

## Chapter Thirteen

### *SEX: Eroticism in Ceramics*

“Le toucher est le plus demystificateur de tous les sens, au contraire de la vue qui est le plus magique”, Roland Barthes.

The relationship between clay as a material, ceramics as a practice and sexuality itself are multiple and numerous. All imply touch and transformation, and touch is the dominant sense when it comes to working with plastic clay. Clay comes from the earth; it is alive and fertile. Clay is like flesh, and most mythologies use clay as origin in creation myths. This relationship has already been discussed in the preceding chapter. Clay is also common, basic, cheap and dirty. At scatological level, it is like excrement. In ceramics, the body has always played a large role in representation, both abstractly and metaphorically in the anthropomorphism of pottery forms, and in an obvious relation between pots and body parts (the lip, neck, shoulder, belly and foot of a pot). The direct formal and semantic connection between pottery forms and human bodies is particularly relevant in the relation of ceramics to sexuality.

In contrast, visual art is often described as distinct from other forms of human expression by being concerned with pure form, with representation. It is in that manner that works of art have an independent life and are complete in themselves. This “independent” life also segregates art from reality and this manifests itself in the art

gallery, the neutral white cube of the conventional exhibition space, the preferred institutional space worldwide now for the experience of art, one that I will not be sorry to see replaced, eventually. I will argue that the white cube of the exhibition space operates in a form of “reverse kitsch”, not stylistically so much as psychologically, since its sublime purity and expectant emptiness is also a form of denial, a negation of base materiality. But then, it is conceived to receive “conceptual” and “mediated” art forms, primarily. This base materiality of ceramics is partly the reason why functional, practical objects are not usually included in the category we name “visual arts” since they are tools for activities that connect them directly to lived experiences and in that process they lose the necessary independence where art, supposedly, operates. I do not happen to agree with this premise, which has also been endlessly challenged by artists as well as theoreticians, in the last 100 years, at least. Yet, it remains that this “formal” model of the purity and independence of art is still with us now, and there is still constant resistance to legitimately include functional, practical objects, specifically hand-made objects, within the art category. They usually achieve such status, coveted by most makers, by contextualization within sculpture/installation strategies, but rarely in remaining true to their original context of practical, functional or even decorative things.

When sexual representations are included in the equation image/object, the problem becomes even more complex. Objects and more specifically if functional, need to be experienced by touch, with the hand if not the whole body. This emphasis on touch over a visual appreciation alone, not only distinguishes objects from images, but also creates a deep connection with eroticism and sexuality, both deeply concerned with touch in sensual experience. And, if the eye is the most magical and mysterious of all the senses, touch is the most revealing, to paraphrase the opening quote by Roland Barthes.

Human nature creates such an inherent and fundamental desire to hold and be united with another human body that this urge must by necessity become a subject for art. The difficulties of representing the nude in art reside in the need to use graphic images that cannot be avoided and must be presented in all their “obscenity”. When a sexual act is represented and the sexual aspects of human bodies are brought to the foreground, this upsets our response to the art work, a response that we prefer to be based on “pure” form alone, without having to consider obvious, confrontational and disturbing contents and contexts.

This modernist emphasis on pure form and the denial of the uncomfortable realities of life aligns formal art and kitsch. Milan Kundera stated that kitsch is the absolute denial of shit. The formalism of modern art and modern design is, in that sense, a form of kitsch too, a reverse kitsch possibly, yet psychologically similar, denying by abbreviation and the reductive process of pure form, the complexity of human life's, of birth and death and everything in between. Of course, formalism too has been endlessly challenged in the last century and will continue to be for quite a while, I am sure. Pottery forms, in their abstraction, could be, interestingly enough, included in this world of pure form where many would still prefer art to solely reside. By themselves, pottery forms are familiar, domestic, ordinary, innocent and their real beauty can be appreciated in itself, independent of any other obvious references to other aspects of life, in their abstract nature. When pottery forms are modified by the addition of graphic sexual representations, the contradictions between the object and the image can be quite jarring and disruptive, hence their efficiency.

