Through innovative use of technology, 92Y Virtual Clay™, a live online-lecture series, provides presenters and participants an opportunity to share research, chat, and see each other in real time.

Ceramics Monthly: Can you explain exactly what 92Y Virtual Clay™ is and how it got started?

Bobby Silverman: 92Y Virtual Clay™ (Virtual Clay) is a real-time, online-lecture series that presents talks and workshops by important figures in the world of contemporary ceramics. The series was developed by 92nd Street Y (92Y). This past year, in collaboration with the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA), we have presented lectures by Tom Sachs, Michael Strand, Bill Strickland, and Namita Gupta Wiggers.

The idea for the series came about when I left academia to join the community-based ceramics program at 92Y in New York City. I wanted to maintain my connection to academia as well as serve a broader constituency. As budgets are cut, schools are left with little or no funds for visiting artists. Through Virtual Clay, ceramics programs can supplement their academic programs at a very modest price—giving students access to some of the world’s leading figures in contemporary ceramics.

The series began in June 2013. Through innovative use of technology, we are able to achieve a remarkably fluid presentation and interaction that seeks to emulate the classroom or lecture theater as closely as possible. Participants can listen, talk (VOIP), chat, and see each other in real time. The moderator, presenter, and participants can participate from anywhere in the world as long as they have access to a computer with a high-speed internet connection or a broadband mobile device. Presentations can be PowerPoint, video, or internet-based. We are also able to record our programs and make these lectures available on demand.

CM: What’s next for Virtual Clay?

BS: We are currently working on our third season, and Virtual Clay is evolving in extraordinary ways.

In December of 2013 I reached out to Josh Green, Executive Director of NCECA, to discuss a possible partnership. Initially we talked about continuing the lecture series geared toward
As our conversations continued and through the progressive and forward thinking of Green and the NCECA board, it seemed Virtual Clay could support and sustain their community through specific programming to NCECA’s various constituencies throughout the year. While NCECA’s primary function has been to facilitate the increasingly popular yearly conference, the new partnership will significantly expand this model.

In the coming year, in addition to our lecture series, we plan to live-stream free lectures and presentations from the New York Ceramic and Glass Fair and the annual NCECA conference (starting with the 2016 event in Kansas City, Missouri). We also plan to broadcast an interactive lecture from the conference.

Additional upcoming projects include a live professional development seminar as well as a 3D modeling course, and NCECA members are exploring initiatives such as apprenticeships and support for new faculty.

Other initiatives we’re developing for the future include creating specific content for university or community-based programs.

I am also thinking about artists who are not enrolled in an academic program. There are many people around the world who, for whatever reason, cannot leave where they are living or afford college tuition or workshop fees—yet want to be part of a larger conversation about ceramics. Through our lectures, critiques, and conversations, Virtual Clay can bring together a committed world-wide community to engage in meaningful and in-depth conversations about issues important to the participants and be a vital component in their professional development.

CM: How many people participate, on average, in the live online classes? What lecture has been the most watched to date?

BS: To date, Namita Gupta Wiggers had the largest group of 25 individuals enrolled for her online lecture. However, this does not tell the whole story as groups tend to sign up for one enrollment and watch together, so there were actually close to 60 participants. This cost sharing tends to be the norm.

While we try to make the programming as accessible and affordable as possible, it makes sense for graduate seminars, community groups, and individuals to pool resources and gather around a computer or digital projection to view the programs collectively. In speaking to participants, conversations in these groups usually continue after the program has signed off which is exactly what we hope for.

the author Bobby Silverman is an artist, designer, and the Director of the Ceramics Department at the 92nd Street Y in New York City. To learn more about 92Y Virtual Clay™, visit www.92y.org/VirtualClay.