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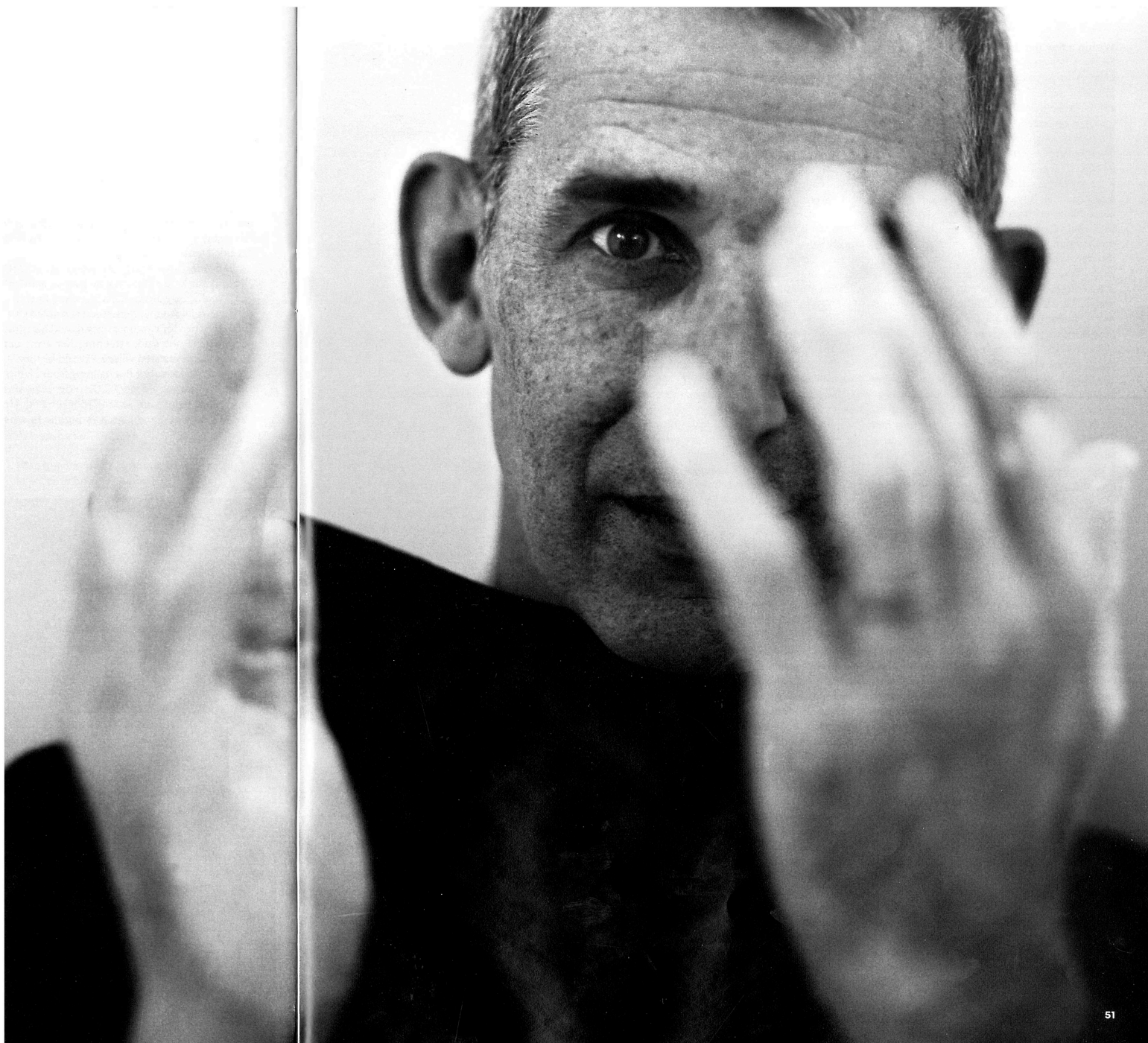
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times Magazine

Thinking With His Hands  
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*Photographs by Jack Davison*

THE  
SCULPTOR  
AND WRITER  
EDMUND  
DE WAAL  
WANTS US TO  
REDISCOVER  
OUR SENSE  
OF TOUCH —  
THROUGH  
THE STRANGE  
ALCHEMY OF  
PORCELAIN.





**Within a few** minutes of my meeting Edmund de Waal, he was putting things in my hands. He handed me, for instance, a 1,000-year-old Chinese porcelain plate — the kind of object you would expect to see in a climate-controlled glass case in a museum, protected, at great expense, from clumsy, meaty, oily, inexperienced hands like mine. De Waal just passed it to me as if it were nothing. To understand an object, he believes, you have to touch it.

