

REPAIRING THE SELF: MATERIAL MEMORY, SUSTAINABILITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC ART

REPARANDO O EU: MEMÓRIA MATERIAL, SUSTENTABILIDADE E IDENTIDADE AUTOBIOGRÁFICA NA ARTE CERÂMICA CONTEMPORÂNEA

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Abstract

This article examines contemporary ceramic art as a site of autobiographical self-narration articulated through material memory, repair practices, and an emerging ethics of material sustainability. Moving beyond text-centered models of autobiography, it argues that ceramic materiality, particularly processes of breakage, fragmentation, and visible mending, functions as a non-textual mode of autobiographical expression. Rather than treating repair as a purely technical intervention, the study conceptualizes it as a narrative and material framework through which identity is constructed as fractured, contingent, and continually reassembled. Drawing on theories of narrative identity, material memory, and material agency, the article positions ceramic and porcelain materials as active narrative agents whose fragility enables memory to be registered through damage and repair while foregrounding questions of responsibility and sustainability. Through analyses of selected contemporary ceramic practices and a reflexive yet non-confessional engagement with artistic process, it demonstrates how visible seams and deliberate imperfections materialize lived experience and identity formation. By foregrounding repair as both a narrative and ethical strategy, the article expands auto/biography studies beyond textual paradigms and proposes the repaired self as a productive model of autobiographical identity grounded in material awareness, sustainability, and ongoing reconstruction.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a arte cerâmica contemporânea como um espaço de autonarração autobiográfica articulada por meio da memória material, das práticas de reparo e de uma ética emergente de sustentabilidade material. Ao ir além dos modelos textuais de autobiografia, o estudo argumenta que a materialidade cerâmica, especialmente os processos de quebra, fragmentação e remendo visível, funciona como um modo não textual de expressão autobiográfica. Em vez de tratar o reparo apenas como uma intervenção técnica, o artigo o concebe como um enquadramento narrativo e material por meio do qual a identidade autobiográfica é construída como fragmentada, contingente e continuamente reconfigurada. Com base nas teorias de identidade narrativa, memória material e agência da matéria, o texto posiciona a cerâmica e a porcelana como agentes narrativos ativos, cuja fragilidade permite que a memória seja inscrita por meio do dano e do reparo, ao mesmo tempo que evidencia questões de responsabilidade material e sustentabilidade. Por meio da análise de práticas cerâmicas contemporâneas selecionadas e de um envolvimento reflexivo com o processo artístico, demonstra-se como fissuras e emendas visíveis materializam experiências vividas e processos de formação identitária. Ao enfatizar o reparo como estratégia narrativa e ética, o artigo amplia os estudos de auto/biografia e propõe o “eu reparado” como modelo produtivo de



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identidade autobiográfica no contexto da arte contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: *Memória Material. Reparo. Sustentabilidade. Identidade. Ética Material. Arte Contemporânea.*

1 INTRODUCTION: REPAIRING THE SELF

Autobiography has long been understood as a textual practice grounded in written self-representation, retrospection, and narrative coherence. Classical and contemporary scholarship in auto/biography studies has emphasized language as the primary medium through which the self is narrated, stabilized, and rendered intelligible (Smith & Watson, 2010: 5). Within this framework, autobiographical meaning has frequently been associated with narrative continuity, temporal ordering, and the retrospective shaping of lived experience into a coherent life story. Such models have traditionally privileged unity, legibility, and narrative mastery as markers of autobiographical success. Yet these assumptions have increasingly been challenged by scholars who argue that identity is neither unified nor stable but fragmented, processual, and continually reconstituted through memory, experience, and interpretation (Ricoeur, 1992: 114).

Recent interdisciplinary turns toward embodiment, affect, and materiality have significantly expanded the conceptual boundaries of autobiographical studies. Rather than treating the self as a purely discursive construct, these approaches emphasize how identity is shaped through bodily practices, sensory experience, and sustained engagement with the material world. As Smith and Watson observe, life narratives do not operate solely through written texts but emerge across “multiple media, modes, and practices of self-representation” (2010: 4). This expanded understanding opens a critical space for considering how the self may be narrated beyond language through objects, gestures, material processes, and traces that carry memory without recourse to explicit storytelling. Within this context, the central question is no longer whether non-textual forms can function autobiographically, but how such forms generate autobiographical meaning and what kinds of identities they make possible.

At the same time, contemporary cultural discourse has increasingly turned toward questions of material responsibility, sustainability, and the ethics of making in response to accelerated consumption and the disposability of objects within late capitalist production systems. Within this climate, practices of repair, reuse, and material continuity have emerged as critical cultural strategies that challenge dominant logics of replacement and obsolescence. Repair foregrounds care, attentiveness, and responsibility toward material life, positioning objects not as expendable commodities but as carriers of temporal and affective value. In this sense, repair operates not only as a technical intervention but also as an ethical and cultural practice that reconfigures relationships between subjects, materials, and memory.

This article situates contemporary ceramic art as a critical site for rethinking autobiographical self-narration through material memory and practices of repair within this broader ethical and material context. It argues that ceramic materiality, particularly processes of breakage, fragmentation, and visible mending, functions as a non-textual autobiographical language through which identity is articulated as fractured, contingent, and continually reconstructed. Rather than conceiving ceramics as symbolic representations of personal experience, the article positions material processes themselves as narrative agents that actively participate in the production of autobiographical meaning. In doing so, it aligns with scholarship that understands autobiographical identity not as a completed narrative but as an ongoing negotiation between memory, loss, and reconstruction (Eakin, 2008: 43–47).