The expression of the sexual impulse in clay and ceramics goes back to the pre-historical Neolithic, about 15,000 years ago, as early as the ceramic tradition itself (which some experts push as far back as 30,000 years into the past), with the modeling and firing of fertility images, then, closer to us in time, the beginning of hollowed vessels, of pottery. From that time, the Neolithic, there are literally thousands of ceramic representations of female figures with large breast, broad hips, with a well defined and large triangular vulva, usually interpreted as images of the Mother Goddess, and connected to funerary rites and the cyclical rhythms of reproduction and re-generation found in nature. Some of these idols are in stone, bone and antler and, by the Bronze Age, metal as well, but the vast majority are made of clay, at first unfired then made more permanent by firing in bonfires or in the fire pits, for placement in the altars and ritual places of these early communities. Fire, of course, was also and primarily used for heat, for protection and for basic cooking needs. The earth, source of clay, is perceived as female in mythologies, in most if not all cultures on the planet, and the apprehension and control of fire may have been a female discovery, originally. It has recently been speculated that some of the Neolithic fertility figures were intentionally fired quickly in a bonfire, while the clay still contained moisture, in order for the form to explode in contact with the flame (fire being a male element). The actual meaning of that (possibly) intentional gesture of exploding the modeled image remains speculative, like so many of our interpretations of that distant past. Probably, the destruction of the modeled figure

could have reinforced the power of the object, releasing its potential energy and completing the cyclic nature of the ritual. It is necessary to note that in most cosmogonies, the world is composed not only of four directions –east, west, north and south– but of four basic elements – air, earth, water and fire – and that all four are central and necessary elements of the ceramic process. The clay, earth, is lifted from the ground (earth again) by the action of water and pressure, it is then exposed to the air to dry and harden and the cycle is completed by fire. Similarly the pot touches the earth at its base, and is open to the air on top, while its interior contains water, which can be heated by fire, all of which are important anthropological aspects of the relationship of pottery and ceramics to natural processes as they relate to culture.

#### *Historical precedents:*

The oldest, chronologically, graphically sexual representations (images of sexual acts, intercourse between male and female partners) in fired clay come from Egypt, from as late as the first dynasties. From that time, fired clay penises have come down to us, and they were probably meant as votive offerings in fertility rites.

The people of Mesopotamia also made countless fired clay offerings, many in the shape of charming miniature beds where couples are seen chastely yet obviously embracing, possible symbols of fidelity and/or wishes for fertility.

We also find terracotta phalluses in China, dating from 5000 years ago in the Quijialing culture of Hebei province. One was found that was 157 cm. tall. From the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), there are some architectural tiles found in brick lined underground funerary chambers, with erotic scenes as well. Closer to us in time, clay phalluses can be found in many cultures, notably in Sub-Saharan Africa and in the vast desert of North Africa, where the nomadic Touaregs use fired clay bed posts that are clearly phallic in form.

#### *The Moche of pre-Columbian Peru:*

From around 600 BCE to the Spanish conquest in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, there were two millennia of continuous history in erotic ceramics based along the coast of Peru in South America. This is certainly the longest, unbroken erotic ceramic tradition in the world and

this situation is unique in the history of ceramics and of humankind. And it is still continuing today, if largely for the tourist trade now, a phenomenon found in all other indigenous craft practices, anywhere.

Of the many cultures of Peru over more than 2000 years, the Moche culture is particularly identified with erotic ceramics, although all the other cultures of the region also produced numerous and distinctive erotic ceramics. In the Moche culture we find multiple representations of graphic sexual acts on pots. It is meaningful that the objects are always pots. These pots are most often of a particular type known as stir-up vessels, with its distinctive handle, a form that is not particularly functional and exclusively made for ritual purposes and found as offerings in funerary rites within tombs. The actual function of that particular shape of the stir-up vessel –easily grasped for transportation, but difficult to fill or empty of its presumably liquid content– is still debated and open for interpretation. It is interesting to note that, just as it is true for their erotic art, all the cultures of Peru made variations on the stir-up vessel over 2000 years and that this shape is unique to Peruvian ceramics and found nowhere else in the world, in itself an interesting fact considering the universal distribution of most, if not all, basic ceramic pottery forms otherwise. That this peculiar and particular form survives continuously for at least two millennia is a potent example in itself of the classical esthetics, where forms vary only slightly over vast expanses of time and geography. In the case of the stir-up handled vessel of the Moche, we find most of the variations at the “spout”, and these variations greatly help in dating the successful periods, each one being characterized by a distinct and specific spout finial at times blatantly phallic, as is so often the case with spouts everywhere in the world, although usually more subtly. This phallic aspect of the spout is in itself revealing of its ritualistic importance and particular meaning, now lost. One amazing vessel shows the stir-up handle actually penetrating the vagina of a woman reclining on her back, while the other end sprouts between her breasts. The very fact that these sexual objects are always pots is in itself significant, as they are meant to contain, to be entered and penetrated, to be filled, then to preserve and protect their content, that will then feed and nourish, regenerate and generously provide, in actuality as well as metaphorically, through their gendering with female openings and protruding male pouring attributes.

