

CONSIDER A CO-OPERATIVE

Modern Clay is based in Digbeth, Birmingham and was set up as a studio project by Mark Essen in 2017 to provide a facility for the production of ceramics. In 2019 Modern Clay changed into an artist led member's co-operative. The studio is run by its seven artist members: Leah Carless, Mark Essen, Joanne Masding, Sophie Mckinney, Suzi Osborn, Laurie Ramsell and Sarah Taylor Silverwood. Modern Clay runs in 3 main interconnecting strands: Artists, Education and Public. The first model of the studio was initially hierarchical, top down Arts Council funded then became self funded, now the studio runs as a Co-op, adopting a circular economy as a way of creating a more sustainable artist-run space.

Historically the co-op movement has been connected to political and social reform. In Birmingham figures such as Mary Ellen Cottrell was a long standing activist in the Women's Co-operative Guild. She was also the first female Labour councillor to serve on the City Council which predated the Co-operative Party but also later stood as the Labour/Co-op candidate. In 1933 the Women's Co-operative Guild introduced the white poppy as a pacifist alternative to the British Legion's annual red poppy appeal. In 1875 the Ten Acres and Stirchley Co-operative Society Limited (TASCOS) was formed by a group of locals. By 1914 the society at its height had over 50 branches and 8,000 members, it had its own dairy, bakery, laundry, coal wharf, works dept, funeral home. It was an independent society, which in 1971, merged with the Birmingham Society.



Birmingham still has active co-ops in Stirchley, Loaf - a bakery, Birmingham Bike Foundry and also two housing Co-operatives. In the city centre the warehouse cafe has recently become a workers co-op. Furthermore, one of the first artist's unions in the world - the Birmingham Potters, established in August 1831 which went onto become Ceramic and Allied Trades Union, this was dissolved in 2015 and joined into Unity the Union.

In the past Modern Clay has provided support for artist opportunities through an initial residency program in 2017 which was funded by the Arts Council England. The funding was good at making a project get off the ground but in many ways but the real hard work is keeping it going. Arts Council England respond well when artists can create an image of culture which can be used to quantify cultural spending. However, in 2019 we're living in a world full of oversaturated images. We need to be really aware that the people we're working with are not exposed just so they can fit into an abstract idea of government art & cultural policy. One of the aims of the studio is to re-position art & culture, we need to move it away from the periphery and into the centre of policy development.

In many ways modern clay is experimenting with these ideas and is testing what an artist's studio can do and who it can engage with. Encouraging Artists to move away from an art orientated practice and into a field of wider engagement where creativity can be useful to society.

The co-operative model is by its nature a model of interdependence. It is a different sort of business model that exercises democratic control, promoting equality, responsibility and care between its members. Practising collectively is an important part of our decision to become a co-op. Through the repeated practice of working collectively we can counter the prevalence of neoliberal working structures and their emphasis on individualism. The co-op is almost the antithesis of neoliberal working, it doesn't care about free-market capitalism and is certainly not interested in the luxury goods market, although we can have the ability to sell goods and services. At the same time, it can generate value through dwelling between craft and fine art, breaking down the barriers of how you can access maker spaces. We need to remember there is always an alternative way, convention always needs to be challenged, even the seemingly radical artist run space.



The ideas and ethos that inform our activity is that Artists are part of the delicate ethea of society which is the accumulation of knowledge, behaviour and skill. Part of this is the cultural competence of a city and the social status or standing of an individual within that society. A city must be trusted not only to preserve but also to create and invent its cultural capital, akin to the roman myth of Janus we must not only look back but also create the new cultural dialogue of a city. This creation of cultural dialogue is one aspect that the arts can enrich. Our co-operative model has a responsibility to be of benefit to the community, through core artistic and creative values: we have a belief that artists can bring change and benefit culture and society. We must learn how individuals and communities can develop our human self-awareness. We are keen to practice a

non-hierarchical cultural policy where we can create a space for all levels of artist's engagement. We are trying work between the facets of the social and cultural realities within communities.

We do this by breaking down the access to art and craft making, we have an outreach educational programme which has a focus of working with the various charities based around the local Digbeth area. We work mainly with the homeless community because of the various hostels and charities that are based within walking distance of the studio. We work with them to offer regular workshops or project based access, working with these groups offers respite to people often in very difficult and unplanned situations. The workshops create the space for new experiences, developing skills and feelings of accomplishment, as well as providing the opportunity to socialise with others in a similar position. Initially offering artistic workshops to those in need could seem frivolous but it offers key psychological

fulfilment of belongingness, collective wellbeing, a feeling of accomplishment and achieving potential. We see this as being in the middle section of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Often people in these workshops enter with low confidence and self-esteem, often commenting that they haven't made anything since school or saying they can't do this. With perseverance we teach them to make something from nothing and slowly change their belief in what they can achieve. After working with us over a period of time we hope they can apply this process of making something from nothing to other areas in



their life. Fundamentally the process of creativity is something which is taught and honed during art school education. Our co-op members are made up by people who studied at art school and can apply these skills in workshops. This is also useful to get artists to develop a practice which is non-art oriented but focused on people who can use creativity productively.

The studio is constantly working to explore the reciprocating actions of this relationship of Artists, Education and Public. This summer we have started running an Art School where the public

can sign up for workshops in the studio run by studio co-op members. There is a subtle cadence which further breaks down access to craft, the studio is free for the participants on our outreach education program but the public can also pay for the same experience. The modern clay art school is a good way of engaging the public access to craft, offering a breadth of workshops which compliments the co-op membership.



Modern Clay is also working with artist Sofia Niazi, who is currently in Birmingham on the Wheatley fellowship at the Birmingham City University. We've found a way of working where we can share ways of working similarities between the studio and Rabbits Road Press. In this kind of creative exchange, a friendship as structure for working. They have helped us get up to speed with running a public art school, we've learned a lot about how RRP run which is similar to modern clay

although the material is different. In exchange we helped RRP produce a range of bowls and mugs specially to use during their summer school. This type of activity is useful to the studio as it helps us gain knowledge and learn from others.

We're interested in expanding and contributing to the art ecology that we are part of - stimulating the local community to provide opportunity for others and to sustain the wider function of artists working in the area. We work closely with our studio providers Grand Union who have overwhelmingly supported modern clay from the very start and still continues to support us, which we are very grateful for.



This summer we have been collaborating with their Collaborative Programme Curator Jo Capper with 'The Growing Project', working with residents of a local homeless hostel we've been making plates and dinnerware at Modern Clay for a harvest dinner using produce from their newly established garden. Within this interdisciplinary project the residents of the hostel tend and grow the garden



which has been set up by the project in the hostel. At the same time, we're running workshops in the studio to make plates with a women's group from SIFA Fireside and also the hostel residents. This is a multidisciplinary project deepens the engagements with the artist and homeless communities in digbeth.

The plate making is an integral part of the project, it breaks out from the surroundings of the garden and hostel to strengthen the group by working in a new situation. The objective for the group is to make 60 plates for a Harvest Dinner as well as 24 serving bowls which they can design, allowing individuals within the community to carry out their own design concepts while also facilitating the production of food, cooking and eating. It gives this community a reason to do something and a place in society when they are in a position of being pushed away by it.



The Harvest Dinner brings together all those who have been apart of the project, we've also invited key political and business figures in the city. The idea is that uniting these groups of people diametrically opposed in society can have the potential to start a real conversation for change. We are living in a toxic political climate and we must learn to work with oppositional energy to bring people together to form a political platform for change.