

Penance Practices Used as an Artistic Research Method

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Abstract

This article presents 'Penance Practices', an art project started in 2017 and consisting of a large number of porcelain sculptures. Most of the works pictured in this article originate in this art project and have featured in various exhibitions in Norway. The project is based on a critical perspective related to society and to politics and is inspired by one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church: the *sacrament of penance and reconciliation*, also known as the *sacrament of confession*. My artistic research method will be discussed in relation to the connection between art and religious concepts. My methods will also be discussed in relation to other artists, as well as to the process of making the porcelain sculptures in my studio.

Keywords: artistic research, political art, porcelain, oil industry, ideology, sacrament of penance

Introduction

I am a ceramist and sculptor, and I mostly create porcelain objects combined with various materials and expressions. My artwork derives from an interest in politics and ethical dilemmas, and this is reflected in my work. This art project started in 2017,

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inspired by a religious rite, the sacrament of penance and reconciliation. Based on this rite, I have developed a set of strict rules that guide the artistic approach to my work. The method might seem quite simple at first, yet it has brought new potential and new meaning to my work.

During my art education at the end of the 20th century, I learned traditional crafting methods in clay and slip casting with porcelain. Nevertheless, my art and design education was influenced by the direction in the craft field at the time. The anthology *Six Views on a Practice in Change*, edited by the Swedish craft and design critic Love Jönsson, will be discussed in this article since it brings interesting perspectives to the contemporary craft scene that influenced my artistic research methods at the beginning of my career.

Art as social critique often services as motivation and inspiration in my projects. In this project I chose to focus on climate shame and climate grief, both of which are political and emotional issues pointing at ethical dilemmas representative of our time. Through my art practice I use means and forms of expression other than the political discourse in general. I will use the sacrament of penance as a method and artistic approach to reflect on a phenomenon which I will describe as a collective, as well as personal, feeling of guilt and grief over Norway's role as an oil nation. This will be discussed in the light of Emile Durkheim's theories on religion as a binding force or moral community. The boundaries between art and religion, as well as my own experience with religious art, have also been a natural part of my research. In religious terms, the act of penance is often a contemplative act of repentance and reconciliation, like repetitive rituals or pilgrim walks. By using an ecclesiastical sacrament as a method, I seek a deeper meaning in the act of making art.

The ritualistic and repetitive nature inherent in this sacrament formed a new approach to my artistic method when creating sculptures in my studio. This way of working is also recognizable to other artists. In this article I will use their practice as a reference for the way in which I approach difficult topics through my own practice. I find it particularly interesting to study Francis Alÿs' works, where he uses himself and his body through ritual walks, and in that way comments on political conflicts. The Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic is also relevant in relation to my artistic method in this project. In her way of revealing her own pain, I find an echo of my guilt and sorrow over climate changes. Another important reference in the development of my artistic method is On Kawara. His approach to painting requires a strong commitment, and the idea often holds a conceptual meaning. His art concepts led to new insights and further development of my own artistic potential. In this article I wish

to reflect on how 'Penance Practices' was developed as an artistic method based on a religious rite. The background for this artistic concept and the reflections I have gained will be described through texts and images.

Artistic method: The vow

The act of penance is used as a conceptual base for this art project. The original idea was to reuse my old plaster molds as a way of compensating for society's overconsumption. As the project developed, this gradually acquired a comprehensive and conceptual meaning. I have made a vow to follow four rules for creating porcelain sculptures in my studio:

Rules for Penance Practices:

Rule no. 1. The artwork in my studio will from now on be an act of penance and reconciliation.

Rule no. 2. Every new porcelain sculpture is to be made only from my previous plaster molds, as an ascetic act.

Rule no. 3. Never destroy imperfect sculptures. Every casted form will be considered as part of the art project, even if they are broken or seem imperfect.

Rule no. 4. The act will be repeated over and over again and will last as long as Norway continues to extract oil.