The concept of repair occupies a central role in this inquiry. Conventionally associated with restoration, functionality, and the return of an object to a prior state, repair has been re-theorized in contemporary cultural and material studies as an ethical and temporal engagement with damage and vulnerability rather than an attempt to erase them (Bennett, 2010: 21). From this perspective, repair does not restore an object or a subject to an imagined origin; instead, it acknowledges rupture while allowing for continued presence, use, and meaning. When applied to autobiographical identity, repair offers a productive framework for understanding the self as constituted through discontinuity, exposure, and partial recomposition rather than narrative closure or resolution. It also proposes an alternative material ethics grounded in sustainability, care, and continuity rather than replacement and erasure.

Ceramic materials, and porcelain in particular, are uniquely positioned to engage these questions of material memory and autobiographical repair. Historically associated with ideals of permanence, refinement, and domestic continuity, ceramics simultaneously embody fragility and the constant possibility of breakage. This tension between durability and vulnerability endows ceramic objects with what scholars of material culture describe as an “affective and mnemonic agency,” whereby objects do not merely store memory but actively participate in its production (Hoskins, 1998: 9). Cracks, fractures, and traces of intervention function as material inscriptions of time, gesture, and lived experience. In this sense, ceramics operate not as neutral supports for meaning but as dynamic sites where memory becomes visible and legible through damage, interruption, and repair.

By foregrounding repair as both an aesthetic and ethical strategy within contemporary ceramic practice, this article intervenes in ongoing debates within auto/biography studies concerning modality, narration, and the limits of self-representation. It builds on theories of narrative identity that emphasize becoming over being, relationality over autonomy, and fragmentation over coherence (Ricoeur, 1992; Eakin, 2008), while also engaging with broader discussions surrounding sustainability and material responsibility in contemporary culture. From this perspective, autobiographical self-narration does not require linguistic completeness or chronological resolution; instead, it may emerge through repetition, rupture, and the visibility of seams both material and experiential that hold disparate moments together without resolving their tension.

Methodologically, the article adopts an interdisciplinary approach that draws on auto/biography studies, memory studies, material culture, and contemporary art theory. Through close readings of selected contemporary ceramic practices, it examines how repair operates as a narrative and ethical strategy that articulates identity without recourse to confessional disclosure. Importantly, the analysis does not equate autobiography with personal testimony. Rather, it investigates how material decisions about what is broken, what is repaired, and what remains visible produce autobiographical meaning through form, process, and material intervention.

The article’s central contribution lies in proposing repair as a critical lens for understanding autobiographical identity across material, narrative, and ethical dimensions. By shifting attention from textual narration to material intervention, it

expands the conceptual terrain of auto/biography studies and challenges the assumption that autobiography must strive toward wholeness or narrative resolution. Instead, it suggests that the repaired self—marked by fractures, seams, and visible joins—offers a more ethically and aesthetically attuned model of identity for contemporary cultural and artistic

2 AUTOBIOGRAPHY, IDENTITY, AND MATERIAL MEMORY

Autobiography has traditionally been theorized as a narrative practice through which individuals retrospectively construct coherent accounts of their lives. Within this framework, identity is often understood as something that can be narrated, stabilized, and rendered intelligible through language. Classical and contemporary scholarship in auto/biography studies has therefore emphasized narrative continuity, temporal ordering, and retrospective interpretation as central mechanisms through which the self becomes legible (Smith & Watson, 2010: 5). Such models have historically privileged unity, coherence, and narrative mastery as markers of autobiographical success. Yet these assumptions have increasingly been challenged by scholars who argue that identity is neither unified nor stable, but fragmented, relational, and continually reconstituted through memory, experience, and interpretation (Eakin, 2008; Ricoeur, 1992:113–121).

From this perspective, autobiography does not merely record a pre-existing self; rather, it actively participates in the formation, negotiation, and transformation of identity over time. Paul John Eakin's influential work on autobiographical identity foregrounds this shift by conceptualizing the self not as a fixed essence but as an ongoing narrative achievement. According to Eakin (2008), identity emerges through repeated acts of self-narration that are always partial, situated, and contingent. Importantly, these acts are not confined to written or spoken language; they encompass a broader range of practices through which individuals make sense of lived experience. Autobiographical meaning, in this sense, is less about narrative closure than about sustaining continuity amid disruption, a condition that resonates strongly with artistic practices grounded in material processes of making, breaking, and reassembling.

This processual understanding of identity finds further theoretical grounding in Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity. Ricoeur distinguishes between *idem*-identity (sameness) and *ipse*-identity (selfhood), arguing that personal identity is not based on

immutable characteristics but on the capacity to maintain a sense of self across change and rupture (Ricoeur, 1992: 113–121). Narrative identity does not eliminate discontinuity; rather, it negotiates it by holding together heterogeneous experiences within a fragile and revisable framework. Such a model is particularly productive for understanding autobiographical practices that resist linearity, coherence, or resolution qualities that are central to many contemporary artistic engagements with memory and materiality.

Within auto/biography studies, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have played a crucial role in expanding the field beyond text-centered approaches. They argue that life narratives operate across “multiple media, modes, and practices of self-representation” (Smith & Watson, 2010, pp. 4–5), challenging the privileging of written autobiography as the primary site of self-narration. By foregrounding performance, visual culture, digital media, and embodied practices, Smith and Watson open a critical space for considering how autobiographical meaning can be produced through material forms that do not rely on linguistic articulation. This expanded framework legitimizes non-textual modes of self-narration as theoretically and analytically significant, enabling contemporary ceramic practice to be situated within the broader discourse of autobiographical studies.

The growing emphasis on materiality across the humanities and social sciences has further reinforced this shift. Scholars in material culture and memory studies have emphasized that objects are not passive repositories of meaning but active participants in the production of memory and identity (Hoskins, 1998; Bennett, 2010). Janet Hoskins’s concept of “biographical objects” is particularly relevant here. Hoskins (1998) argues that objects acquire meaning through their entanglement with lived experience, functioning as sites where personal histories are condensed, displaced, and reactivated. Rather than merely symbolizing memory, such objects actively shape how memory is recalled, narrated, and embodied. This perspective challenges hierarchical distinctions between subject and object, proposing instead a relational model in which identity emerges through ongoing interaction with material forms.

