

Preface

“The vase gives form to the void, music to silence.” Lao-Tsu

Most if not all books about ceramics are of two main types: technical books with an emphasis on processes and materials, equipments and tools or, historical books. These books on the history of ceramics are generally, if not always, organized around geography, where something was made, and chronology, when something was made, as if knowing these specific markers was in itself sufficient for complete knowledge. For this reason, ceramics is understood by just about everyone, by practitioners and lay people alike, in term of expertise and connoisseurship. How, where and when an object was made, and if at all known, by whom, is often perceived as all there is to know about a ceramic object in order to understand its nature and the very important role played by ceramics within culture, as a seminal and essential material of civilization. Although this material may be important and necessary, possibly crucial information, why an object was made is rarely if ever addressed, quite simply, and then often tangentially, as if it was an afterthought. Ceramics is the most important cultural material known to humankind, since the beginning of what is called civilization. This is still true today, although this essential aspect of ceramics role within culture now finds itself usually dismissed or ignored.

In other publications, ceramic history is presented as a rather linear and chronological encyclopedic development; generally, the point of view is strongly ethnocentric. The difficulties arising from this method, presenting ceramics within

national boundaries, is that it creates an artificial construct from a limited context. A false impression is thus given of the significant contributions of each country in what happens to be a global perspective of ceramics as an autonomous yet universal art form. An unfortunate drawback consists in the search for a parallel with the dominant art form(s) and discourses of each country, to “legitimize”, so to speak, the significant artistic contributions of the ceramic art in question. By doing so, ceramics is relegated to an inferior status, and the real contributions, innovations and precedences are overlooked or ignored or even, dismissed. Geography is also largely irrelevant in ceramics since it is, of all art forms, one of the most universal and as such, its core tenets apply everywhere, indiscriminately. Chronology is also of little importance and significance, if we make abstraction of the concept of style, as I largely do here. Chronology also makes little sense since there are vast differences in technological developments from culture to culture through time, yet the achievements of each culture within the history of ceramics are significant beyond these technological discrepancies.

There are a number of books on ceramics in existence whose aim is more philosophical, who look at the cultural aspects of ceramics, but these tend to focus on esthetics or on the history of style, or again on premises that approach making as if it was more informed by political, spiritual or ideological beliefs than by an actual connection to the real life of real people. Various biographies of important artists also exist but again these tend to focus on lifestyles and on rather useless and unnecessary background data, as if the author was filling up the text with superficial information in order to hide the fact that they have nothing substantial to write about. The result is almost always hagiography where we are lead to believe in the importance of the person more than on the contribution of the work, which remains largely unexplained. All recent monographs on ceramic artists I can think of are of this type and they are all basically useless, beyond gossip. They actually provide a great disservice, not only to the artists themselves, but to ceramics itself, as a field.

One notable exception remains Philip Rawson’s “Ceramics” which is, if not the only, certainly the most intelligent book written on the subject. Yet, it dates from 1971 and it is showing its age. It suffers from an approach to meaning that is too deeply informed by formalism, the fashionable theoretical framework of the time and it would greatly benefit from an updating. It also misses on a number of opportunities to discuss aspects of ceramics that are in my opinion crucial, its connection to text and language for example,

among many. The book also contains a substantial section on the technical aspects of ceramics, information readily available elsewhere, and which feels here again as filler more than necessary material. The main quality of this technical section is that it is reasonably thorough and complete (not totally, though) and that it contains no mistake, something extremely rare in the literature on ceramics where most authors cannot even get the basic techniques, processes, equipments, materials and overall terminology right. Rawson's book also suffers from the use of an academic language and vocabulary that is not always readily accessible to beginners in the formulation of complex concepts, not all of them useful anyway, and that are not easily grasped. Although still useful, its basic premise is on the formal aspects of ceramics, most notably pottery form (he has precious little to say about ceramics sculpture) which is really only appropriate for the historical material since the system he proposes for the analysis and appreciation of ceramic forms cannot possibly be useful to understand contemporary ceramics art, which has moved beyond the ideals of form and beauty presented in his book. Rawson's criteria for evaluation of what is good is informed by a "classical" formalism which is largely irrelevant to understand various approaches to form now and all the recent formal developments in ceramic forms. Even as a system to analyze historical forms it remains limited and incomplete. Incompleteness is the curse of the ambitious writer, as it will be certainly for me, here.

So if ceramics is largely misunderstood and underappreciated, the fault lies within the field itself, which has done a shoddy job of explaining itself with clarity and in a manner that is accessible to all. I want to propose here a new and quite different model to not only deepen an existing knowledge of ceramics but, most importantly foster a renewed interest and understanding of the contributions ceramics has made to culture and civilization. Ceramics is intrinsically a cultural material with social and historical properties, and not only (as is so often the case now, as we will see in "The Material Esthetics" chapter) a physical material with specific properties and transformative qualities. For this reason, this book will try to avoid technical aspects unless they directly inform the meaning of a work. It will also largely ignore the temporal and local contexts of an object to focus instead on the reasons why this object was made in the first place and how this understanding can generate relevancy and help us not only to understand ceramics better but most importantly make better and more relevant ceramics now and into the future. Again, I do not mean to imply that the temporal and spatial contexts are irrelevant, simply that they are not sufficient to explain fully the meaning of an object, why it came to be made and most importantly why it still speaks to us now.

The principal contents of this book were developed through thirty-five years of practice as a potter and as a teacher. They are informed by informal researches generated by curiosity more than scholarship. If I use the thoughts of others without always acknowledging them, I would welcome the perceptive reader to contact me so I can make amend. I am myself a ceramics artist first, a maker of functional and decorative pots informed by a conceptual approach to making since, after all, function and decoration are themselves concepts, something the hegemonic discourses on art history and contemporary art seems to forget. So, I have no pretension to an academic approach to the subject matter. This is first and foremost a subjective book, a very personal, opinionated and idiosyncratic outlook on the field as a whole, from its inception in the Neolithic to today. I am more interested in understanding than in knowledge itself, per se. Knowledge as a system is finite, while experience, practice and understanding are never-ending. One system is closed while the other is open.

I am not looking for agreement and acquiescence here. I fully expect that the positions I take will yield disagreement, and I am afraid, misunderstanding as well. If you disagree it may be your fault, if you misunderstand, it will be mine, for not explaining myself clearly. But it is easy to disagree. If you disagree with a position, an argument I defend, then you need to articulate what is YOUR position, why you happen to disagree with mine. If your disagreement toward my analysis yields a clearer understanding of your position, then I will have achieved my goal.