In my fingers, the plate felt both fragile and indestructible. It was older than printed books, older than every traceable generation of my family. I could have snapped it in half or thrown it on the floor. Instead, I just stood there, probing its edges with my finger pads, weighing it in my palms, tracing the precise volume of space that it was displacing in the world. If all went well, this delicate thing would outlive us all by many more generations. My fingers felt this as they felt the plate. I was touching not only space but time.

De Waal kept handing me objects: perfect things, ruined things, priceless things, worthless things. We were standing in the room where he writes, in his studio in London, and he was pulling these specimens off a shelf near his desk. He is 51 and very tall, with short slate-gray hair and round glasses that rest on large, protrusive ears: ears that are somehow childish, ears to be grown into. He has unusually big hands, too; all the objects looked relaxed and at home in them, like young birds in the grasp of an animal handler. He passed me an imperial stem cup, many hundreds of years old, the rim of which seemed to be wilting. “It’s collapsed in on itself,” he said, “but look at the *fineness* of it.”

He handed me a rough lump of Cherokee clay: a clod of petrified dirt, a meatball from outer space. He handed me shard after shard of ancient porcelain dishes. He seemed delighted by all the ruination. “Part of the DNA of porcelain is getting messed up,” he said. One of the shards was a big, chunky encrustation that looked like a particularly ugly seashell. It was, de Waal said, an odd overlapping of worlds: porcelain that had been cooked too hot, so that its delicate white layers had fused, permanently, with their rough outer molds; perfection and failure welded together into something more interesting than either on its own.

De Waal is himself multiple things fused together, an odd overlapping of worlds. He is, first of all, one of the most celebrated living potters. His stark white porcelain vessels, painstakingly arranged in groups on shelves, can be found in private collections throughout Europe and North America, as well as in the permanent collections of such august institutions as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. He is also one of the most adventurous nonfiction writers at work today. His 2010 book, “The Hare With Amber Eyes,” was a surprise best seller and is now being turned into a film. It is a memoir told through objects: a collection of 264 small Japanese carvings called

netsuke, whimsical and intricate depictions, in ivory or wood, of hungry wolves or ripe fruit or sleeping servants or couples making love. Netsuke are roughly the size of a walnut shell. They are designed to be handled: carried in pockets, compulsively tumbled around in your fingers.

In the book, de Waal traces the history of these intricate little sculptures, which he inherited from his great-uncle Iggy, from 18th-century Japan to 19th-century Paris to Holocaust-era Vienna, where they were hidden in a mattress by the family’s maid to protect them from the Nazis. Through meticulous research, he tried to resurrect all of the many hands that have tumbled them over the centuries. The tiny netsuke become great repositories of human experience; they contain generations of Jewish aspiration, delusion, exile and loss.

De Waal’s new book, “The White Road,” is about porcelain — the substance’s unexpectedly dramatic voyage, over the last 1,000 years, from one magic white hill in China, the original source of the clay, to the rest of the clamoring world: Versailles, Dresden, England and even concentration camps in Germany. (Hitler was one of history’s many porcelain-obsessed megalomaniacs.) Coming from a more orthodox mind, de Waal’s stories, and his pots, might have turned out to be dull, dry, obscure, conventional and neatly contained. Instead, they are poetic and sprawling. “The White Road” is a verbal extension of his lifelong work in ceramics. The writing and the porcelain are inseparable now; they lean on one another like the inside and outside of a pot.

At the end of our first handling session, after all of those clods and shards, de Waal passed me the only thing in the room that he didn’t seem to like: a perfect 18th-century porcelain bowl from Dresden, painted intricately with fruit and flowers. “It’s hugely valuable,” he said. “It’s incredibly made. And it’s absolutely horrible. It’s just bourgeois hell. This is why people don’t like porcelain: because it’s precious. It hasn’t got that fierce intensity.”

He rotated the bowl in his hands, long fingers probing, searching, weighing. He told me that part of him wanted to break it with a hammer, but that he couldn’t quite manage to work up the courage. (He inherited it from his grandmother.) So he put the perfect bowl back on the shelf.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “There are more things to pick up.”

**Edmund de Waal** made his first pot when he was 5. The local art college had a night class; he asked to go; he fell in love. His first creation was extremely heavy and extremely white. His mother was a historian, and his father was the chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral and later the dean of Canterbury Cathedral, so de Waal grew up playing in some of the great vast holy spaces of England. Pots became his own kind of sacred spaces; personal cathedrals that he could build in an instant and hold. As a teenager, de Waal apprenticed to the potter Geoffrey Whiting, from





Edmund de Waal working  
at his studio in London.