Jane Bennett’s theory of vibrant matter further complicates conventional distinctions between human agency and inert materiality. Bennett (2010) proposes that matter possesses a form of agency that influences human perception, action, and affect. While her work is not explicitly situated within autobiographical studies, its implications

for understanding material memory are significant. If matter is understood as dynamic and responsive rather than passive, then material practices such as breaking, repairing, and reassembling ceramics can be understood as sites of narrative production rather than merely technical procedures. Material intervention thus becomes a mode of thinking and remembering that operates alongside, and sometimes in tension with, linguistic narration.

In recent decades, the “material turn” has reoriented scholarly attention toward the agency, temporality, and ethical implications of material practices. Rather than treating matter as an inert substance, contemporary new materialist approaches emphasize relationality between human and nonhuman actors, foregrounding how material processes actively shape cultural meaning and subject formation. Within this expanded framework, acts of making, breaking, and repairing ceramics can be understood not only as aesthetic gestures but also as forms of material thinking that engage broader questions of sustainability, responsibility, and continuity in an era marked by ecological and cultural precarity.

Material memory, as theorized across these fields, resists the notion of memory as a stable archive of the past. Instead, it emphasizes memory as something activated through contact, use, damage, and repair. Cracks, fractures, and traces of wear function as temporal inscriptions that register moments of loss, transformation, and survival. These material traces do not simply point backward to an origin; they mark an ongoing negotiation between past experience and present meaning. As such, material memory aligns closely with contemporary understandings of autobiographical identity as discontinuous and relational rather than unified and self-contained.

Within this theoretical constellation, repair emerges as a particularly potent site for examining the relationship between identity and material memory. Repair foregrounds interruption rather than continuity, making visible the moments when objects and by extension, selves fail, break, or become unusable. Unlike restoration, which seeks to erase damage and return an object to an imagined original state, repair acknowledges rupture as part of an object’s history. This acknowledgment resonates with autobiographical models that resist narrative closure and instead emphasize vulnerability, exposure, and ongoing becoming (Ricoeur, 1992; Eakin, 2008).

When considered through the lens of autobiographical studies, repair can be understood as a narrative act that does not resolve fragmentation but holds it in tension.

The visibility of seams, joins, and imperfections functions analogously to autobiographical strategies that foreground gaps, silences, and inconsistencies. Such strategies challenge dominant cultural expectations that life narratives should culminate in coherence or resolution. Instead, they propose an ethics of narration that values openness, contingency, and process over completeness.

This theoretical framework—linking autobiographical identity, narrative fragmentation, and material memory—provides the conceptual foundation for analyzing contemporary ceramic practices that engage repair as both an aesthetic and autobiographical strategy. By approaching ceramics not merely as symbolic representations of personal experience but as material sites where identity is enacted and negotiated, this article aligns with and extends current debates within auto/biography studies. It proposes that autobiographical self-narration can occur through acts of making and mending that materialize memory and identity without recourse to confessional discourse.

By situating repair at the intersection of autobiographical narration, material memory, and contemporary material ethics, this study ultimately proposes repair as a critical conceptual model for understanding identity formation across material and narrative modalities. In doing so, it expands the conceptual terrain of auto/biography studies and positions contemporary ceramic practice within wider debates on sustainability, care, and responsible engagement with material culture in contemporary art.

3 REPAIR AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN CERAMIC ART

Within contemporary ceramic art, repair operates not merely as a technical response to damage but as a deliberate narrative and theoretical strategy through which memory, identity, and temporality are materially articulated. When approached through the lens of auto/biography studies, repair emerges as a mode of self-narration that resists linearity, coherence, and narrative closure while offering a critical framework for understanding identity as materially constructed and continually negotiated. Rather than concealing rupture or masking failure, repaired ceramic works foreground breakage and mending as visible, constitutive elements of meaning. This visibility transforms repair

into a narrative and epistemological act—one that resonates strongly with contemporary theories of autobiographical identity as fragmented, processual, and relational rather than unified or complete (Eakin, 2008; Ricoeur, 1992).

Historically, repair in ceramic practice has been closely associated with restoration and the pursuit of visual wholeness. Museum conservation paradigms have often privileged invisibility, aiming to erase signs of damage to return objects to an imagined original state. Such approaches implicitly reinforce ideals of continuity, permanence, and completeness, positioning breakage as an anomaly to be corrected. In contrast, many contemporary ceramic artists deliberately reject restorative invisibility, choosing instead to emphasize cracks, seams, and joins as integral components of both form and meaning. This shift marks a crucial departure from repair as erasure toward repair as inscription, an approach that aligns with emerging discourses in material culture and contemporary art that frame repair as an ethical and aesthetic intervention rather than a corrective gesture. Within this context, repair can be understood as part of a broader post-restoration aesthetic in which damage is neither hidden nor overcome but integrated into the ongoing life of the object.

From a narrative perspective, repair introduces a temporal complexity that unsettles conventional models of storytelling. Breakage interrupts linear progression, producing a moment of suspension that demands response. Repair does not resolve this interruption but extends it, embedding the moment of rupture into the object's ongoing material life. In this way, repaired ceramics embody what Ricoeur (1992) describes as the negotiation between continuity and discontinuity that defines narrative identity. The object does not return to a prior state of sameness; instead, it carries forward the trace of damage as part of its present condition. This layered temporality mirrors autobiographical processes in which past experiences are not simply recalled or represented but actively reconfigured from the standpoint of the present.

Repair functions as a narrative strategy precisely because it refuses the illusion of seamless coherence. Visible mending exposes the labor of reconstruction and foregrounds the impossibility of complete restoration. Such exposure aligns with critical approaches to life writing that emphasize gaps, silences, and inconsistencies as meaningful rather than deficient elements of autobiographical expression (Smith & Watson, 2010: 18–21). Just as experimental autobiographical texts disrupt linear narration through fragmentation

and discontinuity, repaired ceramic works materialize these qualities through form and process. The crack becomes analogous to the narrative rupture; the seam corresponds to the act of narration that holds disparate moments together without resolving their tension.