The current structure was given final form in a course on the History of Ceramics I taught recently at the Emily Carr University in Vancouver, Canada where I am Associate Professor in the Faculty of Visual and Material Culture. I had given that course before, using the traditional, academic, historical model of a progression through time, traveling historically from place to place, from China to Japan, to Europe and America, through chronological time. Ceramics history was taught to me following such a model, which is the usual model found in the literature as well, and I had found it at the time (and I still do) as basically boring and largely irrelevant. How, when, where or even by whom something was made was never that interesting to me, for some reason. I wanted to know, and far more importantly to understand, why they existed at all in the first place. What was the reason for the object to exist, for its being, its ontology, how it was experienced, its phenomenology, how it was understood, its epistemology (to use terms from another

discipline, philosophy). I was foremost interested in the conceptual aspects of the works and I strongly believe that despite its obvious and inescapable material aspects, ceramics, like any other art form, is above all a conceptual practice. So, when I found myself teaching an History of Ceramics course using the same (boring, irrelevant) methodology, I felt that I was not living up to the challenge offered me, that I was failing myself as a teacher and, worst, failing my students in the process. Given the opportunity to teach the course again, I asked myself how I would have liked having been taught such a course as a student, how I would like to teach such a course as a teacher.

Since I was primarily interested in concepts and meaning, I asked myself what are the principal esthetics of ceramics, irrelevant of where, when, by whom and even less how an object was made. Quickly, seven specific esthetics became evident, and I have assigned them, not always as satisfactorily as I wish, the following names:

The Classical Esthetics: The Continuity of Form; with an emphasis on the constancy of certain forms through time.

The Flux Esthetics: The Unifying Surface and the Drip; with a specific focus on glazes, their particular properties, from glassiness to runniness.

The Decorative Esthetics: Abstraction and Ornament; on patterns, on the arabesque and the floral, and the particular area of blue and white decoration.

The Narrative Esthetics: Framing and Fiction; with an emphasis on surface again, but often narrative in nature, on storytelling, with an analysis of the pictorial space specific to ceramics.

The Simulation Esthetics: Illusion and (L)imitations; when ceramics imitates other materials, at times even itself!

The Industrial Esthetics: Purity and Perfection; and the idea of a standard informed by mechanical processes, and now, new technologies and digitalization.

The Material Esthetics: Physicality and Process; with its emphasis on the visual, tactile qualities of the material itself; and its polar aspect, Conceptual Ceramics.

All the ceramic objects I could think of, irregardless of how, when, where or by whom they were made could fit readily into one of these esthetics, at times more than one in fact, since this structure is not rigid in intent but on the contrary fluid, with multiple hybrids and crossovers not only possible but necessary. In fact, the more crossovers between multiple esthetics within the same object, the more complex and interesting this object becomes. These seven esthetics provided a strong basis for my research and for my teaching as well, but I felt that there were crucial aspects of ceramics that were not being addressed by this focus on esthetics alone. Quickly, I then became aware that ceramics was also generated around specific themes and here again luckily and interestingly enough, I found seven distinct themes particular to ceramics as an art form.

They are:

Food: the Necessities of Containment; all objects related to storing, preparing and serving.

Shelter: Ceramics in architecture; Bricks and Tiles as components, multiplicity, context and association. If we make abstraction of the shift in scale, buildings are conceptually, nothing but big pots. Tiles on buildings act like a glaze, covering a form and its surface with another surface, which is also the operative function of glazes.

Hygiene: the Body and its Functions; ceramics and the physical body, cleanliness, sickness and health. The very important role ceramics plays in our bathrooms and other conveniences.

Text: Speaking Volumes, Language and Memory; the importance of ceramics in the development of writing (and mathematics) and its relation to language throughout history, all the way to the present.

The Figure and the Figurine, Representations of the Human Form. I will argue here that with pottery, tiles and bricks, the other major contribution of ceramics to art and world culture has been the figurine, whose great importance and significance is largely overlooked.

Sex: “SEXPOTS, Eroticism in Ceramics”. It was while writing this book that I realized how interesting it was to look at ceramics thematically, in order to understand its hidden meaning and cultural importance.

Death: The Fragmentation of Time, the Past, the Present and the Future; ceramics and funerary rituals, and the death of pots in shards and fragments.

Ceramics is the art of time and ceramics is above all an archival material. This last theme, Death, is possibly the most important of all in ceramics as it encompasses all the others, interestingly enough. It is important to keep in mind that most ceramic objects that came down to us from historical times were funerary in purpose and that they were preserved not only due to the particular physical properties of permanency of the ceramic material itself, but by being buried and left largely undisturbed. Our propensity to uncover them may eventually lead to their destruction... Here again, the specific themes are not independent of each other but often overlap and inform each other. The more different themes present in one object, the more significant it becomes. Yet it remains relevant to look at these esthetics and these themes independently, in order to establish a coherent structure where an analysis can take place. There is no hierarchical order implied here and each chapter of this book can be read independently, in any order, depending on the interests of the reader.

It may be argued that looking at and analyzing ceramics in such a fashion is limiting and that these esthetics and themes cannot possibly apply to all ceramic objects. Yet, they do for all objects presented in this book, in their amazing variety.

These seven esthetics and seven themes provided the basic structure around which I could organize my teaching of the History of Ceramics for my students and they provide the structure for this book as well. In each chapter, I will explore and analyze a particular esthetics or a particular theme, describing its characteristics and using a few chosen examples as models to develop its core aspects. My examples will come from the vast corpus of works available through time and space, in historical as well as contemporary times. They have been chosen subjectively, first of all because they interest me personally but also because they seem to embody particularly well, in my opinion, the particular meanings brought forth by each esthetics, each themes.

This model was exhilarating for me to use as a basis for teaching and students responded really well to its clarity and novel approach. I hope this will be true of the reader and that this book can serve others as well who may have similar needs and are interested to transcend their knowledge of ceramics toward a deeper understanding. There exists no such book for ceramics, as there are, if somewhat differently, for photography, design, architecture, painting, etc. I intend this book to be not only for potters and ceramists (the term “ceramicist” always makes me think of a hair dresser in my neighborhood whose shop window advertises: “Hair Sculpturist”!), and for people involved or engaged in ceramics in various ways. A book for everybody else who might be curious about it and who would want to expand their own understanding. Quite simply, I decided to write the book on ceramics that has not been written yet (it often seems that all the books on the subject are slightly different versions of the same text!), the book I would want to read.

Ceramics and the Archive:

The main and central argument of this book is that, beyond its physical, practical and functional aspects, ceramics is above all an archival material and that the art form itself, ceramics, needs to be understood from an historical viewpoint as an archive of humanity. As such, ceramics is in so many ways and specifically more so than any other cultural phenomenon, the memory of humankind. The true material of ceramics is not clay. The true material of ceramics is time itself.