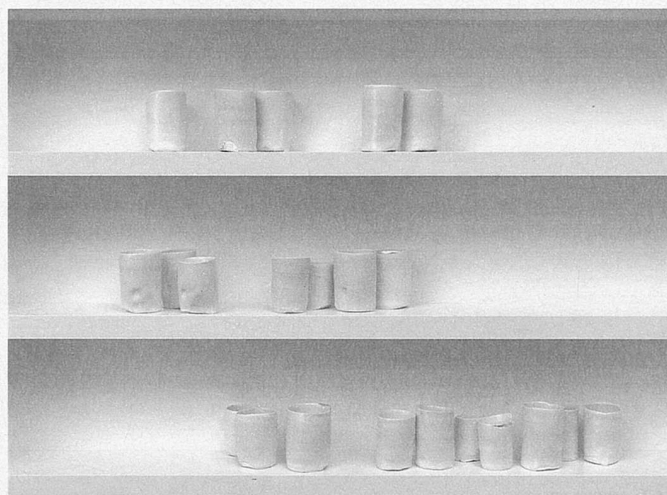
whom he learned of all the aesthetic crosswinds blowing through the ceramics world: the rural kitchenware of Bernard Leach, the sophisticated simplicity of Japan. De Waal turned himself into a monk of pot making. Every morning and every evening, he swept up great clouds of porcelain dust from the studio floor.

After many years of daily practice — after stints in Japan, Cambridge and again Japan — de Waal moved to London and began to find his own style. This turned out to be classic porcelain with a twist: pure white vessels (teapots, cups) with conspicuous irregularities — dents, warpage, traces of the hands that made them. In the early 1990s, de Waal's work became suddenly desirable among the artistic set in London. His dishes sold out, even as their prices went up. He began to make a good living and put on gallery shows. He started moving away from functional, individual pots and toward larger collections for display: installations involving dozens of porcelain vessels, each deliberately placed. They looked, after he arranged them, like language: a musical score or an abacus or morse code. Physical poems.

**This month**, de Waal invited me to embed in his studio for a couple of days, to watch him create a series of pots that will be shown next year in Berlin. He has a team of young assistants, many of them potters themselves, and together, over constant cups of coffee and tea, they considered possible shelves, exhibitions, website redesigns and glazes. There were, de Waal said, “crazy amounts of tests going on,” to prepare for a show at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills in which the pots would be glazed black instead of white. The atmosphere in the studio is cozy, familial. (He is naming the black glazes as he uses them: Obsidian, Basalt, Bible Black.) De Waal is, for an Englishman, extremely affectionate: I saw him hug, in my two days with him, a surprising number of people, with surprising enthusiasm.

I watched him work at the wheel. Because de Waal's installations contain so many individual pieces, he has to make lots and lots of them: armies, with reinforcements streaming in constantly. He makes them all himself. On our first afternoon, over the course of a couple of hours, I watched him make 58. He works alone, in a small, simple room that floats above the main part of the studio. The white walls are covered with his handwriting — possible exhibition titles, mysterious numbers, inscrutable notes. (One note simply said “Rhythm, etc.”) As de Waal worked, his dog, Isla, sat in a corner, chewing on a torn-up plush pheasant. I asked how many dog hairs he thought had become embedded in his pots over the years. “Oh, just a wonderful number,” he said.

De Waal does all of his making (he calls it, invariably, “making”) on an old, uncomfortable, paint-covered, backless wooden stool that he inherited during his apprenticeship in the 1980s. The stool and the wheel are very low, so he has to fold his long body over, basically in half, as he sits. Shaping a pot is still more or less an ancient activity: wet earth yielding to human pressure. De Waal prefers to be slightly distracted as he does it, by music or conversation, so that his conscious mind can get out of the way of his hands. As he worked, he spoke in long, halting sentences, sometimes closing his eyes to make sure he was choosing just the right words. He kept passing me balls of wet porcelain to squeeze and play with and pinch, so that I wouldn't get bored, presumably, and so I would understand what he was working with.



A detail from an installation by de Waal called “Lichtzwang” that was shown at the Theseus Temple in Vienna last year.