A wide variety of sexual acts are represented on Moche pots and other pots from the other cultures of Peru: female to male fellatio is quite common; kissing and foundling;

male masturbation (but never, as yet, female masturbation); intercourse between heterosexual couples, in various positions; birthing scenes; intercourse between animals, copulating frogs, mice, dogs, lamas, monkeys even at times corn and other sexualized food crops engaged in genital, sexual acts; and intercourse between human females and mythical animals (such as bats and jaguars, which both had important religious connotations in Moche culture); no scene of sadism or sadomasochism, while scenes of torture and mutilation of war prisoners, slaves and sacrificial victims are very graphic and common; no voyeurism, but some examples of genital mutilation, even self-mutilation and castration. In scholarly books on the subject, it is repeatedly stated that there are no examples of cunnilingus (male to female oral sex), no examples of pedophilia, of lesbianism, no homosexual act. More recent scholarship and excavations has revealed examples of all these as well: a vase showing mutual heterosexual oral sex, another depicts a female masturbating a young boy, yet another, a male figure penetrating anally a small, young girl. An example of lesbianism has also recently surfaced, showing a female with an enlarged clitoris ready to penetrate a receptive female partner lying on her back. A few homosexual depictions of penetrative anal sex are also known. There are also many examples of sexualized pots and vessels, conventional pot forms with penises as well as pots actually shaped like male genitalia. There is even a vase made of pair of phalluses, both in erection, joined together, a possible homosexual reference. In fact the joining together of two vessel forms, identical or different, to make a single pot is a characteristic of many pre-Columbian ceramic objects, notably in Peru. The concept of duality was central to the mythologies of pre-Columbian cultures. There are pots adorned with vaginas as well, carved or painted on the conventional pottery form and rather bizarre yet fascinating anthropomorphized penile and vaginal pots, where the genital organs by themselves are given human form combining simultaneously sexual, human and pottery references. Three levels of transformation are also at work here, from flesh to clay and then ceramics, from genital to human, from human form to vessel form, stressing the inherent relations between these diverse states of existence and embodiment.

Yet, interestingly enough in all this amazing variety (in itself unique in the history of ceramics if not the history of erotic art), most pots from the Moche culture, as many as 80% of all erotic ceramic forms, from a corpus of about 800 erotic vessels found so far, show heterosexual anal intercourse! This is very clearly represented in all cases, with no ambiguity, whether penetration happens from the side or from the back, with the female figure bending over, on her knees or lying down, usually on her side. The vagina is usually

clearly defined and visible, with the penis obviously penetrating the anus of the woman. In no case is there evidence of force or coercion on the part of the male or resistance from the female, despite the fact that their facial expression is often difficult to interpret, as they rarely show emotions or feelings, of pain or of pleasure. Speculations about these amazing, unconventional representations abound, due to the particular nature of the act of anal penetration, taboo and unmentionable in most cultures and certainly not accepted as conventional sexual practice anywhere. Another factor is the prevalence of the image in Moche pottery and thus, its obvious cultural importance. Many agree that it may represent some form of prescription for birth control, a means to limit pregnancy. More recent scholarship speculates, rightfully in my mind, that there was a special time of the year, within the natural cycle of growth and regeneration, planting and harvesting in the life and death of plants and nature, when for a period of time, the dead were believed to come back to life and resurface to share the world of the living. During that special time, still found today all over Latin America in the celebrations around the Day of the Dead, the natural order of the world was reversed and all activities had to be reversed likewise, particularly all sexual activities. As a form of reversal, only anal intercourse was permitted during that important ritual period. This ritual prescription was essential for the natural order to be restored so that the dead could return to the underworld, restoring the natural order of things for another year. This practice of various reverse rituals can be found in many other American aboriginal cultures. It is important to keep in mind that the Moche culture was highly agricultural, relying on a vast system of irrigation in an otherwise desert environment, where periodic drought and famine was rather common. Rituals around death and sexuality as they relate to the cycles of nature were of supreme importance. These sexual representations on pots are always intended for a funerary context, for the use of the dead in the afterlife.