This archival aspect of ceramics is at best misunderstood and quite often not considered at all. We live in a world obsessed with the present, with the “now”, in a culture of transitoriness, of impermanency, of obsolescence, of expandability, of the “throw away”. This is true in the art world as well as it is true of most of the art we now make, if it is at all “made”. The culture we now produce is readily and instantly consumed but it leaves few, if any traces. It disappears quickly. What will be left of our present is still the ceramics we make! This is where and when it will take its revenge over the current neglect it receives! For millennia, ceramics role was primarily functional, practical. More recently, through the (pernicious...) influence of Modernism, it has become for its individual practitioners the focus for personal expression, often of a therapeutic nature and largely disconnected from the larger culture. It may be time to reassess the role of ceramics now and in the future, and a reexamination of its archival nature and potential may offer a

renewed sense of meaning and provide further possibilities for inquiry. Historically, hand made pots and other ceramic objects played a seminal, essential role in the real life of real people and communities. Today, most hand made ceramics is the product of amateurism, of hobbyists and dilettantes, of the therapeutic activities of leisure. Even ceramics made by professionals tend to have as a main purpose the fulfilling of impulsive consumerism in a gift economy. Yet, these objects will be the archive we will leave behind. Maybe our culture is getting the ceramics and the art it deserves, after all. A rampant symptom of this amateurism within the ceramics community itself, is the bizarre phenomenon of the “workshop” where the making of ceramics is experienced as entertainment, as if it was a cooking show, with recipes, tricks, tools and a “chef”, a “master” who demonstrates how it is done, despite the fact that this experience is not possibly transferable. When the field takes its cultural role seriously, such futile activity will hopefully cease or cease to be at the center of its activities. I am not holding my breath.

The role played by ceramics and pottery historically (to preserve and contain time) has been taken over by photography and more recently by digital technologies, both the most fleeting and impermanent media. Evermore, we need ceramics to maintain this essential link between the past and the future. In a culture where everything becomes obsolete instantly, where everything exists to be discarded, including art, what will be left of our culture (and it is a global culture, not a local one) will still be the ceramic objects we produce, as has always been the case. And the ceramics we are now making, the vast majority of them, are not doing a very good job of it.

Ceramics is a very misunderstood art form and the blame for that sorry state of affairs lies largely within the field itself. Ceramics as a practice has been dismally effective, amazingly inefficient at explaining itself convincingly as relevant within culture now and more specifically within the art world. I hope this book will provide, within its limits and shortcomings, an effective argument for relevancy and necessity of ceramics not only in the more or less distant past but now, today, as well and hopefully in the near and distant future too. To argue with conviction that, yes, ceramics is the art of the future.

INTRODUCTION:

What is ceramics? It may be important to answer this simple question first, as there seems to be a lot of confusion out there. The word “ceramics” has two related but distinct meanings. “Ceramics” can mean either the material itself, which usually implies fired clay but not always, or alternatively, “ceramics” can be used to describe the practice, the technique and, yes, the distinct art form that uses silica based materials, fused in a kiln. The word has a singular form, which is adjectival and a plural noun form, sometimes construed as singular (more confusion here). Other words share these characteristics, words I will also use here like esthetics, erotics, poetics.

The material “Clay”: A brief overview to explain its archival nature.

Let’s talk about the material for a bit, first. I will remain brief since this information is readily available in numerous technical books on the subject, yet it may be important if not essential to clarify certain aspects that may not be familiar to all readers and may provide a clearer, deeper understanding down the road.

Ceramics are a family of materials whose main component is silica, one of the most common chemical elements found on earth. After all, planet Earth is just a very large spherical vessel, made with a lot of silica (the central element in ceramic chemistry) and other minerals and filled with glassy molten matter that periodically erupts to the surface from volcanoes and covers it with a “glaze”, the exterior crust. Silica based materials can be found everywhere on and under that crust, in various forms, but its most commonly familiar and relevant form for us here, is clay. Clay is a plastic material, that is to say, a material that can change form easily when some pressure is applied to it and can then retain that form once that pressure ceases. Clay can be found in vast quantities just about everywhere on earth. Clay is often perceived as an essential ingredient in ceramics but that is not necessarily true. The large family of materials known as ceramics also includes glass, enamels, cements, plasters and other materials too, none of which are clay based but all are silica based and/or are processed in kilns under intense heat, another characteristic of ceramics as a technology. Yet it is generally understood, and it is true for the vast majority of ceramic objects that they are made with clay.

Clay is a naturally occurring material that is the result of the weathering (rain, wind, frost, etc) of an igneous, volcanic rock, feldspar. The mineral feldspar is principally made of two chemicals, silica and alumina, with small quantities of various alkaline salts (calcium, sodium, potassium, etc.) chemically bound together with chemical water, that is to say water joining these materials chemically. This bound is actually not very strong and feldspar can easily lose, albeit over long periods of time, geological time, its alkaline salts through the action of weather, rain and frost, particularly. Most of the salt in the oceans is the result of this process. When this happens, feldspar becomes clay. The chemical composition of clay is silica, alumina and chemical water. The breaking down of the original feldspathic rock into clay creates very small crystalline alumina/silica particles that have the characteristic of being very thin in thickness compared to their length and width, somewhat like microscopic playing cards. When actual water (called mechanical water to distinguish it from the chemical water bound within the material itself) is added to these wafer like crystalline particles, they can then slide against each other due to the lubrication provided by the water and thus the material can easily change shape under pressure. This phenomenon is called plasticity. When the pressure stops, the material retains its new shape and with the evaporation of the mechanical water, it dries and hardens cohesively. At this stage it is still very fragile and it can easily be recycled as well and reused, by crushing it and adding water again to obtain a plastic mass that can then be reworked to a new shape. But once the clay has dried and its mechanical water removed, if it is placed in a kiln (basically a box made with bricks or other refractory (heat resistant), materials that can be heated up with a source of energy such as gas or wood and other combustibles or again other heat sources like electricity), it can be fired at various temperatures to make the material strong and permanent. Clay has now become a ceramic material and ceramics as a material only exists after such a firing process.

There is no “clay” in ceramics; the clay has been completely transformed by the irreversible ceramic process, and there is no “ceramics” in nature either, only ceramic materials. Ceramics is a cultural material, made by humans.