The process looks simple from the outside. De Waal plops a lump of clay, about the size of a tangerine, into the middle of the wheel, then, as it turns, massages it into a wet, perfectly symmetrical puck. After that, the pot happens very quickly: it blooms out of his hands like a flower in a stop-motion film. He stops the wheel, cuts the pot off with a piece of wire, presses his seal into it (a small rectangle of wood) and sets it on a board to dry. Then he plops another tangerine of wet clay onto the wheel, and another pot blooms out of his hands, and before long there is a little beige forest of pots drying on the board beside him. Some of them, on that afternoon, were squat and wide, some of them narrow and tall, some of them almost like tiny plates. It all seemed, watching him, very easy and natural and organic. But it was an easiness he had refined over many decades.

He pulled a pot off the wheel. “This is a beautifully wonky one,” he said. “I’ll definitely keep that.”

I asked him what he liked about it.

“It looks like a kid could have made it,” he said. “It’s that good.”

**On my last morning** in London, I visited the Victoria and Albert Museum, one of the great decorative-art collections in the world. The place is like a giant display cabinet of England's infinite treasures: Indian saris, Egyptian scepters, Persian carpets, diamond tiaras, golden Buddhas. There is an 18th-century wooden automaton of a tiger mauling a man, as well as a full-size plaster copy of Michelangelo's David that includes (in a case nearby) the giant fig leaf commissioned to shield its genitalia from prudish Victorians. On the day I went, the museum was crowded: tourists filling the galleries, art students sprawled out sketching on the floor.

Except for the porcelain collection.

If you ever want to feel alone in London, go up to the Victoria and Albert's porcelain collection, all the way at the top of the building. It feels like a secret attic where the queen keeps her special china. There is such an insane proliferation of porcelain — precious, clean, pristine white plates and bowls and figurines, all of them protected by glass — that it becomes almost impossible to see them as individual pieces. Even the transcendently good stuff, the Ming dynasty vases and Meissen coffee pots, are so spare and fragile and cold that the eye just stares right past them as the feet walk on to the next room. Whatever cultural power the stuff once had has gone the way of corn cob pipes and smelting and aristocratic Elizabethan neck ruffles.

In 2009, the museum invited de Waal to contribute a major piece to its collection. He grew up visiting the museum, so he knew its porcelain collection well.

He knew its loneliness, its isolation. He came up with an ingenious solution. De Waal designed a huge red aluminum ring, 120 feet in diameter, to nest inside the museum's dome. The red ring is actually an elegant circular shelf: inside of it, all the way around, are pieces of porcelain by de Waal, large and extremely white, inspired by the museum's collection. There are 425 of them, flashing against the red like teeth in a violent mouth. When visitors enter the museum, on their way to the better-known galleries closer to the street, their eyes are almost inevitably drawn up to this colorful ring hanging, very distantly, over the grand lobby. It's like the hint of a scandal up in the attic, a sudden reason to make that long trip.

“The White Road,” de Waal's new book, performs an analogous trick. It rescues porcelain from the cultural attic — makes the subject feel vital, modern, interactive. In the book, de Waal refers to “Moby-Dick” several times (the whiteness of the whale, etc.), and he writes about



porcelain as Melville writes about cetaceans: as one of the central elements of the universe. Porcelain is not just porcelain, it's the essence of displacement. Touch a piece of it, and you travel through time, place, states of being, from ancient Chinese peasants harvesting clay to German alchemists suffocating in castle basements to emperors bankrupting their kingdoms in order to feed their collections. "*Porzellankrankheit*," Germans called it — "porcelain sickness." It is a delicate subject with a feverish history.

De Waal has his own special case of porcelain sickness, of course, and in "The White Road," he follows it around the world. He visits primordial white hills in China, France, Germany and England. For 500 years, de Waal writes, the West had no idea how porcelain was made: People speculated that it was the crushed-up umbilical cords of fish that had been buried underground for decades. In fact, it is only clay. But it is clay of a very special kind: an extremely smooth combination of two minerals, petunse and kaolin, mined separately and mixed together in exactly the right proportions. When fired at extremely high temperatures, porcelain clay fuses into a kind of glass, hard and white but still slightly translucent. It is this paradoxical combination of qualities — hardness, softness, solidity, translucence — that has made people throughout history go so bananas.

"The White Road" is a book of excess. It goes too far. It gets lost. It repeats itself. De Waal takes us all over the world, all over history: Jesuit priests, Spinoza, Constantinople, manhunts, self-immolation, Hitler, Cherokees, Quakers, modern Chinese street vendors selling "sixteenth-century porcelains from last week." His prose style is like his pot style: He gets drunk on simplicity, on repetition. "The car turns off the new highway on to the old road and off the old road on to the old track rising between two farmers' houses." It could have been an easier book, more linear and contained. But then "Moby-Dick" could have been easier, too. One of de Waal's core beliefs is that messes are interesting. There's so much to feel inside of them.