Some vessels show living males or even skeletons with erections as spouts, with the superior rim of the vessel pierced with holes on the periphery, preventing the user from drinking the content in any other way than through vicarious fellatio of the phallic spout, creating a specific rite for inebriation. This impression is reinforced by the fact that there are also vessels in the shape of female bodies, where the opening for drinking is a wide, gaping vagina, directing the user to vicarious cunnilingus (if male) or lesbian oral sex (if female). In fact, many bowls and drinking vessels release their contents through vaginal, penile, even anal openings, encouraging the user to engage in various sexual acts with the vessel.

It is even more interesting to note that representations of vaginas often, if not always, include a clearly defined clitoris, something unique to the ceramic culture of Peru and not found anywhere else in the world and only subsequently found much later in the medical illustrations of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe. An amazingly detailed vessel shows a prostrated female figure raising her buttocks in offering and spreading her posterior cheeks with both hands, to expose her enlarged vagina, clearly showing the clitoris. This shows the precise clinical knowledge of anatomy and the power of descriptive observation on the part of the Moche potter, and that female pleasure was considered by the Moche as an integral part of sexuality.

Moche pottery does not exclusively depict sexual acts, or sexuality as subject – quite the contrary. Only about 800 remaining pots among the thousands and thousands in existence do. Among these 800, are also depictions of hermaphroditism and androgyny (a human with both male and female genitalia), and many others show sexual, venereal diseases, such as syphilis (which was, like tobacco, potato, corn, peanuts, tomatoes, rubber, cacao, etc. a gift of the New World to Europeans, then to the rest of the world) and hemorrhoids. Other vessels also depict other diseases and their treatment. Most aspects of Moche culture can be learned from these vases. They remain an invaluable source of information on these complex and fascinating people.

If there are numerous painted representations of pots on pots, either in the domestic context of daily life or within religious and funerary rituals, there are no depictions of pottery making that we know of. Recent excavations in the working quarters of inhabited sites show that potters worked in close proximity to important buildings and ceremonial centers and were probably under state control. They were provided with good materials. Moche pottery is of very high quality and very refined structurally and esthetically, considering the basic, simple technology available, and potters probably enjoyed a higher status than farmers and fishermen. Pottery making was a specialized industry and the artists had a special status within the highly hierarchical Moche society. But much research and excavation remains to be done.



*On reproductive processes, procreation, regeneration and the matrix of molds:*

In Peru today, most folk pottery is made by men. Similarly, in most cultures worldwide, males have the monopoly on the production of graphic erotica. Usually in most cultures of the world, pottery making is a female activity but there are exceptions. Often, pottery made by hand is the domain of women, pottery made on the wheel, the domain of men. Pre-Columbian pottery was made by hand (pre-Columbian America did not use wheels as tools but made use of them for children's toys!), at times with the help of molds, also made with fired clay. Molds themselves, as generating devices, are sexualized and in some aspects gendered, and molds for casting, be it clay or metal, also find their origin in ceramics as a process. Molds have made appearances repeatedly in these essays for all kinds of reasons. Molds are very interesting and complex objects. Their exterior form is independent of their closed interior aspect and one would be hard pressed to second guess what could possibly lie inside a closed mold, what it would eventually reveal. This negative space inside is an absolute reversal, a mirror image of the original model from which the mold was made. When clay is pressed or poured into the mold, it produces another version of the original, and if this original model was to begin with solid, as is usually the case, the new version is usually a hollow shell. The process went from solid (the model), to hollow (the mold), to solid again (the mold filled with liquid clay slip), to hollow again (the new object). This object can then be multiplied and the mold can generate new forms, all basically identical, repeatedly. It is not only a form of pregnancy and birthing but also of cloning. The mold is a matrix, like a uterus, to regenerate new forms, in this case basically identical to the source (if we make exception for the shift from solid to hollow, from mass to volume). In that sense, molds are intrinsically feminine, in their (re)productive aspects.

*Greek Attic Pottery:*

Much could also be written about the Greek Attic pottery in relation to sex. I would again refer the curious reader to my book "Sexpots: Eroticism in Ceramics", where this is discussed in more depth. Suffice to say here that the Greeks had a very particular and problematic relation to sex, and sexual activity was basically an ethical issue for males, in Greek culture. Although homosexuality was well accepted in Ancient Greece, these relationships were complicated by hierarchies between men and women, men and boys, and master and slave. The most problematic of these was the relationships between men

and boys, since they were considered free citizens, with free will and individual rights and they could not be subjugated, as women and slaves were. The active/passive role between men and boys was somewhat resolved by intercrural sex, where the penis was inserted between the thighs, the two protagonists facing each other, and ejaculation taking place outside the body. This is the position usually depicted in graphic sexual representations between men and boys on Greek pots. Many other vessels show sexual scenes of either vaginal or anal penetration with female prostitutes (courtesans), who like slaves could be subjugated. If there are numerous seduction scenes, between men and boys (the most numerous) and men and girls or women, there is never any sexual representation between husband and wife. This was too private to be shown in the public context where pots usually operated.