Material memory plays a central role in this process. As scholars of material culture have argued, objects actively participate in the production of memory rather than merely storing it (Hoskins, 1998; Bennett, 2010). In repaired ceramics, memory is embedded within the object's material structure rather than external to it. The site of repair records a specific event, an impact, a fracture, or a failure that cannot be undone or erased. At the same time, it marks a decision to continue, to reassemble, and to re-engage with the object despite its damage. This dual inscription of loss and persistence closely parallels autobiographical narratives that engage vulnerability and survival without subsuming them into redemptive or restorative arcs.

Repair also introduces a pronounced ethical dimension to ceramic practice that further underscores its narrative significance. To mend rather than discard a broken object is to affirm the value of what has been damaged. This gesture challenges dominant cultural logics of disposability, perfection, and replacement, proposing instead an ethics of care, attentiveness, and material responsibility. Within autobiographical discourse, similar ethical stakes are present in decisions about what to reveal, what to withhold, and how to narrate vulnerability. Repair, in this sense, can be understood as a material analogue to autobiographical disclosure: a selective, situated act that acknowledges fragility while simultaneously asserting agency. Such practices resonate with contemporary debates on sustainability and material continuity, where acts of repair function as resistance to extractive and disposable models of material culture.

Crucially, repair as a narrative strategy does not imply reconciliation or healing in any simplistic sense. While repair enables continued use, display, or presence, it does not negate the fact of breakage. The repaired object remains visibly marked by damage, and this marking resists narrative closure. Such resistance is central to contemporary critiques of autobiographical narratives that privilege coherence, recovery, or self-mastery. As Eakin (2008) observes, autobiographical identity is not achieved through narrative completion but sustained through ongoing acts of interpretation and reconfiguration. Repaired ceramics materialize this condition, offering a form of self-narration that remains open, provisional, and unresolved.

The visibility of repair also disrupts conventional hierarchies between original and secondary states. In repaired ceramic works, the post-damage form is not subordinate to an idealized original; rather, it constitutes a new and equally valid state of being. This reevaluation parallels autobiographical approaches that refuse to privilege an “authentic” self before rupture over subsequent transformations. Instead, identity is understood as cumulative and relational, shaped through encounters, disruptions, and adaptations over time (Ricoeur, 1992). Repair thus becomes a means of asserting continuity without denying change, a material enactment of narrative identity’s fragile coherence.

Within contemporary ceramic art, artists employ a wide range of repair strategies that further complicate its narrative function. Some emphasize contrast by introducing visibly different materials at sites of repair, while others integrate mending so subtly that distinction becomes ambiguous. In both cases, repair foregrounds questions of visibility, authorship, and intentionality: what is revealed, what remains concealed, and whose intervention is legible. These questions mirror those central to autobiographical studies, where issues of voice, mediation, and agency are persistently foregrounded (Smith & Watson, 2010). Repair, like autobiography, is never neutral; it reflects choices that shape how stories are structured, perceived, and interpreted.

Finally, repair as a narrative strategy destabilizes the boundary between process and product. In many repaired ceramic works, traces of the process, the evidence of breakage, mending, and intervention remain permanently visible, collapsing the distinction between making and meaning. This collapse aligns with methodological approaches in auto/biography studies that emphasize reflexivity and the conditions of narration alongside narrative content. The repaired object does not simply present a finished story; it exposes the labor, interruption, and decision-making that constitute its becoming. Such exposure invites viewers into a mode of engagement that is interpretive rather than consumptive, attentive rather than conclusive.

By foregrounding repair as an aesthetic, narrative, and ethical material strategy, contemporary ceramic art offers a compelling model for understanding autobiographical identity across modalities. Repair materializes identity as something assembled through interruption, care, and ongoing negotiation while situating artistic practice within broader debates on sustainability, material responsibility, and the ethics of continuity. It challenges assumptions that autobiographical meaning depends on coherence,

transparency, or resolution, proposing instead a model grounded in vulnerability, visibility, and responsible engagement with material life. This understanding of repair provides the conceptual bridge to the analysis that follows, where contemporary ceramic practices are examined as sites of autobiographical expression articulated through material memory and the visible labor of mending.

4 CASE STUDIES: REPAIR, MATERIAL MEMORY, AND THE ETHICS OF CONTINUITY IN CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC PRACTICE

To ground the article’s conceptual argument in concrete artistic strategies, this section offers close readings of selected contemporary ceramic practices that mobilize breakage and mending as material, narrative, and ethical operations. Rather than treating these works as illustrative “examples” appended to theory, the analysis approaches them as sites of knowledge production in which repair is not merely represented but enacted. In each case, autobiographical meaning emerges not through explicit self-disclosure but through the material management of interruption—what is fractured, what is preserved, what is rejoined, and what remains deliberately visible. This approach aligns with expanded frameworks of life narration that recognize self-representation across media and practices rather than solely in textual form (Smith & Watson, 2010). It also reinforces the article’s central proposition: that autobiographical identity may be materially performed as a repaired structure—provisionally coherent yet permanently marked by rupture.

4.1 Yeesoookyung: Fragment Assemblage and the Aesthetics of Visible Joining

Yeesoookyung’s practice constitutes one of the most forceful articulations of repair as a non-textual autobiographical language within contemporary ceramics. Her works, most notably those constructed from ceramic fragments and reassembled into new forms, foreground the seam as a site of narration: a visible record of breakage, decision, and reconfiguration. The resulting objects do not conceal their discontinuity; instead, they display repair as a structural condition. Through the deliberate emphasis on joining, the

work reframes the crack not as an accident to be erased but as an inscription through which time, damage, and persistence remain legible.

