes of global order and the identity of the continents that were already established and well-popularised by the time Cookworthy set up the Plymouth Porcelain manufactory.

In this narrative and visual manifestation of geographical identity, the decorated surface of the porcelain is important - most obviously in the delineation of race, as it involves the complete covering of the white china surface with a decorative glaze; see America here. Yet what is interesting to me about these figures is that the other major site of decorative work, the fabric that is used to dress the figures, is much less geared to differentiating between the four quarters.

In his work on inventing exoticism in the early modern period, Benjamin Schmidt says that images of the four continents were designed to both distinguish geographical regions and conflate them on the basis of three themes; religion, natural histories, and the production of material goods, and that the attributes of the allegorical figures were almost always those of the goods produced in that part of the world. This is true of these figurines; for example, Asia carries a perfume censer. However, it is not true of the textiles with which the figures are dressed; I have put together this slide deliberately so that the textiles have been divorced from the bodies, and it is difficult to tell them apart.

In dress and textile history and theory, the idea that dress and identity are intimately intertwined it is a familiar one, but in this instance, the identity being expressed is, I would argue, not that of the continents, but that of the consumer for whom these objects were designed. While I don't have time to go into the literature in great detail, research by, amongst others, Hilary Young, Susan Sloboda,

and Christine Jones, have established not only that china of this type was predominantly the object of middle-class consumption, but that decorative figurines such as these, with a relatively low purchase value, were probably the province of female consumption and collecting; this would make sense in the context of the textiles on these figurines as they appear to be based on fashionable textile patterns such as those of the Spitalfields silk designs used in contemporary fashionable clothing.

Therefore, if the surface of these figurines in their original context was a site of sweeping global representations, it was also a means of communicating directly, on a personal level, with the individual consumer, and this dual edge of physical representation and emotive connection is key to ideas about the surface as a site of interaction between object and individual, a problem discussed in some detail by Joseph Amato, and a key theme of our design-led interventions.

Surface acting as a barrier - disrupting the surface is a way of overcoming this. Therefore, if one barrier to contemporary engagement with these objects is a shift in ideas about geographical and racial identities, another is the lack of personal and emotional connection between the historical museum object and the contemporary viewer. In both these instances, it is the surface the provides the barrier, and therefore arguably disrupting the surfaces is the first step to removing these barriers.

As the original objects were appealing both because of their technological innovation and their chiming with contemporary design aesthetics, one of the ways that I have sought to re-normalise these objects and to reintroduce them to the contemporary viewer is by dematerialising and then rematerialising the surfaces, view them through the lens of modern technology and an aesthetic created using new design techniques.

As part of my first design-led exposure to the Cookworthy porcelain sets, and as an example of what was possible, much as the original model makers would have done when they created the negative-form moulds that Cookworthy mistook for the Seasons. Initially, I looked at using hand-held scanners and photogrammetry to capture the figurines as a 3D scan, but these were not capturing the details of the models well. Instead, therefore, we created images of each of the figurines, by using a 365° turntable, and AICON's fixed 3D digitization and measuring system, which is more effective at dealing with complex surface structures. *(I have since rescanned with lidar)*

3D shape acquisition has become a major tool for creating digital 3D surface data in a variety of application fields. Despite the steady increase in accuracy, most available scanning techniques cause severe scanning artifacts such as noise, outliers, holes, or ghost geometry. To apply sophisticated modeling operations on these data sets, substantial post- processing is usually required. What was of interest of course was the reverse of this; it was the disruptive potential of surface; and its potential to create a transgressive surface quality or atmosphere. So the 'fails' became the successes.

Rather than patching the reflected light in the scan, we exploited the variations in surface where the light bounced off the white porcelain to produce voids in the original scans, and then coloured and contoured the images to give them the moulded form, which show the front and back of Cookworthy's *Asia*. These scans not only gave us a way of transforming the physical object into a digital form, but also of altering the object visually by selecting some elements and discarding others. In some way, this is similar to the work of the eighteenth-century modeller, who selected some elements of earlier models and discarded others when recreating the figurines for a new workshops, but in this case the selection has been done by the scanner; the eye of the modeller has been digitised.

Thinking about the way contemporary viewers engage with historical artefacts, Prown (2001) has written persuasively of going beyond the mind's intellectual contact with the past and engaging the senses in different ways in museum contexts, an 'affective mode' of engagement that allows the viewer, figuratively speaking, to more closely engage with those who made, used, and enjoyed these objects without the barrier imposed by historical presuppositions. But Roy (2016) extends this discussion to think about affective modes in terms of museum soundscapes, and following this, the form of the figurines was further abstracted through a musicological lens, with the data points turned into sounds. To achieve this, the objects were flipped laterally so the scan data could be read from left to right. Using a high precision distance measuring laser from Micro-Epsilon, and rotating the scan, a custom-programmed translator and controller module was then used to transform the measured distance values into audible frequencies, notes and scales, with the result that the silhouettes were used to define loops, melodies and rhythms, and the resulting musical piece was transcribed for performance via *Scorecloud*. These notes, arranged into musical phrases, were assigned instruments, and layered together so that in effect the public could hear simultaneously read the objects visually and hear them as a musical score. One particularly interesting consequence of this mode of display is that it allows the contemporary viewer to perceive the object as innovative and new in much the same way that the original consumer might have viewed porcelain figurines, which in their original form now arguably look dated, rather kitsch and contested.

So, while looking at digitized representations of Cookworthy's continents, the audience listened to music that was being live sourced through a custom-built machine learning algorithm designed to learn what results were returned most frequently through specific search terms. In this particular instance, it was programmed to seek out music, without discrimination, and in an international frame, that responded to the search terms, Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas, a proxy that identified the most common, and by inference, the most popular pieces of music, a way of sampling contemporary 'Taste'. This was played through four separate sets of headphones, in front of the digitized images.

This was exhibited in the UK and with each set of headphones laid out in front of a different continent, and therefore the viewer might imagine they were listening to four separate 'feeds' of music, which corresponded to the continent on view, they were in fact listening to the same live music feed split across four sets of headphones, and the content of the feed was not explained in exhibition signage. This was designed not only to encourage viewers to engage with the objects in terms of material that represented a sampling of the contemporary world view about the continents, and therefore to question their own preconceptions about the meaning of the labels 'Asia', 'Europe', 'Africa' and 'The Americas', but also to communicate with one another after listening, and potentially to realise that the feeds they were experiencing were the same. As the aural material was continually selected and adjusted by the algorithm, and as the feed was not repeated, each viewer's experience of the exhibition, while routed in a contemporary geographic hegemony, was inevitably an individual experience.

We are now moving into disrupting whole 3Dprinted figures while in process, using the local and body to control or disrupt the normal print qualities of these objects amongst many other outputs, in textile, clay, music, dance and images.

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