Figure 1. Working in the studio, Nesodden, Norway, 2022. Photo: Gunhild Vatn. ©



Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5. Top to the left; The collection with all the plaster molds. Top to the right and below; Working in the studio with slip casting of porcelain, Nesodden, Norway, 2022. Photo: Gunhild Vatn. ©

Skilled hands

I have worked with porcelain slip casting in plaster molds for nearly thirty years. The molds are originally handmade, created in the course of my 30 years of art production. In this project, I have created small porcelain objects based entirely on these molds. This process consists of step-by-step actions that must be done in a specific order and within a specific amount of time. When the porcelain objects come out of the mold, they are soft, and can be modeled together with porcelain slip (liquid porcelain) into new shapes. This process requires patience and caution, as the material is very fragile and can easily break into pieces. After the sculptures have dried, they are fired in a ceramic kiln and then carefully sanded and sometimes coated with glaze in different colors and glosses before they are fired once more. Making sculptures in porcelain using traditional crafting techniques is a very slow process, and the skills I have acquired over the years lie in my hands. In a research process, skill is crucial for gaining new experiences; it enables me to know exactly what to do and to understand what the next step in the process should be. In his book entitled *Basics of Artistic Research*, Juha Varto writes that 'manual skills are not derived from thought, and thought is not derived from the functions of the hand'. Through our hands we can relate to the existence of objects. Our manual skills will deepen our knowledge of the object, since our thoughts derive from an existing consciousness of our own bodies, the activity in which thoughts will open the way (Varto, 2009, p. 48). In my work I have experienced the benefits of being skilled, and how I expand my horizon by creating things with my own hands. This perspective is also highlighted by the sociologist Richard Sennett in his ambitious book *The Craftsman*. He emphasizes the craftsman's exercise of his skills as a rhythm, like committing to a duty, which is endlessly repeated, just as a religious ritual that must be repeated to be persuasive. Developing specialized manual skills requires a lot of practice, deep concentration, technical development, and experimentation through the touch of one's hands (Sennett, 2008, pp. 177–178). This is relevant to my artistic method and will be discussed further in this article. I work with body-related objects with certain functions that allude to our existence and cultural development. These objects are materialized in porcelain through a traditional casting technique. I have acquired this knowledge through my own practice over the years and through the skills of ceramists through many generations before me. Being skilled gives room for reflection. By repeatedly doing the same steps, like a ritual, the creation of each new porcelain sculpture becomes a meditative process (Figures 1–5). A contemplative act of repentance and reconciliation that allows me to reflect on the conceptual potential of these objects.

Contemporary Craft as social critique

Performing social critique through art has always been the main source of motivation in my work. My sculptures meet the viewer in a gallery room or are stored in museum collections. The ever-growing numbers of new arenas for communication in social media are changing our awareness of art. Perhaps this also creates a need for expression that lingers longer or that invites contemplation. In a publication related to the exhibition *Slow Art* at the National Museum in Stockholm, Cilla Robach reflects on the time aspect of the artistic process. The idea of craft as a source of quality of life is not new, nor is using art and craft as a social critique. The conceptual craft scene of the 20th century has been analyzed and discussed in a number of exhibitions and publications in Scandinavia. The *laspis* project *Craft in Dialogue* (2003–2006) contributed to increasing visibility in the field (Robach, 2012). The anthology *Craft in Dialogue: Six Views on a Practice in Change*, edited by Love Jönsson, is relevant for reflecting on the potential in craft-based art objects to convey socio-political issues, a direction and trend Jönsson identified in the craft scene at the time when I was starting my career.

In the same anthology, Kristina Niedderer raises awareness about the expressive potential of function. In her essay she writes that craft has a creative and expressive potential due to its ambiguous position between art and design. In a design object, function plays a central role in defining the object and its use. As for (visual) arts, the meaning of an object often becomes a metaphor for something else, such as a conceptual function yet is fundamentally different from the pragmatic function of a design object (Niedderer, 2005, pp. 47, 48, 49). This essay provides several interesting reflections that correlate with my own art practice. My sculptures normally originate in familiar objects with a certain function but are recreated in porcelain to express a conceptual meaning, used as a metaphor to express something else.