From the perspective of narrative identity, these works perform a material analogue to Ricoeur's account of selfhood as the capacity to maintain continuity through change (Ricoeur, 1992). The reassembled vessel is not restored to an imagined origin; it becomes another state—an altered coherence that persists alongside the trace of interruption. This transformation shifts the conceptual status of repair from restoration to narration. The seam, as a material decision, is comparable to the autobiographical act of holding heterogeneous moments together without dissolving their tensions. In this sense, the work does not aim at narrative closure. It demonstrates how identity can be sustained through visible joins—through the acknowledgement of rupture as constitutive rather than exceptional.

Figure 1

Yeesookyung, *Translated Vase*, ceramic shards, epoxy, 24k gold leaf, 65 x 43 x 43 inches, 2015



This approach also engages material memory as an active process rather than an archival one. The fragments carry histories of prior forms, uses, and visual languages, yet the work refuses to stabilize those histories into a single recoverable origin. Instead, memory becomes relational and reactivated: it is produced through the encounter between fragment and joining gesture. Here, Bennett's conceptualization of matter as dynamic and

affective becomes productive (Bennett, 2010). The ceramic fragments do not function merely as passive “carriers” of meaning; they participate in shaping what the repaired form can become. The work thus offers a robust model of autobiographical identity as contingent and continually reassembled—an identity enacted materially through the ethics of retaining, reusing, and recomposing what is broken rather than replacing it.

At the same time, the practice resonates with sustainability as a material ethic. Fragment reuse contests the logic of disposability that frames damage as the end of value. Repair becomes an affirmation of continuity: a refusal of replacement as the default response to fracture. This is not sustainability in the narrow sense of “green” materials; rather, it is sustainability as a cultural practice of material responsibility, an insistence that brokenness can remain a viable state of being. The repaired object thereby parallels the repaired self: a form that continues without denying the mark of rupture.

4.2 Edmund de Waal: porcelain as narrative atmosphere and the autobiographical trace without confession

Where Yeessookyung foregrounds rupture through pronounced joining, Edmund de Waal’s installations mobilize porcelain differently: as a medium of presence, repetition, and mnemonic atmosphere. His works frequently employ serial arrangements of porcelain vessels, often white, minimal, and quietly differentiated, presented within architectural structures such as vitrines or shelving. This mode of display is not simply aesthetic; it produces a spatial syntax of memory in which the self appears indirectly, through the organization of objects rather than the confession of events.

De Waal’s practice is particularly relevant to the article’s claim that autobiography can be enacted without explicit self-disclosure. The work operates through what might be described as autobiographical adjacency: it constructs conditions in which identity is sensed through accumulation, restraint, and the careful calibration of difference within repetition. This resonates with Eakin’s understanding of identity as sustained through ongoing acts of interpretation rather than completed narrative arcs (Eakin, 2008). Each vessel is similar enough to participate in a coherent field, yet distinct enough to resist total sameness. The installation thus performs ipse-identity selfhood as continuity across change through material seriality rather than linguistic narration (Ricoeur, 1992).

Figure 2

Edmund de Waal, Library of Exile (installation view)2020



Material memory in this context is produced through porcelain's ambivalent temporality. Porcelain carries historical associations with permanence, domestic continuity, and refinement, yet it is also fragile and prone to loss. De Waal's restrained aesthetic activates this tension: the vessels evoke preservation while simultaneously implying vulnerability. This vulnerability is not dramatized through visible cracks; it is embedded in the medium's known susceptibility to breakage. Memory here is not the spectacular trace of damage but the quiet persistence of objects arranged as if to hold time in place while never fully succeeding. This near holding, this provisional stabilization, is precisely the logic of the repaired structure: a coherence that remains fragile, contingent, and revisable.

In terms of sustainability and ethics, de Waal's work suggests a practice of care through attention rather than overt mending. The careful placement, repetition, and maintenance of porcelain objects within a display structure enacts a slow ethics that counters the speed of contemporary consumption. The installations do not propose resolution; they offer continuity as an ongoing responsibility and attentiveness to what persists and what might be lost. In this way, repair can be understood not only as the act of fixing but as the expanded ethic of sustaining material presence across time.

4.3 Clare Twomey: participation, fragility, and repair as social narrative

Clare Twomey's practice introduces a further dimension: repair not only as a personal or material narrative strategy but as a social and participatory condition. Her installations frequently engage the viewer's proximity, movement, and potential to disrupt. Within such works, fragility becomes a shared field of responsibility, and the question of repair expands beyond the object to include the ethics of encounter. This shifts autobiographical meaning toward relationality: identity is not enacted as a private interior but as a set of negotiated relations between bodies, objects, and institutional spaces.

Figure 3

Clare Twomey, Tate, Liverpool; Crafts Council, London; and Icheon, Korea, 2001-2004



In auto/biography studies, the self is increasingly understood as relational and mediated rather than autonomous and self-identical (Smith & Watson, 2010). Twomey's installations materialize this proposition. The object's vulnerability is not simply seen; it is felt as a condition of being-with. When the possibility of breakage is structurally present, repair becomes an ethical horizon rather than a purely technical intervention. The work thus reframes repair as care: a practice of attentiveness to fragility that implicates the viewer within the object's ongoing life.

This participatory dimension also destabilizes conventional narratives of mastery associated with both autobiography and restoration. Instead of presenting the repaired

object as a completed story, the installation emphasizes risk, contingency, and the limits of control. Such limits echo the article's critique of autobiographical coherence as a dominant expectation. Repair, in Twomey's context, is not the endpoint; it is a condition of continued negotiation. The seam may not be visible in the same manner as in assemblage practices, yet vulnerability is structurally visible as a threat that cannot be fully resolved. Identity, by analogy, is sustained not by erasing instability but by living with it, by cultivating responsibility toward what can fracture.