Characteristics of clay are great abundance in nature and relative cheapness, and in fact it has very little intrinsic value before transformation, contrary to metals like gold or copper or iron or even precious rocks like marble or precious stones like diamonds, which are intrinsically valuable in their natural state. Plasticity and fusibility in a kiln are two other characteristics. After firing, clay has lost its plasticity and the new material, a

ceramic material, is now stronger, yet still breakable. If it has been made into a container it can now hold liquids (or solids for that matter) yet may retain some porosity depending on the temperature it has been fired to. The new material, ceramics, is also non recyclable (contrary to metals or glass or wood, for example), its “ceramicness” is irreversible, it cannot be made into plastic clay again although if crushed into particles of various sizes it can be added as an aggregate to alter texture and provide other benefits in a new plastic clay body. Many, many ceramic pots made historically have ended their life in such a fashion, as a temper in a new clay body to be transformed into other new vessels. The non-recyclable aspect of ceramics is a very important aspect of its historical role. Most metal objects are eventually recycled and made into new forms. Most bronzes from Antiquity, some of them important and very beautiful objects made by celebrated artists, were eventually melted down to be made into other things, notably weapons. The same is true of marble buildings and carved statues, which were used in large quantities to be calcined in kilns to make plaster and cement, used in mortar. Yet, most ceramic objects ever made, even if broken and now reduced to shards, still exist somewhere and await the archeologist, the historian and the connoisseur.

Clay is also non corrosive and will not rust or alter in contact with oxygen or other corrosive chemicals including acids, at least if the clay has been fired high enough to now be fully vitrified and non porous. Clay is also non-putrescible and will not rot or decompose through the action of organic processes. Most importantly, clay has now become very permanent, basically timeless and will last forever in this new form, ceramics. Even once broken and reduced to a shard, a fragment of its original self, it can still contain much information about its origins and will convey meaning through time. That is how it is most often discovered, analyzed and interpreted, by archeologists, for example.

Archeology and history define time according to two systems, one based on minerals and metals, the stone age, the bronze age, the iron age, the age of coal, the age of oil, the atomic age, the silicon age also called the digital age, the hydrogen age, and another system based on ceramics, with cultures either defined as pre-ceramics or post-ceramics, the later being a clear marker for technological development and connected to the beginning of agriculture, the development of cities and civilization itself. Within the ceramics phase, gradual developments can be marked in time either through stylistic changes in the objects, in their forms and decorations, and/or technical advances of all kinds, in the processing of the materials, the ever more refined firing methods (the

development of ever more sophisticated kilns that can reach higher and higher temperatures, for example), the development of glazes, etc. All human cultures on earth are ceramic cultures, even the Inuit around the arctic circle, with the exception of the aboriginals of Australia, which remained until recently a largely pre-agricultural Neolithic culture of hunter/gatherers with no real need for ceramic vessels. Baskets, gourds and other fibrous, organic materials served that purpose readily. Some culture can revert from a ceramic phase to a pre-ceramic phase, as happened on some islands in the Pacific when new material conditions were inappropriate (absence of clay, usually).

Beyond style and/or technology, we can also deduct how old a ceramic object is by the surrounding context in which it is found. Scientific methods can also be used, notably, by carbon dating the organic material found with or near the object, since ceramics itself contains no carbon and no organic (carbon based) materials, although clay in its raw state usually does. For example, bones, wood or ashes found at the site can provide the materials which, when carbon dated, will provide the age of the site and the age of the objects found therein. Ceramic objects can also be dated by thermo-luminescence, which measures the accumulation of radiation over time, since the object was last fired. A fake will thus reveal that it is much more recent than it appears. If the object is re-fired, this removes the accumulated radiation, it resets the internal clock and the process of accumulation starts anew. A more recent dating method consists in measuring water absorption by precisely measuring the mass of the object, then firing it at 500 degrees Centigrade to remove all the absorbed water accumulated through time at a precise physical rate. By re-measuring its mass after firing, we can calculate the amount of water the object absorbed since it was originally made, which will provide us with its age. The drawback to this method is that the object can be altered in appearance in the re-firing, something not always possible in an art context.

If ceramics were not so breakable, it would in fact be the perfect material and just about everything would be made with it. As it stands, with its particular qualities and shortcomings, it still remains ideal for many uses and as such, it is one of the most important and essential cultural material ever made, the very foundation of culture, of civilization, as will be made clear later. To recapitulate and repeat myself, as I will often do, on purpose, throughout these texts, clay is common, cheap, valueless and plastic; once fired, the now new material, ceramics, is non-plastic, non-recyclable, non-corrosive, will not rot and also be incredibly permanent. It is also breakable yet the objects made

with ceramics will hold and contain not only liquids and various substances, including people in the form of buildings and other structures, but most importantly, ceramics contains time and it is the very stuff of history. It is still the best archival material ever devised by humankind and it is necessary to note that the computer chip is silicon based, yet the historical proof of virtual technologies as truly archival devices still remains to be seen.

The process of making pottery and ceramics is totally dependent on time in a way significantly different from other processes and techniques. It is a diachronic activity, taking place over different times, with drastic changes in between. Each step is transitory and, after firing, these changes are irreversible. The completed object becomes “eternal”, fixed, permanent, for its nature as ceramics cannot be reversed. No other material, no other art form has such a specific and particular relation to time.

The experience of ceramic objects is of low intensity but very long lasting (potentially, eternity). This is evident within ceramics in the extensive, continuous historical record. This temporal nature of ceramics comes with a collateral effect. You can either have an art that has great power for a short time (like most if not all contemporary art and all forms of image-making), since this powerful experience can be fickle in nature and easily dispersed, or an art that relies on a subtle, light effect that is released slowly, over a long, long time. Ceramics is of this second type.

The Genealogy of Clay and Ceramics:

Clay has a genealogy of sorts as well and I will give you a bit of the family history here. This data constitutes an accumulation of evidence in order to position ceramics within history itself and within the history of technological developments.

Clay that has remained close to its original rock, feldspar, is called primary clay. It is usually pure, white and contains few, if any impurities, depending on the source material, the original feldspar that decomposed to form the clay. It will need to be fired to a high temperature in order to fuse and become a ceramic material as it is the impurities present in the clay that lower its fusion point. These primary clays, called kaolin, are one of the main ingredients in porcelain clays. If the clay is displaced by water or wind to another location from its original source, it will have collected other materials in the process, other

minerals and organic debris along the way and its nature and quality will change. It will gain color and pigmentation by the addition of minerals like iron or manganese and other metals and it will also break down into smaller particles that will change and often improve its plasticity. It usually also gains texture, with the addition of sand and other rocks of various sizes deposited through sedimentation as it is transported by wind and water. These types of secondary, sedimentary clays, from light buff to grey, dark brown and red in color, are usually called stoneware clays and they require a lower temperature, relatively, to fuse since the added minerals they contain will not only alter their color and texture but also lower their fusion point.