In his essay *Life among Things*, Love Jönsson reflects on the meaning of *things* in craft, and on the strong tradition and historical link to everyday necessities in crafted objects. Nevertheless, there has been a tendency in craft to turn away from traditional ties to function and practical use (Jönsson, 2005, pp. 81–83). According to Jönsson, the narrative and symbolically laden sculptural trend, especially in ceramics, has historical references to the Pop and Funk ceramics of the 1960s art scene in the United States. Political content has become more common, but sculptural ceramics still reflect on traditional everyday utility objects (Ibid, 2005, p. 89). I was part of this contemporary craft scene, which came about at the beginning of my career, and it made an impact on the development of my artistic research

methods. The American ceramic art scene has inspired and motivated my art practice. Early in my career, I saw an exhibition entitled *Confrontational Clay* that was shown in several galleries in the United States as well as in Norway. The exhibition highlighted the work of 25 artists which the curator Judith Schwartz would identify as the core of a new movement. The exhibition presented artists who used the ceramic medium completely unbound by tradition (Schwartz, 2008, p. 13). I found this exhibition tremendously inspiring, and it has influenced my artistic practice ever since. Inspired by this direction in craft early in my career, I found the courage to use a material as exclusive and delicate as porcelain to create a confrontational expression in my sculptures, such as *Grand Speculum* (Figure 6), which depicts a large gynecological instrument used on horses. I mostly seek inspiration from the contemporary art scene rather than from ceramic art or craft, as will be discussed further in this article.



Figure 6. Gunhild Vatn 'Grand Speculum'. Porcelain, stainless steel. 35 x 16 x 20 cm Oslo; 2000.
Photo: Gunhild Vatn. ©

The body as field of action

My earlier art projects often relate to gender issues, depicting implements such as gynecological tools and instruments used for circumcising women, but also equipment used on animals, such as bridle bits and nose rings for bulls, and agricultural machinery. Traces of human civilizations often describe objects that refer to our existence and cultural development. Our technical development might also be seen as a story of overcoming the limitations of the body, and objects relating to the body thus become important and charged objects. The material expression in porcelain is an important part of my artistic exploration to create an illusion of industrial perfection as well as of exclusive intimacy. In porcelain I try to create ambiguous expressions that are simultaneously beautiful and disturbing, as described by Jönsson in his essay:

These sculptures refer to bodily pain, transferred into exquisite white porcelain sculptures, with connotations of power, correction, and control. The perfect industrial appearance of the sculpture's distances them from the reality the objects originally derive from: the pain of a surgical operation, the constraint of a bridle. (Jönsson, 2005)

Ritual pain

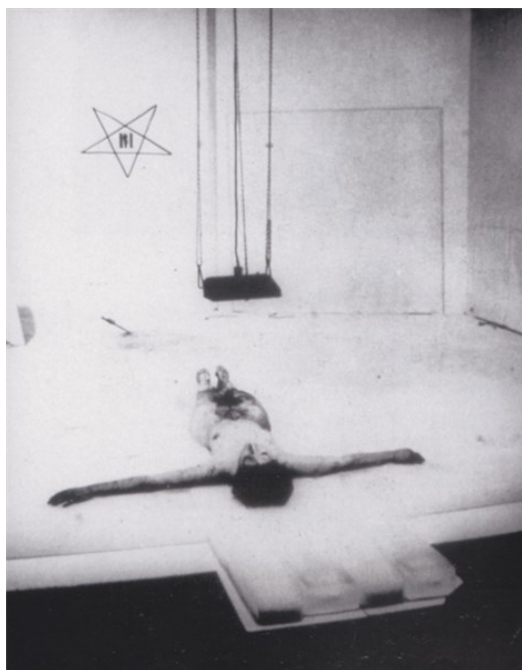


Figure 7. Abramović performing 'Lips of Thomas' at the Krinzinger Gallery, Innsbruck. 1975. Marina Abramovic ©.

In 'Penance Practices' my art production has turned into a ritual of penance which I perform alone in my studio (rule no. 1). Penal rituals such as voluntary self-flagellation with the aim of achieving spiritual transformation still exist in the Catholic Church, (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 14). There are many examples of artists who use rituals and religious symbols in their art practice. Of particular interest in this context is the work of Serbian artist Marina Abramović. In her performance *Lips of Thomas* at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck 1975, she performed self-flagellation, deliberately inflicting pain upon herself as part of the performance without showing any outward signs of motion or discomfort. In doing so, she put her audience in a deeply disturbing and agonizing position, evoking a range of