Twomey's work is also situated within contemporary debates about sustainability and the cultural politics of material continuity. When fragility is foregrounded, and objects are not treated as easily replaceable, the logic of disposability is interrupted. The installation stages a critique of replacement culture by making the consequences of damage palpable. Repair, whether enacted materially or implied ethically, becomes a resistance to the late-capitalist impulse to substitute rather than sustain. In this sense, the artwork performs sustainability as a social relation and an ethics of shared care rather than an individual moral claim.

4.4 Synthesis: repair as an expanded autobiographical modality

Taken together, these practices demonstrate that repair operates as an expanded autobiographical modality across contemporary ceramic art. Yeesoonyung materializes identity as literal reassembly through visible joining; de Waal constructs autobiographical meaning through serial arrangement and mnemonic atmosphere; Twomey frames repair as a relational ethics staged through vulnerability and participation. In each case, the ceramic object functions not as a passive symbol of memory but as an active site where memory is registered through material conditions, fragility, interruption, continuity, and the visible or implied labor of sustaining.

These case studies reinforce the article's central claim: autobiography need not strive toward narrative coherence or resolution. The repaired self, like the repaired object, remains a structure that holds together without becoming seamless. The seam, crack, repetition, and vulnerability become narrative operators that articulate identity as contingent and continually reconfigured. Through this lens, contemporary ceramic practice contributes to auto/biography studies by demonstrating how self-narration can

be enacted materially through the ethics of repair, the agency of matter, and the sustained visibility of rupture.

5 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REPAIR AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Within contemporary ceramic art, autobiographical meaning often emerges not through explicit self-disclosure but through sustained engagement with material processes that register memory, loss, and reconstruction. This section approaches artistic practice as a site of situated knowledge production, where material decisions operate as forms of self-narration without recourse to confessional storytelling. Rather than positioning practice as illustrative of theory, the analysis understands itself as a critical methodology through which autobiographical identity is materially negotiated (Smith & Watson, 2010).

In ceramic practice grounded in fragility, breakage, and repair, the self is not narrated as a stable subject but enacted through processes of interruption and reassembly. Breakage functions as a material event that disrupts continuity, while repair introduces a provisional response that acknowledges damage without attempting to erase it. These processes parallel contemporary models of autobiographical identity that emphasize becoming over being and negotiation over resolution (Eakin, 2008). Within such practices, identity is neither represented nor symbolized; it is materially enacted through decisions concerning what is broken, what is mended, and what remains visible.

The use of porcelain is particularly significant in this context. Porcelain's historical associations with purity, refinement, and permanence stand in tension with its material vulnerability. This tension renders porcelain a potent medium for exploring autobiographical identity as both culturally idealized and materially precarious. When porcelain objects fracture, the break does not simply signify failure; it exposes the material limits of ideals such as wholeness, continuity, and control. Repair, in turn, becomes a means of engaging these limits, allowing the object and the identity it materializes to persist without denying rupture.

In practice-based works that foreground repair, material memory operates through visible traces rather than symbolic reference. Cracks, seams, and joins function as inscriptions of time and experience, recording moments of interruption that cannot be

undone. These traces align with Hoskins's (1998) concept of biographical objects, which acquire meaning through their entanglement with lived events rather than through representational intent. The repaired ceramic object does not narrate a specific life event; instead, it materializes the conditions under which memory is formed, disrupted, and reactivated.

Importantly, the decision to make repair visible constitutes an ethical and narrative choice. Visible repair resists the aesthetic logic of concealment that often governs both conservation practices and dominant autobiographical narratives. Just as traditional life writing has been shaped by expectations of coherence and narrative mastery, restored objects are often expected to conceal their damage to preserve an illusion of completeness. By contrast, visible mending foregrounds vulnerability and exposure, aligning with autobiographical approaches that value fragmentation, silence, and incompleteness as meaningful narrative strategies (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Within this framework, artistic practice becomes a form of critical self-positioning rather than self-expression. The emphasis is not on telling one's story but on establishing conditions through which autobiographical meaning can emerge materially. Decisions about scale, fragility, repetition, and repair articulate a relationship to memory that is indirect yet deeply situated. Such practices resonate with Ricoeur's (1992) understanding of narrative identity as a fragile synthesis that holds together continuity and rupture without resolving their tension. The repaired ceramic object, like autobiographical identity, remains provisionally coherent enough to persist, yet permanently marked by disruption.

The reflexive dimension of this practice does not lie in explicit autobiographical reference but in an awareness of how making participates in identity formation. Repair introduces a temporal loop in which past damage is re-encountered and reconfigured in the present. This process mirrors autobiographical acts in which memory is not retrieved intact but reconstructed through interpretive labor. As Eakin (2008) suggests, identity is sustained not through narrative completion but through ongoing acts of self-interpretation. Repair materializes this condition, offering a form of self-narration grounded in process rather than representation.

By situating artistic practice within this analytical frame, the section avoids conflating autobiography with personal testimony. Instead, it demonstrates how material

engagement itself constitutes a mode of autobiographical inquiry. The ceramic object becomes a site where identity is not declared but negotiated through breakage that interrupts and repair that responds without closure. This approach challenges assumptions that autobiographical meaning requires linguistic articulation or explicit self-reference, proposing instead that identity can be materially enacted through attention, care, and the ethical handling of damage.

In this sense, practice-based ceramic work contributes to broader debates within auto/biography studies by expanding the field's understanding of how self-narration operates across modalities. Repair functions not as a metaphor alone but as a material practice that enacts autobiographical identity as contingent, relational, and continually reassembled. The repaired object does not tell a story of recovery or resolution; it sustains the visibility of fracture as part of its ongoing existence.

This analysis underscores the potential of contemporary ceramic practice to operate as a form of non-textual autobiography, one that privileges material memory over narrative coherence and process over confession. Through repair, autobiographical identity is articulated not as a completed narrative but as an open structure, held together through provisional acts of making and mending.