If ceramics as an art form is largely absent from art history and is rarely considered important enough to be included in most surveys, the same can also be said for sexuality, which also finds itself overlooked or ignored by the histories of art. When objects with sexual scenes are part of the collection of museums, they usually remain out of view and are not publicly displayed, unless the offensive aspect can be hidden and/or is difficult to be accessed visually. Often on Greek pottery, erotic or sexual scenes are painted on the underside of a Kylix (large flat drinking cups, for serving wine at a symposium). In museums, such cups are usually displayed against a wall, lying on their side, so we can see the other image, more acceptable, painted inside the concave space of the shallow dish, in the unusual and formally inventive circular format. In that process, the other, offensive side where the depiction is organized in a more continuous band, interrupted by the two handles on each side, is now hidden from view. At the Metropolitan Museum in New-York, a recent and highly praised reinstalling of the Ancient Greek collections present their important holdings of Greek Attic pottery according to various themes, like domestic life, food, wine, death, religion, sports, medicine, war, mythology, etc. Notably absent is a section on sexuality, despite the fact that the museum holds numerous important examples of pots with sexual scenes, but these still cannot be shown publicly. In the process, the Museum, and this example is repeated worldwide, gives the impression that sexuality did not exist for the Greeks when in fact the exact opposite is true. The ancient Greeks were literally obsessed with sex and it infuses all of their literature, their mythology and their philosophy as well as their pottery. And if one can write endlessly about sex, it is still remains difficult to virtually impossible to exhibit.

*The contemporary context:*

My favorite contemporary erotic pots are the “Vases for a Gynecologist’s Office” made by American potter Warren Mackenzie in the 1960’s and early 70’s. These direct, fluid vessels, with penile shapes and vaginal folds and openings, made me realize, when I first saw them as a young student in the early 1970’s, that it was possible for simple, small, functional pots to be relevant in the contemporary world and in the process make subtle yet efficient commentary on life and culture by formal association with bodies and body parts.

Which brings to mind an interesting question. Are pots themselves gendered? Are there female pots and male pots? There is always an obvious anthropomorphism evident in pottery forms. Pots look like human bodies and the language we use to describe them makes direct references to the human form as well. But pots are also the embodiment of polar opposites, the “female” interior, the space for containment, function and utility, and the “male” exterior, the space for the symbolic meaning of decoration and images. As we have seen with the pre-Columbian Moche culture, many pots have actual sexual organs and body orifices, penises and vaginas, more rarely anuses. Examples of that can be found all over the world, in Greek Attic and Roman pottery, in China and the Orient as well. All over the world in various cultures and as early as the very beginnings of pottery making in the Neolithic, pots shaped like breasts or adorned with nipple-like protuberances can be found (early Minoan and today, Magdalene Odundo). There are many examples of pots with penises and scrotum as feet or base, in Moche art, in Greek pottery, and in an example made in Staffordshire in 1820, a cup with Punch’s head over a large erect penis with a two lobed scrotum, acting as the “foot” for the cup, with the interior space for containment extending all the way into the sexual organ (for what kind of drink, what kind of libation?). An earlier English example from the late Stuart period of a phallic drinking cup was recently excavated in London too. So, are some pots male and others female? I have mentioned earlier that bowls could be read as essentially female. Any vessel with a round base, a globular bottom and belly would be perceived as female, while teapots, pouring and spouted vessels with projections, might be viewed as male or with masculine characteristics. Some pots are passive and receptive, while others are active and transformative. All remain performative, either way. So, are there also trans-gendered pots, even transvestite pots, where gender roles have been reversed or subverted? Isn’t decoration on pots a form of “make-up”, a cosmetic stage, where the nature of surface is

altered by painting and ornamentation? I have no answers to these questions. Maybe such pots still remain to be made. I think that in the end, all pottery forms are essentially hermaphroditic and androgynous, combining elements of both female and male bodies (and psyche) not only through formal associations and semantic parallels, but by virtue of symbolic function and metaphorical implications. Grayson Perry is probably the contemporary potter investigating this potential with the most potency right now.