associations, challenging the audience's limit for how much pain they could bear to watch. Some members of the audience eventually put an end to it by removing her from the ice cross she had been lying on for about 30 minutes (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 11-16). Abramović's performance offers interesting reflections on my own research methods, due to some similarities in the symbolically laden objects, the references to bodily pain, and to the way she performs a ritual act as part of her art project. My artwork is turned into a ritual act, but unlike Abramovic, the ritual I perform is a solitary act, more introvert than extrovert; no one is present when I perform the penance act in my studio. In contrast to Abramovich's ritual and bodily pain, the ritual I perform involves no physical pain, yet it requires endurance and commitment, and is a symbolic act of grief and guilt.

The sacred

In this project, I chose to use a Christian ritual of penance as an artistic method (rule no.1). In Western art history, ecclesiastical motives and subjects have been widely used as an expression of religious, political, or philosophical issues. Emile Durkheim, one of the most important figures in sociology and author of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), a highly influential book on religion, is of particular interest for this project. Durkheim's ideas have also been used by many others to understand the importance of religious practice in society. According to K Ward (2019), Durkheim proposed the idea of 'the sacred' as the key element in religion, not as an existing spiritual reality or as connected to personal beliefs or truth-claims, but rather as something that could inspire awe and that is worthy of devotion. 'The sacred' can be material objects symbolizing collective ideals and social constructions of specific groups. Ward defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite religion as a binding force or a moral community (Ward, 2019, pp. 12–13). Philip Mellor refers to Durkheim, stating that at the heart of religious life it is important to be in contact with 'the sacred' through ritual processes. Rituals provide how emotional energy can be intensified and are often related to cyclical patterns of social life such as those we find in feasts and piacular rites (Mellor, 2013, p. 292).

Religious rituals and divine art

In Christianity, religious rituals are grounded in personal belief and religious practice, but in my experience, many Christian rituals or ceremonies still exist in our secular society as expressions of cultural and social commitment. We get married, we celebrate Christmas and Easter holydays. These are joyful rites, but there are sad celebrations as well, such as the funeral rites we perform in church at the loss of loved ones, united in a piacular rite (Durkheim, 1915 p. 390). Even if we do not

always commit to a personal belief, in my experience we are bound together in such rites, which can provide relief and comfort when we are burdened by guilt, grief or despair. According to Durkheim, it is the unity and diversity of social life that binds us together in ascetic as well as piacular rites as a representation of beliefs (Ibid 1915, p. 414).

Ecclesiastical rituals are often accompanied by art and music. When I was a child, my parents would often take me to church in connection with religious feasts or rehearsals in the church choir. I could sit for hours listening to Bach or Händel, fascinated by the paintings, the wooden carved sculptures and the magnificent stained-glass ornaments that adorned the church. My parents would never impose their religious beliefs on me, but the sacred rituals felt natural, and through them, my eyes were opened to the wonderful experience of art that created a sense of something divine. In my experience, both art and religious rites can relieve grief and pain and evoke strong emotions beyond what words could ever express. This may be essential when it comes to political, philosophical and ethical issues, which is why I wanted to use a religious ritual as an artistic methodological entry point.

The paradox of praxis

By turning my work into a ritual act, I seek something more than what materializes in the porcelain sculptures that come out of my studio. The act has a political as well as a ritual dimension, which I can relate to the work of the artist Francis Alÿs:

Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic.

This is the subtitle of Francis Alÿs' project and film *The Green Line* (Alÿs, 2004). Many of Alÿs' works are based on journeys. His artwork is often made in response to the places he has visited or to societal or economic crises or political impasses. He would travel the world like a nomad, and many of his works also have the character of endless walks. An example of such a walk was in Jerusalem, with reference to the 'green line' from 1948. In 2004, Alÿs walked along this line, carrying a box filled with green paint. The bottom of the box was perforated with a small hole, allowing the paint to drip and form a continuous meandering green line on the ground, tracing his journey as he walked (Gieskes, 2014). The strong political dimension and poetic expression in this and several other works resonate in my own approach to creating art from a political point of view. Although the conflict this work refers to is the center of one of the most complex and insoluble wars, I still find the expression quiet and subdued, and reminiscent of ritual acts.