De Waal is an evangelist of touch. As he wrote in "The Hare With Amber Eyes": "Touch tells you what you need to know: it tells you about yourself." As he writes in "The White Road": "Thinking is through the hands as well as the head." Hands are the great universal human fact. Our opposable thumbs are the tools that helped launch us out of the forests and into the world we know now. Some of the earliest art is simply handprints on cave walls — a high-five across 30,000 years. Even in our postmodern, postindustrial, increasingly virtual digital world, we depend on our fingertips to decode for us, instantly, the crucial outlines of

our environment: whether an object is hot or cold, whether it's something to drink or peel or squeeze, something your teeth will be able to penetrate, a volume button or a power switch. We are still affectionate animals who greet each other with hands: handshakes, fist bumps, high-fives, hugs.

De Waal's hands are rapturously attentive to the weight, grain, proportions and personalities of objects. For years, he says, he could remember every single pot he ever touched. In the same way that Bobby Fischer could run into someone at a tournament and say, about a game they had played 15 years earlier, "You should have moved your bishop to e7," de Waal can recall exactly the way a particular vase swelled or tapered toward its rim, or if the heft of a teakettle was particularly well-balanced. Recently, he says, his memory has filled up, and old pots have started to drop out of it.

## IF ALL WENT WELL, THIS DELICATE THING WOULD OUTLIVE US ALL BY MANY MORE GENERATIONS. MY FINGERS FELT THIS AS THEY TOUCHED THE PLATE.

De Waal worries that modern humans are beginning to lose our fluency in touch. He thinks that we live in a world impoverished by a lack of attention to tactility. Our culture has a deeply embedded shame of the body, shame of skin, shame of "mere" sensation — a desire to transcend the animal coarseness of nerves, hair, blood flow. To live in clean, noble abstractions: things that we think will last. All of our digital technology, all of these portable virtual worlds, only make it easier to live in touchlessness. If you put on virtual-reality goggles, there will be plenty to look at and *pretend* to touch, but nothing to actually feel. But touch, de Waal insists, is fundamental to the human experience. If we can't fully inhabit and value the world of touchable objects, de Waal told me, then we can't fully value other human beings.

Despite our culture's squeamishness, there is no escape from touch, and there is no escape from time, and these two facts are intimately related. All of the hands that exist today, all of the objects they

will ever touch, will someday, not long from now, be gone. All we can do, in the meantime, is to be fully present in the world we have — to roll it, insistently, in our fingers — and, in doing so, to light up as many of the nodes along the continuum of time that we can: the absent uncles and workmen and lovers and thieves, the people who held the world before any of us were here to hold it, and, if we're lucky, the people who will hold it when we are finally gone. Although de Waal often writes about objects, what he is really writing about is the power of presence, of intimacy. As he puts it at the end of "The White Road": "It is this consolation, someone walking part of the way by your side, that means almost everything. Everything."

On my second afternoon at the studio, the 58 pots de Waal made the day before had dried to their optimal texture — potters call it "leather hard," or "cheese hard." And so de Waal started cutting them. He slapped them back on the wheel and, as they spun, trimmed off excess clay with a set of tools that reminded me of dental equipment. He bent himself in half again, and his head bobbed slightly in rhythm with the spinning wheel, and ribbons of wet clay spun off the pots. Occasionally he would pick up a little sponge and dab, mysteriously, at the rim. When all the excess clay had been trimmed, de Waal pulled the pot off the wheel and, with a knife, cut his characteristic little scallops out of the base. This is one of his signatures, these dents and caves. De Waal cut quickly, intuitively, like someone paring an apple. He was not precious about it, not terribly serious, just matter-of-factly doing what his hands told him was the right thing for each pot. He could have been whittling sticks by a lake.

I kept asking questions about how he decided what and where to cut. Why that spot and not this one? Why deep and not shallow? He said he was just trying to bring the outside of the pot into the proper relationship to its inside. O.K., yes, sure, I said. But why did you make that *particular* cut? And why did you make that one?

After a while, de Waal responded by handing me one of the pots — fresh, cheese-dry, ready to cut. He handed me the knife. "Cut it," he said. This seemed sacrilegious, but he insisted. So I did. I tried to emulate his cutting: to whittle out small slivers that added texture without ruining everything. The first pot I tried turned out O.K. De Waal said that my largest cut had a nice "authority" to it.

The second pot, however, I completely destroyed. I carved out so many hunks of wet porcelain that there was almost nothing left — a little nub, all angles. Ruination. De Waal seemed to agree. But he also seemed equally satisfied with both pots, the success and the failure. He set them both on the board to dry. ♦