American potter George Ohr is another ceramic artist I actually consider a contemporary since, although he lived and worked mostly towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, he was then basically forgotten to be rediscovered only in the early 1970's. George Ohr is arguably America's greatest potter. I will go so far as to state, the first truly original American artist as well, irrespective of discipline, a rather bold statement to make but one I am ready to defend since his vision was so independent, original and singular. He manifested in his work and in his creativity, all aspects that have come to define all other American artists who followed him, and which he was the first to fully and truly exercise. Yes, I declare (nobody else will), Ohr was the first truly American artist, one whose work was totally and absolutely original, totally American. Of course, being a potter, he is hardly considered to be an artist at all, in art contexts, even American art contexts.

Ohr made lots of sexually charged objects, among them a vagina-lipped vase over an erect phallic shape, glazed in menstrual red. The folds and twists of his extremely thinly wheel-thrown forms are ideally suited to sexual connotations. His vagina banks, crudely made, with the slot for money and the gouged pubic hair, bring together power and sex, money and desire, with amazing directness. His tokens for New Orleans brothels continue the idea in a more humorous manner, with visual rebuses and word play with sexual meaning and double-entendre. George Ohr saw the making of his work as a process of giving birth and he considered his pots to be his babies, literally. His work, as well as his writings, what is left of it since after his death a large amount of his literary output was destroyed by his family and burned, is infused with sexual metaphors and references to feminine powers of creation and reproduction.

The unfortunate destruction of his apparently massive literary output was probably very detrimental to his reputation, then and even now, since a significant paper trail greatly helps those with literal minds in their assessment of art works, even if only in a

limited, incomplete manner. The “folk” sensibility of Ohr’s work is found all over the world in the relation between ceramics, pottery and sexuality, and most pottery traditions worldwide, to this day, incorporate abstract or realistic motifs with sexual references on the surface designs decorating the forms. Female triangles, vaginal flowers, erect landscapes and rocks as well as male “cocks” or roosters are found everywhere.

Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party” combines porcelain dishes and utensils, placed on a large triangular table. The triangle itself is a particularly female form: it is an abstract, symbolic shape often used to represent female genitalia and sexuality. The table is also covered with embroidered and woven place settings for 39 historically important women. This large table is itself placed over a triangular floor covered in triangular porcelain tiles, bearing the names in gold of another 999 women. It has always fascinated me that in all the voluminous literature about this important and seminal sculpture installation, the conceptual aspects of crafts are rarely, if ever, discussed. The material aspects of crafts are obviously mentioned, doing otherwise would be an impossibility, and craft as a process or as a collective activity is also brought up, usually in reference to collaboration, to women’s work and domestic activities, but craft concepts, around containment, the juxtaposition and embodiment of opposites in reconciliation, as well as crafts’ relation to history and culture, craft’s universality and more importantly in the case of the “Dinner Party”, the importance of ritual and experience, are all usually ignored, something not totally surprising of course in the current climate of ignorance and dismissal around these practices.

Historians, academics, art critics and theorists do not have an understanding of craft concepts that would allow them to address these important and essential issues. In the case of Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party” they have the perfect excuses (the reliance on content, i.e. historical narratives, here revisionist from a patriarchal to a matriarchal hierarchy, yet nonetheless hierarchical, and on context, namely installation art and other “high” art references) to analyze and explain, to the detriment of concepts (art concepts, like representation or craft concepts, like function and decoration, for example). Such writers, by focusing on the personality and biography of the artist herself, Judy Chicago here, also obscure and diffuse the meaning of the work and this prevents us from addressing its real content. Here, the content is provided by context, and the most relevant context is not actually feminism, or even installation art, but crafts, a context that

is, unfortunately, unmentionable, except in passing, as material process exclusively, as an unimportant, yet unavoidable and dismissible aspect.