Alÿs' many walks have a monotonous character, of something repetitive and persistent, such as *Paradox of Praxis*, where he states that 'sometimes making something leads to nothing'. The film depicts a simple and seemingly pointless exercise; for nine hours, Alÿs struggled with a large block of ice that was pushed through the city streets until it melted away to a pond of meltwater (Alÿs, 2009). This paradox resonates with me when all the work I put into my art practice can sometimes feel meaningless, or when a work perishes, as often happens when working with fragile porcelain. Yet it can be significant simply because it made sense to make it.

The Road to Canossa

In religious terms, *the act of penance* can also be recognized as a contemplative act with a monotonous and repetitive character, like a repetitive ritual or a pilgrim walk. The most famous pilgrim walk is perhaps associated with King Henry IV when he walked to Canossa Castle in Italy to seek absolution and revocation of his excommunication by Pope Gregory VII, who was staying as the guest of Margravine Matilda of Tuscany (Reuter, 2006, p. 147). The expression 'the Road to Canossa' (in Norwegian: *Kanossagang*) refers to an act of penance or submission, often in the sense of being humble. In the 'Penance Practices' project I set the rule of using only *previous* plaster molds accumulated from my career as a ceramist as an ascetic and pious act (rule no. 2). This led to reflection on earlier art projects as well as on my role as an artist. It can be a humble and ascetic life, with long hours and little pay, but I am grateful for the meaningful tasks and difficult challenges it gives me. Reflecting on the role of the artist, I sometimes feel as if I am walking the road to Canossa. I chose to use the *act of penance* as an artistic approach, referring to the humility of the artist.

My mother's words still ring in my ears

Although I was not raised in a strict Christian religion, I grew up in a community characterized by some pietist norms. Frugality, humility, and piety were highly regarded virtues. '*Don't spend more than you need and share with those who need it more*' my mother would always say to me. Later I became less aware of those ideals, perhaps as a form of opposition against the pietistic culture of frugality in which I grew up. Becoming part of a consumer culture expressing freedom and identity, in which I believe today is regarded as one of our society's highest virtues. Surely, I value those virtues, but I keep questioning myself whether my consumption comes partly at the expense of future generations. Norway is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, a democracy with values that are highly regarded and which I deeply

appreciate. But one could question the way in which we came to be such a prosperous country. And those prudent virtues that my mother preached suddenly ring in my ears again.

Oil ethics

Pietism and its strict adherence to rules has been essential in the development of my artistic method in this art project. Religious institutions have always had a strong impact on moral and ethical standards in our society, which is why I wanted to use a religious ritual as an artistic method, to reflect on a political matter and a personal feeling of guilt and sorrow over Norwegian oil production. Once the source of prosperity and equality, oil extraction in the North Sea is now creating complex political and ethical dilemmas related to our identity as an oil nation (Vatn/Bergaust, 2020 Album, p. 195). The oil industry has played a crucial role in Norway's industrial development and prosperity since the discovery of the Ekofisk oil field in 1969. However, Norwegian oil production has created several ethical dilemmas and has caused political disagreement for decades (Vatn, 2020, pp. 81–96).

Contemporary art and activism

In my experience, being an artist comes from a desire to create and to express oneself. But the opportunity to show art in public space also brings a responsibility, and I have always felt obliged to use my voice in something that has importance beyond myself.

In the essay *Uncertain Realities: Art, Anthropology, and Activism*, Christopher Wright writes about whether art, anthropology, and activism fold into each other – or not. These disciplines have in common that they use reality as a material, they question what constitutes it, and they even attempt to affect reality and change it. If art is to comment on crisis, this will always be related to a specific context (Wright, 2018). As an artist, I often work with these aspects, and most of my art projects are related to a political or social context. Oil extraction in the North Sea represents a complex political and ethical dilemma related to our identity as an oil nation and is one of the most difficult and polarizing political conflicts in Norway today. It is what eventually led to my vow, as expressed in rule no. 4: The act will be repeated over and over and will last as long as Norway continues to extract oil.

Collective consciousness

In my opinion, the political agenda in Norway and the high level of conflict over this matter may eventually lead to a form of collective guilt, like a perception of reality that

creates an experience out of a moral community. In my art project, this experience is translated into performative action that refers to a collective consciousness.