6 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology that combines theoretical analysis with practice-informed inquiry to examine repair as a narrative and material strategy in contemporary ceramic art. Rather than treating ceramic works solely as visual artifacts, the research approaches them as material texts through which autobiographical identity, memory, and ethical relations to matter are articulated. The methodological framework draws on auto/biography studies, material culture theory, memory studies, and contemporary art theory, enabling a multi-layered analysis of how material processes function as modes of self-narration.

The research is grounded in a theoretical and interpretive approach. Key concepts such as narrative identity, material memory, and repair are examined through an extensive review of foundational and contemporary scholarship, including works by Paul Ricoeur (1992), Paul John Eakin (2008), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010), Janet Hoskins

(1998), and Jane Bennett (2010). These theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual basis for understanding identity as processual, relational, and materially mediated rather than fixed or textually confined. Within this framework, repair is approached not merely as a technical or restorative procedure but as a cultural, ethical, and epistemological practice that produces meaning through material intervention.

In addition to theoretical analysis, the study employs a qualitative visual and material reading of selected contemporary ceramic practices that foreground breakage, fragmentation, and visible mending. These works are examined through close analysis of form, surface, material intervention, and process, with particular attention to how cracks, seams, joins, and repaired surfaces operate as material inscriptions of memory and identity. The analysis does not aim to produce monographic artist studies; rather, it mobilizes selected examples as critical sites through which broader questions of autobiographical narration and material ethics can be explored.

The methodological approach is also informed by a reflexive engagement with artistic process. However, the study avoids confessional or autobiographical self-disclosure as primary evidence. Instead, practice is treated as a form of situated knowledge production in which decisions related to making, breaking, and repairing constitute analytical material. This reflexive dimension allows for a nuanced understanding of how autobiographical meaning may emerge through material engagement without being reduced to personal testimony.

Analytically, the study proceeds through three interrelated stages. First, it establishes a theoretical framework linking autobiographical identity with material memory and the ethics of repair. Second, it examines repair as a narrative strategy within contemporary ceramic practice through visual and material analysis. Third, it interprets repair as a broader conceptual model for understanding identity formation within contemporary cultural contexts marked by fragmentation, vulnerability, and ecological and material precarity.

By integrating theoretical inquiry with material and visual analysis, this methodology positions contemporary ceramic practice as a critical site of knowledge production. It enables an examination of how autobiographical identity may be materially enacted, disrupted, and reconfigured through artistic processes, thereby expanding the conceptual terrain of auto/biography studies beyond text-centered paradigms and

situating repair as a significant analytical framework within contemporary art and material culture discourse.

7 DISCUSSION – IDENTITY AS A REPAIRED STRUCTURE

This discussion synthesizes the theoretical and practice-based arguments developed throughout the article by proposing identity as a repaired structure. Rather than conceiving autobiographical identity as a unified narrative or a recoverable origin, the study argues that identity is materially and narratively sustained through acts of repair that acknowledge rupture while enabling continuity. This model aligns with contemporary approaches in auto/biography studies that reject narrative closure and instead emphasize identity as processual, relational, and contingent (Eakin, 2008: 43–47; Smith & Watson, 2010: 18–21).

Central to this argument is the recognition that repair does not restore wholeness in any absolute sense. Instead, repair produces a provisional coherence that remains visibly marked by interruption. Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity is particularly instructive in this regard. By distinguishing between *idem*-identity (sameness) and *ipse*-identity (selfhood), Ricoeur demonstrates that identity persists not through sameness over time but through the capacity to negotiate change, rupture, and ethical responsibility (Ricoeur, 1992: 113–121). The repaired structure exemplifies this negotiation: continuity is maintained not by erasing damage but by integrating it into an altered yet viable form.

When applied to autobiographical self-narration, these understanding challenges dominant cultural expectations that life narratives should culminate in coherence, healing, or resolution. Traditional autobiographical models have often privileged narrative mastery, in which fragmentation is retrospectively ordered into unity. However, as Smith and Watson (2010: 5) observe, such expectations marginalize narratives and lives that resist linear progression or redemptive closure. The repaired structure offers an alternative paradigm in which fragmentation is not a deficiency to be overcome but a condition to be acknowledged and worked through.

Material practices of repair in contemporary ceramic art render this paradigm visible. Repair foregrounds the labor of holding together what has been broken without denying the fact of breakage. Cracks, seams, and joins function as material analogues to

autobiographical gaps and silences—sites where meaning is negotiated rather than resolved. These material traces correspond to what Eakin (2008, p. 46) describes as the ongoing work of identity formation, sustained through repeated acts of interpretation rather than completed narrative arcs. In this sense, repaired ceramic objects materialize autobiographical identity as an open and evolving process.

Importantly, the repaired structure also introduces an ethical dimension to autobiographical identity. Repair entails a decision to care for what has been damaged rather than discard it. This decision resonates with Bennett’s notion of attentiveness to vulnerability and material fragility, in which value is not contingent upon perfection or utility (Bennett, 2010: 101–104). Within autobiographical discourse, a comparable ethical stance emerges in narratives that attend to vulnerability without subsuming it into narratives of triumph or recovery. The repaired self is thus not an idealized or perfected subject but an ethically situated one, marked by exposure and responsibility.

The concept of material memory further reinforces this ethical and narrative shift. As Hoskins (1998: 8) argues, objects do not merely symbolize memory; they actively participate in its production through their biographies of use, damage, and repair. When applied to autobiographical identity, this insight suggests that memory is not located solely in recollection or narration but is materially enacted through ongoing engagement with objects and processes. The repaired ceramic object becomes a site where memory is neither preserved intact nor erased but continually reactivated through material intervention.