Kim Dickey also introduces an evident feminist content in her “Pissoir” of 1994, a series of seductive vessels with sexually referential organic shapes, made with the intent to intensify the relationship between the user and the object. These unusual and original implements are meant to fit the female body and when inserted between the legs in another form of intercrural penetration, enable a woman to pee standing up. They are politicized contemporary interpretations of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century bourdaloue, a lidded porcelain vessel made at Sèvres, used in church at Versailles, and specifically shaped to fit snugly between the thighs, and used for the relief of women during the too long sermons of a long winded priest, Abbé Bourdaloue! Dickey also documents her work “in action” with video or “in situ” with photography to allow their potential to be realized and to encourage an interaction with the work, if vicarious, that provides complete understanding. This documentation suggests intimacy and reveals the ultimate function of the objects. Yet, the video or photography also positions the viewer as removed from the action and reaffirms our problematic relation to real acts and physical touch, through the mediation of experiences in art. This reference to touch is central to Kim Dickey’s work, since her preferred form of construction is the assemblage of pinched forms, where clay is squeezed progressively into shape between the fingers. By this erotic process, the forms are further shaped to reference vaginal or ambiguously organic forms.

The use of ceramics in these works emphasizes the extraordinary semantic and formal similarities possible between ceramics and sexualities. In its physical nature ceramics is fragile yet permanent and can act as a memorial for desire, for intimacy, for the passing of time and the reality of death. These objects of “obscenity” (in the etymological sense of the word “from the dirt”), which graphically present and represent the rarely visible, bring to mind the notion of pornography. If it often seems in our enlightened age of freedom and permissiveness that there is no objective basis for discrimination among bodies and sexual acts, this is not the case in actuality and as a result, when pornography appears as a social issue, we react with little understanding of what is at stake in term of freedom of expression and other related values. There is a complex debate around pornography that addresses the tension between freedom of expression and other social values, including the exploitation of the subjects and the implications of being subjugated as image, as body parts rather than whole people

Daniel Kruger from Germany uses representations of masculinity in various ways for various ends in most of his ceramics. The representation of male nudity or sexuality is itself quite rare in art and the difficulties of such images is fraught with all kinds of problems. In Kruger's work, the most interesting use of such images show photographic nudes transferred to porcelain plaques attached to familiar standard vase forms, of the type one would use for flowers, for example. These vases are also modified by the addition of other cast or modeled ceramic objects, like flowers, fruits or even rocks, which all in their own way stress the ambiguity of the placement of such an image on such an object, by analogy with femininity, vulnerability, impermanency and fragility. The photographic images themselves are transferred to porcelain with computer generated, laser printed ceramic decals. This transfer gives these images permanency, something not present in the original photographs, photography being the most fleeting and impermanent medium. These images then become frozen in time, to be transmitted to a hypothetical future, which will reinterpret them much differently than we do now. The progressive transfer from flesh to photograph, from photograph to print in a magazine, from paper print to ceramic print, all these passages from soft, living flesh to hard, cold clay and to shiny, reflective, glazed ceramic skin serves to immortalize these images of masculine display, of youth and beauty and also, of the fleetingness of flesh. Similar to the images of "pais kalos", the beautiful boys singled out on Attic Greek vases, these ceramic objects will transmit to the future images of manhood and desire from our present time. They will thus become the antiquities of the future, with more realism than the one found on the differently idealized Greek forms.

Sergei Isupov, originally from Russia but now living in America, combines surrealism and the fantasy and freedom of dreams, with graphic depictions of sexuality in its many forms. These nightmarish scenarios of associations and juxtapositions, rendered in an academic, controlled manner with a skillful sense of color, contrast and balance in the relation of form to surface, nonetheless destabilize our expectations. In his work, naked bodies are symbolic of humankind as a whole, and their nakedness provides a seductive entry to engage the viewer. The nudity also positions the figures ambiguously in time and space, without the bothersome references that could be provided by clothing, thus reinforcing their universality and timelessness.

*Ceramics and Sexuality:*

“It is fearfully exciting when you do get it centered and the stuff begins to come up between your fingers....Vanessa would never make her penises long enough, which I thought was very odd...the clay was too stiff...”

In these excerpts from a letter by Roger Fry (which brings to mind the sexy, erotic and very slippery, even literally dirty throwing scene in the movie “Ghost”), the Bloomsbury writer and critic describes his first experiments of throwing clay on the wheel and he conveys with efficiency the eroticism of the experience with the slippery, wet, malleable clay progressively raising under the touch and pressure of the hands and fingers, moving in an up and down masturbatory gesture. Anyone who has attempted to centre clay on a potter’s wheel, even professionals who do it hundred of times a day, can directly relate to the particularly sexual nature of the experience. These sexual associations are not only phallic and male, but equally carry female analogies. Centering the clay on the wheel’s head is the moment when the inform mass becomes a breast-like, pregnant form ready to transform, through the familiar touch, inside and outside, of the potter’s hand. After centering the clay, the fingers penetrate the yielding mass, stretch the opening and then raise and lift the form to generate the desired shape. All these gestures and actions are not only mechanically competent, they also give rise to unambiguously and unabashedly sensual and erotic images within the imagination.