According to Mellor, Emile Durkheim expresses this as a collective, emotional power that exists in the hearts and minds of individuals. (Mellor, 2013, p. 292), The 'Penance Practices' project refers to a collective as well as to a personal sense of guilt over living at the expense of my children and future generations. The ambivalence between the desire for material wealth and feelings of guilt have had a strong impact on my art production.

On Kawara's Date paintings

In this art project, I have a conceptual approach to my work in the studio as an act of penance. The Japanese artist On Kawara and his Date paintings have been an important reference in the development of my artistic research (Figure 8). On Kawara settled in New York in the mid-1960s and was part of the conceptual art community of that time. Kawara's painting skills were an important part of the expression, and one of the features that distinguishes Kawara from other conceptualists; he was deeply devoted to painting as a practice. His paintings are produced according to a very strict set of rules, a kind of protocol (Weiss, 2015). The Today series contained nearly 3,000 acrylic paintings that show only the date, month and year in which there were made. If Kawara could not finish a day's painting by midnight, he destroyed it. It was hard work, and he missed on many occasions (Schjeldahl, 2015). In connection with the 'Silence' exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 2015, Peter Schjeldahl, an art critic in *The New Yorker* magazine, compared the 'Today series' with Albert Camus' *the Myth of Sisyphus*. The repetitive action of painting is like rolling a stone uphill that promptly rolls back, an action that is seemingly pointless (Ibid, 2015).



Figure 8. Installation view: *On Kawara - Silence*, February 6–May 3, 2015, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photograph by David Heald © Reprinted with permission from Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

Devotion to the material

In my own work I can relate to Kawara's determination in the *Today* series. When I started the 'Penance Practices' project in 2017, the creation of each porcelain sculpture in my studio was as a contemplative and repetitive act of confession and penance. This project has many similarities with Kawara's project: the concept of following strict rules as an artistic concept, and his devotion to the material and commitment to perfection. My porcelain sculptures do not have any directly visual references to Kawara's *Date* paintings, yet his *Today* series had an impact on the development of my research. Kawara's strong affection for the practice of painting correlates with my fascination for porcelain. I have been deeply devoted to porcelain ever since I first tried sculpting with it. I want to make sculptures with fine details and an expression of material perfection. The sculptures are cast in plaster molds and carefully assembled into complex porcelain sculptures. This method is suitable to create shapes with the industrial precision I seek. The work in my studio led to a large number of sculptures in porcelain, composed in various installations, as an ornamental rhythm to emphasize the repetitiveness of the process by which they were created.

Dreams and disappointments

This process includes the reuse of older plaster molds (rules no. 1 and 2) as a kind of ascetic act, a journey in my entire art production, like a walk to Canossa. Certain motives will be repeated, and elements from earlier sculptures might be recognized, but since they are assembled in new constellations, they take on a new appearance. When I pick up an old mold, I often find remnants of failed projects that remind me of my disappointments or of what I did not get right. Working with porcelain can sometimes be harsh, and this beautiful material can be unpredictable and capricious. In porcelain lies the beauty of my dreams, the shape of my ambitions, but also the depth of my disappointments. After the porcelain sculptures are fired, the truth is revealed. Some days I am crushed, and think of the myth of Sisyphus, working for days in my studio with a sculpture, only to pull a contorted shape out of my kiln, with no resemblance to my hopes and expectations. Other days are filled with ecstatic joy at the divine beauty of porcelain. I can find great joy in rediscovering an old forgotten shape that can be recreated into new porcelain sculptures that give new meaning. This gives me new perspectives on my previous art projects, as replicas from older plaster molds are reborn. When the porcelain objects come out of the mold, they are still soft and can be modeled together, as earlier described. (*Figure 2-5*). The old shapes offer many possibilities and combinations for creating new sculptures. This is where much of my artistic research lies, exploring how shapes can fit together in different ways; what new visual expressions will appear? Sometimes they are even torn into pieces and then modeled together again into something completely new, and I can find something interesting in the shapes I previously rejected and destroyed.