Understanding identity as a repaired structure also destabilizes hierarchies between original and subsequent states of being. In repaired ceramics, the post-damage form is not inferior to an imagined original; it constitutes a new configuration with its own integrity. This revaluation parallels autobiographical approaches that refuse to privilege an “authentic” self before rupture over later transformations. Instead, identity is understood as cumulative and relational, shaped through encounters, losses, and adaptations over time (Ricoeur, 1992:140–148). The repaired structure affirms this cumulative identity by refusing a return to an unmarked origin.

Moreover, the repaired structure foregrounds temporality as layered rather than linear. Repair embeds past rupture within the present form, creating a temporal palimpsest in which multiple moments coexist. This temporal complexity mirrors autobiographical

processes in which past experiences are continually reinterpreted from the standpoint of the present. As Smith and Watson (2010: 18–21) note, autobiographical acts are always situated and shaped by the conditions of their articulation. Repair materializes this situatedness, making visible the temporal negotiations that underlie identity formation.

By framing identity as a repaired structure, this article contributes to ongoing debates in auto/biography studies concerning modality, narration, and the limits of self-representation. It demonstrates that autobiographical self-narration need not rely on linguistic articulation or confessional disclosure to be analytically robust. Instead, identity can be materially enacted through practices that foreground interruption, care, and provisional coherence. Such practices expand understandings of how self-narration operates across media and disciplines while maintaining a strong commitment to narrative analysis.

Ultimately, the repaired structure offers a model of autobiographical identity attuned to contemporary conditions of precarity, vulnerability, and transformation. It resists narratives of mastery and closure, proposing an understanding of the self as something sustained through ongoing acts of attention and repair. In doing so, the article advances repair from a descriptive metaphor to a critical theoretical framework within contemporary cultural and material discourse. Positioned at the intersection of material memory, ethics, and artistic practice, repair emerges not only as an aesthetic strategy but also as a conceptual model for interpreting how identities and material worlds are maintained under conditions of fragility and change. By foregrounding the ethical and temporal implications of making, breaking, and mending, the repaired structure provides a productive lens through which contemporary art and culture may rethink the relationship between selfhood, materiality, and continuity in an era increasingly defined by precarity and ecological awareness. Repair, therefore, provides a conceptual framework for rethinking responsible material practices and sustainable cultural production in contemporary society.

8 CONCLUSION

This article has proposed understanding autobiographical identity as a repaired structure: a form of selfhood that is neither unified nor recoverable in an original state,

but materially and narratively sustained through acts of repair. By situating contemporary ceramic art within the theoretical framework of auto/biography studies, the study has expanded prevailing conceptions of self-narration beyond text-centered paradigms and demonstrated how material processes can function as modes of autobiographical meaning-making.

Drawing on narrative theories of identity and material memory, the article has shown that repair operates not merely as a metaphor but as a narrative and conceptual strategy enacted through material practice. In contrast to restorative models that aim to erase damage and reinstate wholeness, repair foregrounds rupture as constitutive rather than incidental. This perspective aligns with contemporary understandings of autobiographical identity as processual, contingent, and ethically situated (Eakin, 2008; Ricoeur, 1992). Identity, from this standpoint, is not narrated as a completed story but sustained through provisional acts of reassembly that acknowledge vulnerability without subsuming it into narratives of resolution.

The analysis of ceramic repair practices has further demonstrated how material memory functions as a site where autobiographical meaning is actively produced rather than merely represented. Cracks, seams, and visible joins register temporal interruptions and material events that cannot be undone, operating analogously to gaps and silences within autobiographical narratives. By retaining rather than concealing damage, repaired ceramic objects materialize an alternative ethics of self-narration—one grounded in exposure, care, and continuity without closure (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Importantly, this study has argued that autobiographical meaning in ceramic art does not depend upon explicit self-reference or confessional disclosure. Instead, identity emerges through material decisions and processes that articulate a relationship to memory, loss, and persistence. This approach resists reductive readings of artistic practice as merely illustrative of personal experience and instead positions making itself as a form of situated autobiographical inquiry. In this sense, ceramic practice functions as a critical methodology through which identity is materially negotiated rather than solely narrated.

By framing identity as a repaired structure, the article contributes to ongoing debates within auto/biography studies concerning modality, narration, and the limits of self-representation. It challenges the privileging of linguistic articulation as the primary site of autobiographical expression and underscores the narrative capacity of material

practices that operate through making, breaking, and mending. At the same time, it situates contemporary ceramic practice within broader discussions in material culture and contemporary art concerning sustainability, care, and responsible engagement with material worlds.

The concept of repair carries broader implications for understanding identity in contemporary cultural contexts marked by precarity, fragmentation, and ecological awareness. Rather than aspiring to ideals of mastery or completeness, the repaired self acknowledges damage as part of its ongoing existence and sustains meaning through continued engagement with what has been broken. In this sense, repair emerges not only as an aesthetic or technical strategy but as a critical conceptual framework for rethinking the relationship between selfhood, materiality, and continuity in contemporary culture.

Ultimately, this article has argued that contemporary ceramic art provides a compelling site for rethinking autobiographical self-narration through material memory and repair. By attending to the narrative capacities of material processes, it expands the conceptual terrain of auto/biography studies and offers new pathways for analyzing identity across media and disciplines. The repaired structure, as articulated through ceramic practice, does not resolve the tensions between continuity and rupture; rather, it sustains them in productive relation, proposing a model of autobiographical identity grounded not in wholeness but in the visible and ongoing labor of living with and through what has been broken. This article proposes repair as a theoretical model for understanding identity formation in contemporary material culture. Within this perspective, repair also functions as a critical ethical response to cultures of disposability and overconsumption that define the contemporary material world.

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Visual Sources

Figure 1 Yeesoonyung, https://www.artsy.net/article/locks-gallery-translated-vase-unruly-ceramics-yeesoonyung?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Figure 2 Edmund de Waal, https://www.edmunddewaal.com/making/library-of-exile-1?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Figure 3 Clare Twomey, http://www.claretwomey.com/projects_-_consciousnessconscience.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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