Depending on how much new materials and what types of materials are added as clay travels from its feldspathic source, far and wide, these secondary clays can become earthenware clays, clay that will fuse at a lower temperature still. In fact, one characteristic of earthenware clays is that they can fuse completely and melt quite readily and they have a narrow margin between being sufficiently hardened by heat and fire and becoming fusible and turning into a glass like substance that will melt and lose its basic shape by deformation. For this reason, earthenware clays are not fired high enough to become vitrified and water-tight and they remain porous and will only retain water or other liquids if lined with a glaze that will close their pores and render the vessel impervious.

There are thus three main types of clays and three main types of clay based ceramic materials, porcelain, stoneware and earthenware, each with their specific firing temperature, color, texture, qualities and characteristics. This classification of the three main types of clay does not imply a hierarchical value system between them, as tends to be the case often in connoisseurship. All clays can be used to make works that are either good or bad, beautiful or ugly, significant or meaningless, irrelevant of the material used to make them.

Firing clay to make ceramic objects is probably the earliest deliberate use by humans of a chemical change and it remains that fired clay (ceramics) is in fact the first synthetic material devised by humanity.

Uses for Ceramics:

Clay as a material was first used during the Neolithic (the new stone age) period, around 30,000 years ago. Its first use was to model fertility figures, usually if not always female, with accentuated aspects of fecundity, large hips, large breasts, large triangular pubic and vaginal areas. These figures, usually quite small from a few to ten to fifteen centimeters high, were not always fired and often remained in their raw dry clay state. If they were fired, it was probably in a bonfire as part of the religious/ spiritual rituals they embodied, literally. Rapidly, bonfire firing was improved and traces of basic yet functional kilns have also been found from the Neolithic. Often these simple, primitive firing processes would explode the figure and this breaking may have been an actual part of the efficiency and completeness of the ritual. The earliest ones are 27,000 years old and were found at Dolni Vestonice in Moravia, Czech Republic. These modeled figures are found by archeologists along with fired clay pellets, little round balls of fired clay, that may have been early experiments in controlled firing, since the pellets themselves are found intact while the fertility figures are exploded. It is believed that these explosions were the result of intentional effort and practice, as exemplified by the pellets. We will see later (in the “Death” chapter) that breaking is often an integral part of rituals that use ceramics in their manifestation. It was long believed that the earliest fired clay pots were to be found in Japan, as early as 12,000 years ago, in the Jomon culture. In fact, Japan has one of the longest continuous record in the world for pottery and ceramics. Recent finds in a Neolithic cave in China has brought to light (literally and figuratively) fragments of pots that are 18,000 years old, pushing the date for the earliest ceramic vessel by 6,000 years! Yet elsewhere it is only about 10,000 years ago that the first clay vessels appear with the beginning of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East and in the Indus Valley, with the need to store grain and the development of cities with their need for distribution, which also sees the development of political structures, commerce and laws. Neither pottery making nor weaving fibers really took off on a large scale until people became sedentary and therefore escaped the problem of transporting pots and looms. The earliest decorated pots by the farmers of Central Europe are called “linearbandkeramik” for their characteristic decorative banding and they date from around 7000 years ago.

The vessels made of clay for storage purposes are most often fired, while larger granaries are made with raw clay, as are buildings and habitations. I recently saw in a newspaper a photograph from Darfur, Sudan, which showed a destructed village where all

that remained were a few ceramic pots scattered around and the unfired clay granaries standing within the charred remains of huts that had been built of wood, branches and straw. Only the pots and the granaries had survived the destruction of the village by fire. When the inhabitants eventually return to these destroyed areas, they often find intact grain at the bottom of the granaries and can readily cook a meal in the surviving pots too and resume their life somehow.

Technological advances around firing are rapidly made with the invention of the fired clay brick, which permits the construction of evermore sophisticated kilns as well as larger and larger buildings, usually ceremonial and political at first. By 8000 years ago we see the invention of the wheel, in an area near the Black Sea. Contrary to expectation, the first use of the wheel was not for transportation in fact, but it was used as a potter's wheel, which greatly speeds the making of pots and permits production of similar forms on a much larger scale. If wheel transportation came later, and the first horse drawn chariots are from 3,800 years ago, there was a precedence for speed and efficiency in the use of the wheel to make pots, nonetheless. This new technological advance for forming or throwing replaces hand forming, but never completely and to this day, vessels and other ceramic objects, notably bricks in developing economies, are still made by hand all over the world. For example, even today a thriving economy of hand made bricks is feeding the building boom in India and elsewhere in the developing world, while providing an income for displaced unskilled workers from the countryside.

A Genealogy (continued):

The oldest New World ceramics and Meso-American pottery comes from near the equator in tropical South America, in coastal Ecuador around 5,100 years ago and in Peru around 3,800 years ago. In pre-Columbian America, a part of the world that did not use the wheel either for transportation or as a forming tool, all ceramics were hand formed, often with the use of fired clay molds. It is interesting and important to note here since the opportunity may not present itself again, that pre-Columbian America knew of the wheel for mechanical children toys (animals on wheels) as it also knew of glazes, but here again their use was esthetic, another form of play for adults, as decorative patterns painted on pots. This esthetic use of a new technology usually if not always precedes a practical use just about everywhere a new technology first manifests itself. Now of course we have reversed and completely annihilated this particular logic and all our technologies

are basically solely practical and have no really relevant esthetic aspect whatsoever (beyond marketing) and I would add that they have had instead a rather negative impact on the esthetic experience offered by either culture or nature. Cars have had a very negative impact on the esthetic experience of nature, for example, by destroying or modifying large chunks of it. The reason pre-Columbian America did not use the wheel was due to geography and the lack of tract animals large enough for efficiency, the horse and domesticated bovines having been brought to the New World after contact with Europeans as well. If by 8000 years ago the wheel creates expanded possibilities, in size, in quantity and in formal aspects for new ceramic objects, that is also the time we see the appearance of the first real kilns, enclosed spaces for the firing of clay objects where more constant, higher and controllable temperatures can be achieved, than in firing pots in an open hearth. The wheel and the basic kilns first appeared in Egypt and Mesopotamia, it seems simultaneously, which will also see the first glazes at around 4500 years ago. Glass technologies are a direct development of advances in clay and ceramic technologies. The first free standing cast glass objects first appear in Egypt and Mesopotamia about 4,500 years ago, the first blown glass vessels about 3,500 years ago and the first Roman glass window, around 2000 years ago. Metal-smithing appears 6,000 years ago in Iran and the Balkans, bronze making around 5,000 years ago in Iran/Irak and 4000 years ago in China but the earliest cast iron dates from 2,500 years ago, in China as well. 4,000 years ago also appear the first artificial clays and glazes, composed and mixed from natural and manufactured materials, followed later by the first enamels on glazes (1500 years ago) and later still, ceramic lusters or deposits of reflective minerals over glazes to create metallic effects of gold, silver or copper (1000 years ago). In fact, the Middle East and in its origins in Mesopotamia, has been instrumental in the discovery and development of more ceramics materials, technologies and tools than any other part of world, including China and other Far Eastern cultures, which simply added and refined the existing range of possibilities according to their own specific geology and cultural context. It is important to keep in mind that, like other cultural phenomena, the development of writing for example (as we will see in the "Text" chapter), these technological, formal and esthetic ceramic developments happened all over the world independently of each other to a large degree. To make a connection of precedence and influence between these diverse cultures based on shared formal and technological characteristics is misleading at best if not altogether dishonest. Given similar circumstances, similar needs and the fact that humans are basically the same everywhere independent of context, ceramics will manifest itself in a very similar if not identical manner over time and space with no connection