This ascetic act is part of the vow I made to reuse all my older molds, even the bad ones, and to accept my own failures, and to include the imperfect and distorted porcelain misfits in my exhibitions, as a kind of *artistic confession* (rules no. 2 and 3). The feeling of disappointment and failure is also one aspect of being an artist. I still seek perfection in my artistic approach, but 'misfits' which once were hidden or destroyed are now exposed. I have even become more attached to the twisted misshapes and to their ability to express something other than the perfect industrial appearance. These fragile and weathered forms can create a contrast to the industrial perfection and remind us of our own vulnerability.



Figure 9. Gunhild Vatn, 'Penance Practices'. Porcelain sculptures, detail, Nesoddparken Art Hall, Nesodden, 2020. Photo: Gunhild Vatn. ©

Artistic re-search

This project has been a contemplative and self-reflective process, *re*-discovering my previous artwork through transformation of old sculptures into new, always building something new based on previous art processes, searching among my old plaster molds with new interest and curiosity, like following pilgrim trail. The British anthropologist Tim Ingold states that research in its literal sense is an 'act of searching again'. When we search, we are looking for the truth: 'then there must always be more to research than a collection and analysis of data'. When we search again, that is to say when we re-search, we search not only for the truth, but also for

a new beginning or a path towards something that is not already formed. Being in the research process is a kind of 'knowing-in-being' (Ingold, 2018 - IV). The exploration often consists of making the same shape many times over, with only small changes from time to time, repeatedly doing the same steps, like a slow rhythm. This method gives me time to reflect, I understand more of the potential in each original shape. Reflections on old shapes create ideas for new sculptures, yet the development of a new sculpture is often quite intuitive, and my mood or state of mind can often be recognized in the finished piece. Naturally, this can create a wide range of expressions, since my mood changes from day to day. Often, I only realize this afterwards when a sculpture turns out to be humorous or sad or shows traces of anger or frustration. Most of the sculptures are kept in the pure white porcelain color, but sometimes I am in the mood for a black or red glaze, or I might add other details and materials. References to the subject of oil is not obvious in the visual representation except in a very few sculptures, where a small black droplet might create a disturbing contrast to the exquisite white porcelain (*Figure 11*).

In 'Penance Practices' project, my *re-search* was literally *re-discovering* previous shapes and turning them into new sculptures (Figure 10). A contemplative process of repetition and reflection, not with the aim of completing the project by reaching the end of the track, but by *being in* the process, searching again from a different angle, looking for a new beginning or way into something that was already formed.



Figure 10. Gunhild Vatn. 'Penance Practices' Porcelain sculptures, detail from installation. Buskerud Art Center, Drammen, Norway. 2018. Photo: Anders Bergersen. ©

Walking back along the path of my art practice

The materialization of functional objects into expressions in porcelain has been the main subject of my art practice. Only fragments of the original function remain, transformed into unrecognizable objects that express something different from those from which they originally derived. Nevertheless, an observant viewer may still find hidden traces of a gynecological instrument or a horse bridle.

To summarize my project 'Penance Practices' I chose to use *the sacrament of penance* as a methodological approach. Based on this rite, I have developed a set of strict rules for my work in the studio. The aim of this method is to reflect on the collective and personal feelings of guilt over Norway's role as an oil nation. I chose this rite in my art practice because of the strong potential of religious rituals to evoke strong emotions or to create a collective consciousness (Mellor, 2013, p. 292). I can relate my art practice and my ritual of penance to how other artists approach similar topics, such as Alys' ritual walks, Abramovic's endurance and Kawara's devotion to the material and his commitment to the conceptual idea in his Date paintings. By

studying their practice, I have gained new knowledge and a deeper understanding of my own work. This project has taught me humility, provided new insight and perspectives on my role as an artist, and has developed my research methodology. My artistic research method is mainly *remaking* previous shapes in new constellations, like a slow, rhythmic ritual. By making new sculptures in porcelain entirely from my old plaster molds, my artwork has become an ascetic and contemplative act of penance and reconciliation, reflecting my art career in general as well serving as a kind of confession. Through this practice, the meaning of my sculptures is acquired through the act of *making* them.



Figure 11 (left). Figure 12 (right). Gunhild Vatn. 'Penance Practices'. Porcelain, and nose ring in brass. Detail from installation at Buskerud Art Center, Drammen, Norway. 2018. Photo: Anders Bergersen. ©

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