This transformative aspect of clay, loaded with erotic gestures, sexual forms and shapes and even a vocabulary of adjectives that is more than suggestive (soft, wet, slippery, hard, stiff, rough, etc.) is familiar not only to ceramists and potters but to anyone, that is to say everyone, really, that has witnessed the process. The creative act itself, of raising hollow forms, on the wheel or by hand, out of a formless material, is imbued with quasi-metaphysical implications of power over matter, will and control, reinforced by the mystical use of fire as an elemental force, that also carries sexualized, generative aspects. The transformation of a basic material into another one with very different properties, through the use of fire, makes the humble potter into a demiurge, with god-like powers that brings to mind the transcendental nature of the creative potency of deity, who in most creation myths worldwide uses clay as a primary material. This potency is stressed further by the fact that the majority of the forms created will contain clear references to the human body, and to the human form, as well as to human



activities in their actual or potential use (containing, pouring, holding, releasing, etc.). These characteristics of clay and of ceramic processes all reaffirm the obvious connections to sexuality. The fragility of the material, its breakability, yet its hardness and its amazing resilience to time, all these confusing contradictions add to the multiple sexual contents. Pottery forms are fundamentally phenomenological objects, objects that permit the investigation of the essence of human situation, and particularly quotidian situations of life, including sexuality.

These budding, emerging, oozing qualities of ceramic forms as well as processes, as they communicate growth, change and transformation, are all used for various ends by ceramic artists, whose work is informed directly by sexual contents.

The works discussed here bring to the fore the interesting predominance of ceramics in erotic representations worldwide. The fact that this activity of expressing the sexual urge through clay is still continuing now, finds its meaning in an historical continuity that is an aspect of pottery and ceramics as autonomous art forms. Historically, we know that ceramic objects played an important role in ritualized activities that were at times connected directly to daily life. Yet, it remains almost certain that these rituals were mostly religious, mystical and spiritual, establishing nonetheless a social link between people's life in their community as it related to the inexplicable, the un-controllable, as well as the afterlife, in funerary rites and rituals surrounding the mysteries of death, as they are connected to the cyclical, returning rhythms of seasons in nature. This connection with generation and regeneration opens a direct link between rituals and sexuality and simultaneously with the various vessels, usually ceramic, and in these performances and activities. That many of these vessels had (have) clear sexual attributes comes as no surprise. Ceramics functions as the DNA of civilization and acts as its cultural memory.

Ceramics is related to sexuality in numerous ways. The material itself, clay, is overflowing with characteristics shared with sexuality and sexual practices. The transformation of the material and the various processes used therein all imply countless sexual analogies and connotations. Equally important, ceramic vessels in their variety, in their morphology, make countless references to the human body, to particular body parts, and by extension to sexual organs and sexual acts. Most tellingly, it is the actual experience we have of these objects, not only through touch and direct physical contact, but also through the operative workings of the objects themselves (to contain, to preserve,

to pour, to spill, to prepare, to cook and to serve food and then also to dispose of the body's unwanted residues) that affirms ceramics exceptional relationship to sexuality.

At other levels, through the effects of content, either the physical content of object, or, as tellingly in metaphorical terms, the empty interior void, or in the represented content of forms, or again and more importantly in the assignation of meaning, the content of images on surfaces, specific and evocative meanings and revealing interpretations are not only possible but necessary. This merging of content within the symbiosis of form (object) and surface (image) is not only typical of ceramics, but is also emblematic of all craft practices.

The concept of permanency, which I have been coming back to repeatedly throughout these essays, is central to my argument for a variety of reasons. Not only is it an important if too rarely considered aspect of ceramics in its archival potential as a cultural practice, it also connects with sexuality directly. Sexuality is the activity that assures the continuity of humankind, through progeny; it makes the continuation and potential permanency of humankind possible. Ceramics embodies other forms of continuity, as it is, like sexuality, universal and found in all cultures, through all times. Like other craft practices, ceramics also acts as a recipient for the transmission of knowledge. Due to their permanency and resilience to the workings and ravages of time, ceramic objects, specifically, are essential tools for the continuation of memory, the maintenance of humanity's consciousness and the commemoration of precedence, and the possibility of continuity and transcendence, in a process that unites with the past, through the present with the future.