necessary or even probable at times (between Europe and the Central and South Americas before 1492, for example). The Egyptians and the Mayas both built pyramids since it is the most obvious solution to the problem of building a structure by stacking stones, and for no other reason. Peru also has a large number of very large pyramids built with raw clay bricks but these have now eroded into hill-like and seemingly natural occurrences dotting the landscape.

A few more words on clay:

The first ceramics objects, as we have already seen, were modeled clay figures used in fertility rituals. Then we have the emergence of pots and vessels, bricks and tiles for buildings and their progressive refinement all the way to today. I would want to expand here on this rather brief, succinct genealogy of clay and ceramics materials to provide a broad and wide picture of the historical record. The first clay figures and pots were made with readily available clays of various types yet because they are fired in simple bonfire at rather low temperatures, they are generally considered earthenware. All pots and other ceramic objects made in Europe and the Middle East until the 17th Century, all Greek and Roman pots, all medieval pots, all pre-Columbian and African pots are earthenware, fired at low temperatures, usually made with clay pigmented from light to dark, from beige to red, from brown to black. Pots made in the Far East until 2200 years ago are also earthenware. Stoneware clays and stoneware pots made their first appearance in China around that time (the Warring States period and the Han dynasty) with new developments in firing technologies, more sophisticated kilns reaching higher temperatures, using stoneware (and porcelain) clays that are naturally abundant in the vast alluvial plains of China. With subsequent refinements and developments, the clays are made with purer, whiter clays, and by 1500 years ago the first white, translucent yet still somewhat crude proto-porcelains appears in China and continue to be refined technically and esthetically both at the levels of the clay and the glaze through the years. Around 1000 years ago, this oriental porcelain makes its way to Europe by way of the Silk Road through the Middle East. Right away, attempts are made all over Europe to imitate this ware and to find the secret of Chinese hard paste porcelain. In Ottoman Turkey around 500 years ago, fritted earthenware are developed that combine ground glass with fine, white clay to make a clay body that while remaining opaque and un-vitrified (true porcelain is vitrified thus translucent, as it lets light shines through) can be painted in underglaze blue to approximate oriental porcelain. Similar developments take place in Venice and in Florence

, Italy, in what is known as “Medici porcelain”, at the same time. By the mid 1600s, a frenzy of experiments are taking place all over Europe and everyone it seems is trying to discover the elusive secret for the white, vitrified and translucent material coming from China, porcelain. In Germany, relatively high-fired stoneware clays have already been in use since the early Renaissance. These stoneware are coated with a glaze deposited on the wares by the addition of salt in the kiln at the end cycle of firing, where the salt becomes a gas in the intense heat and where, combining with the silica present in the clay, it forms a natural, molted glaze on the surface of the wares. It is then in Germany, with this particular technological advantage, its more advanced kilns and knowledge of high temperature materials and firings that “true” porcelain is first invented in Europe by Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and Johann Friedrich Bottger in 1708–1709 .

“Porcelain” is one of these ceramic terms that is used erroneously all the time. For example, white enamel on cast iron or metal is often referred to as “porcelain” when it basically has nothing at all to do with it. This situation of using the incorrect terminology is endemic in ceramics and I will attempt to correct a few examples of misuse here. It is Confucius who advised that if we are to repair what is wrong in the world, we had best start with a rectification of the names. The corruption of society begins with the failure to call things by their proper names and its renovation begins with the reattachment of appropriate words to real things and precise concepts. White enamel on metal is called “porcelain” since it somewhat looks like it, but it is a totally different material. Unfortunately, we too often tend to assign identity (and meaning) depending on surface appearances more often than on actual relation. This phenomenon is endemic everywhere today.

Meanwhile experiments in ceramic technologies continue all over Europe. The Dutch also compose a fritted, manufactured white earthenware that provides a suitable alternative to expensive Chinese imports in the form of Delftware, a technology that then makes its way to England. In France, the addition of frit (or ground glass) to primary clays gives us soft paste porcelains, which are fired at a much lower temperature than the hard paste porcelains of China (and now Germany). The first porcelain made in France is of this soft paste type, until the discovery of kaolin near Limoges and the development of true hard paste porcelain there and at Sèvres near Paris. Hard paste porcelain is a mixture of ground primary clay (kaolin) with ground feldspar and their fusing creates the translucency in the clay if fired high enough. Ground silica can also be added to achieve

the proper chemical balance depending on the amount of natural silica present in the kaolin and feldspar to begin with. Originating in Saxony in today's eastern Germany, the secret of porcelain travels rather quickly all over Europe to Vienna, to Italy, to Spain and England. This in itself is a fascinating story too intricate and complex for my purposes here. In England, Josiah Spode who is also looking for the secret of hard paste porcelain, experiments with various white materials and develops Bone China, a type of soft paste porcelain combining kaolin with ground, calcined animal bones. The resulting clay is warmer in tone, yet very translucent, even more so than the original true porcelain, achieving the light quality of opaque white glass. It can also be potted extremely thin through casting in plaster moulds, a contemporary development in the making of industrial ceramics, as well. For these qualities, Bone China is still in production today, at Spode of course, but also in Japan, in the USA and at Belleek in Ireland. Bone China is now, ironically, a very popular material in China (the country!), where it is perceived as more sophisticated and refined than common, ordinary porcelain! Various stoneware clays are also refined and developed due to all these material investigations in ceramic materials, notably through the scientific experiments of Josiah Wedgwood in England, who discovers and formulates stoneware clays of various colors, beige, pink, grey, light and dark blue and also black, in the form of black basalt clay, a very fine, dense, water-tight stoneware that is so vitrified that it does not even require a glaze. Its smooth, soft surface confers a specific esthetic experience to the eye and to the touch that explains its considerable success continuing today. Its technical as well as esthetic forebear is found in the purple clay Hixing wares of China, very popular in Europe at the time, although Greek and Roman pottery served as the main source of forms and decoration for Wedgwood and other neo-classical potters. Another of Josiah Wedgwood's developments is a pale, buff stoneware called Queen's Ware, which takes printed decorative patterns readily (another technological advance of that time, using etched copper plates as well as stone lithography) and is still in production to this day.

More recent developments in clay formulation today include clays where the silica content has been removed, since the silica crystal is what confers breakability to the body. Removing the silica from the clay body creates a "clay" whose structure is based on the alumina matrix and the resulting fired object is so resistant to shock that it is almost unbreakable. This material is known under the registered name of Corundum, which is the name of the mineral form of pure alumina, as found in sapphires, for example and the hardest natural material next to diamonds, which are carbon crystals. Such unbreakable

ceramics requires to be fired at a much higher temperature unfortunately, which renders its commercial potential limited to products where such resistance to shock is necessary or where the particular incredibly silky and smooth surface is esthetically defensible. Kaowool is another trademarked material that revolutionized ceramic technology. It is basically kaolin melted at very high temperatures and then spun into fibers. Like fiberglass, but much more refractory, it is very insulating and can be used to build very light kilns (compared to heavy bricks) that are very energy efficient. New clays, and new ceramics materials certainly await in the future. Ceramics has always been at the forefront of technological developments and this is still true, if less acknowledged, today. Solar panels for the production of electricity operate around the chemical and physical properties of silica, the most basic ceramic material.

It remains important to remember that there is no clay in ceramics. Once the clay has been fired, it is a totally new material with none of the original properties of the natural material. It has gone irrevocably from being a natural material to a cultural one.

Ceramics: The Art Form

Ceramics is a distinct and specific art form, unique and different from any and all other art forms. Ceramics does things that only ceramics can do, it's that simple. We need to communicate with pots and all ceramic objects what only pots and ceramic objects can communicate. The subject of ceramics, beyond specific contexts and functions, is its own specificity. I will attempt to demonstrate here that the specificity of ceramics is not just material, technical or formal, but above all conceptual, intrinsically; that there are ideas and mode of thinking that are specific to ceramics. This is where the essential autonomy of ceramics as an art form resides. Ceramics is an autonomous practice and while remaining so, it not only can, it must be in a dialogue with all the other art forms. In some ways, it is intrinsic to its very nature to do so, but it must resist the tremendous hegemonic pressures to co-opt it, make it conform and rejoin other practices, like sculpture, for example. It is by retaining its radical autonomy and by acknowledging the radical autonomy of its history that ceramics, in its own limited ways, can also say things about the human condition that no social or political thought could ever tell us. The spirit of ceramics is the spirit of continuity. Each work is an answer to preceding ones, each continues all the previous experiences similar works embody. The best ceramics fulfills that potential and is both aware of and acknowledges that specificity of the art form. The

materials themselves have an impact on that specificity, but only instrumentally, not any more nor less than any other material does for any other art form, be they painting, photography, sculpture or others. It may be important to state again that the materials used in ceramics are common and cheap, with little if any intrinsic value; that after firing, once these materials have become ceramics, a very different material is created and that process remains irreversible. Ceramics is non-recyclable, non-corrosive, non-putrescible thus non-polluting, although the process of transformation is highly polluting in itself, since it uses a lot of energy; it is very strong and permanent, basically impossible to compress (a notable advantage when building with bricks), yet breakable. Even as fragments and shards, it retains and transmits information of all kinds through time. Ceramics, both the material itself and the art form, and we use the same word to describe both which can lead to confusion (yet they should not be confused), are archives, they hold, contain and preserve time and as such are a very specific form of the memory of humankind. This archival potential comes with a responsibility. When one is making objects using a large quantity of materials and within an art form that is ecologically expensive to produce due to the large quantity of energy required in firing (the basic materials themselves are hugely sustainable, basically inexhaustible), yet whose result is in itself non-polluting, this comes with the responsibility to produce relevant things that accomplish to their utmost potential their mandate. This responsibility of ceramics is too often disregarded, misunderstood or ignored or even worse dismissed by ceramists and potters who are often unaware of that potential and that responsibility, particularly today.

Concept and Form in Ceramics:

Ceramics has very specific characteristics. To put it very succinctly here, it is the coming together of a form and a surface. This form is generally articulated by volume, by an empty interior space, while the surface remains distinct and separate, conceptually, from the form. The interior volume of ceramic objects is usually necessary since (and due to the particular material nature of clay, in order to be fired appropriately in a kiln), it can only be of rather limited thickness, otherwise, the moisture trapped in the clay would explode the form as it is fired. Although there can be exceptions to this, clay forms can only be a few centimeters thick, say about the thickness of a brick, maximum. So thicker, bulkier objects must then be made hollow and in this process of making their shape and form is more informed by volume than by mass. This volumetric approach to making forms is particular and specific to ceramics, although not unique to it, since we find

examples of volumetric forms in architecture, in furniture, in textile, etc, but never with an interior pressure coming from forming with a plastic material, like clay, expanding the form from the inside out. Metal is also ductile and can be formed similarly, but its properties and esthetics are nonetheless altogether different. This marked difference within ceramics is the result of generating the volumetric forms with clay by using processes that expand the material from its interior core to the exterior shape; this expansive, pneumatic approach to volume is specific to ceramics and we must keep in mind here that hollow glass, which is generated in a similar fashion, is also a ceramics material and thus connected to ceramics made with clay in its generative process as well as its materials. The difference with glass and metal is that their form and their surface are simultaneous and not distinct, as is the case with ceramic objects. One could object here the arena of enamel on glass or enameled metal (an hybrid form of glass and metal), but these are connected directly to ceramics in the materials, the processes used and the fact that they require to be fired in a kiln as well. As such they are closely related to ceramics, esthetically and conceptually.

Is it absolutely necessary for ceramics to be made with clay? I would argue that the fact that something is made with clay is not by far the most important element to define that thing as ceramics. How the clay is used is also of great importance and I would argue that the object has not only to be made with clay, but most importantly to have been generated by volume, where the pressure on the form is from the interior to the exterior. This volumetric, pneumatic approach to making generates the form and these types of forms are largely specific to ceramics as an art. Another important characteristic of ceramic objects is that their surface is distinct from the form. Even when left totally bare, the skin, the surface of a ceramic object feels distinct from the form itself. It is also very rare in ceramics to have a form that has not been adorned with a different surface, a design, a pattern, and image or a glaze. Even the earliest clay objects take advantage of this potential for ornamentation and for engaging with the exciting symbiosis of form and surface we find in ceramic objects. Their surface often directly takes a particular character in their shaping where the plastic clay imprints on various surfaces and textures it comes into contact with in the forming process, the hands and fingers of the maker, woven or braided objects as well as various tools used for smoothing or even burnishing the surface to a shine. Again, this is not unique to ceramics per se, yet it manifests itself in unique ways in ceramics as will be demonstrated later.

This relation between form and surface so particular to ceramics is articulated around two main concepts: function and decoration, where the concept of function is largely given by the volumetric form which empties the interior of the shape and renders it practically available for containment, and where the concept of decoration is largely given by the surface. The fact that the form and the surface are distinct is a very important aspect of ceramics specificity as an art form. Despite this distinctiveness, it is important to stress that ceramics is a truly multi-disciplinary art form. Basically, the form is sculptural in its dimensionality while the surface is pictorial and relates to other pictorial art forms like painting, drawing, printmaking, even photography, since this surface can also be articulated by all and any printmaking and photographic processes. Today, the surface, as well as the form, can be generated by computers and digital technologies as well. Ceramics is also in a deep relation to architecture and even pots can be understood as small scale architecture (or buildings as large scale, static vessels!), beyond the obvious and significant contribution of bricks and tiles at the formal level, while also contributing plaster and cement, two ceramic materials often used in architecture, at that other level too. In order to make a ceramic object, one has to be conversant in all of these other art forms, have a deep understanding of as many of them as possible, the more, the better. No other art form requires such a deep and wide understanding of other arts in order to achieve its full potential. For this reason alone, ceramics is an incredibly demanding and difficult art to master and for this reason as well, it has rarely been historically the result of the labor and imagination of a single individual, although it can be, and with extraordinary results. I know from personal experience that all artists think that their art form, whatever it may be, is not only the most important but also the most difficult. Some artists even think that their art is the only truly relevant one, a position that is not only pretentious but ludicrous as well, yet rather well spread. Basically, everyone is always complaining, one way or another. I remember, in a discussion with a photographer, stating how difficult it is to exhibit ceramic objects and how few opportunities exist to do so. She interjected forcefully how much in agreement she was with me since she had the very same problem as a photographer. Now, from my viewpoint, photographs are very easy to exhibit, you can just pin them to the wall if necessary and there are countless venues to do so. In fact, the art experience now is basically reduced to a photographic experience, since most art is experienced through photography, primarily. It often seems that the photograph of anything has more intrinsic value than the actual thing, person or event... A photograph can also be reproduced readily and easily with no or little loss of quality or noticeable difference between the original and the reproduction. They can also

be easily and efficiently disseminated in books and magazines with the same results. Try that with ceramics! Once in a discussion with a fellow teacher who is a painter, she said how lucky I was to work in ceramics since it is so much easier than painting! So I replied: “Just imagine that at the end of the day after finishing a painting made by grinding, preparing and mixing all the colors yourself, from scratch, you were to put it in a sealed room and leave it there overnight. The next day, when you come back to the studio, the painting would have shrunk significantly, all the colors and textures would be changed and the likelihood of the painting being cracked or warped quite significant. That is what I have to compose with as a ceramic artist, circumstances that no painter or photographer ever has to consider, even less work with.” Ceramics is by far, above and beyond any other, the most demanding, frustrating and difficult art form. Yet, this is not in itself ground for special consideration and appreciation. Ceramics is not readily an experimental art form and it tends to be the result of repeated activities and the passing of knowledge from generation to generation in a spirit of continuity, which is characteristic of tradition and craft practices. Ceramics is also multi-disciplinary in its inclusion of geography and geology in the sourcing of materials, of chemistry in their complex combination and transformation, of physics in its use of gravity and in the plasticity of materials, of mathematics and geometry as well.

Although ceramics takes many forms, pots, vessels, containers of all types but also sculptures, buildings, large mural surfaces, drains and pipes and other forms too, the main contribution the practice has made to culture and civilization remains at the level of volumetric forms and for this reason alone, pottery is the single most important aspect of the art. By “pot” in this book, I do not simply mean an object for containment but, basically, I mean any form dealing with the principles of containment or the articulation of a movable volumetric space through its generative process. Most if not all ceramic objects be they vessels, sculptures, buildings or other things are at the conceptual level pots, that is to say volumetric forms with an empty interior defined by an exterior wall whose visual aspect is often, if not always, decorated as a distinct surface. Form and surface give us function and decoration. A fired clay object that is hollow, or that is used to make hollow things as would bricks and tiles, and which has a distinct surface is a ceramic object. In order for any object to be classified as ceramics and be a part of this art as a specific and distinct discipline, it must fulfill these characteristics. All the works discussed in this book, in their amazing variety, are ceramic objects, following this definition. Other objects that do not prescribe to this definition, and even if made with clay and even fired clay at that,

are part of another field of inquiry within the arts and should be understood and classified as such. I will argue throughout this book that these characteristics of ceramics are essential and intrinsic to the art form and that they define and separate it from any other cultural phenomenon. This is a book about ceramics.

Chapter One

The Classical Esthetics: The Constancy of Form

I am writing this from China, where the most popular architectural conceit manifests itself in the perverse quoting of ancient Greek architecture. Taking a bus trip through suburbia and the outskirts of Chinese cities, one goes through an industrial wasteland seemingly without end, where numerous factories, head offices, warehouses and other buildings of all kinds, including private homes, are adorned with Greek columns, porticoes and pediments. These are bastardized, cheapened and over-all kitchy versions, cast in cheap materials, cement or even plastic, of one of the Greek orders, the Ionic, the Doric and the Corinthian. The last being the most popular by far, no doubt due to its florid excessiveness and closer relation to bad taste. This classical urge to ornamentation finds its way into houses as well and many new developments of public or private housing suffer from the same Greek induced malaise. One even finds skyscrapers, office towers and large condo complexes, multi-storied, crowned with Greek columns and the pretensions of faux Greek temples. To find these old and tired stereotypes in “communist” China at the beginning of the 21st Century is all the more strange and disquieting. What is going on here?

What is it about Greek architecture and Greek art, and particularly Greek Attic pottery that gives it such perennial power, such resilience and such widespread efficiency

through time? This state of affairs has been going with hardly an interruption since Antiquity, with the Etruscans and the Romans taking over from the Greeks, then subsequently throughout Europe, with a strong revival during the Renaissance due to the rediscovered writings on architecture of Vitruvius (1st Century B.C. E.) that greatly influenced the buildings of Palladio (1508–1580) and many others. A resurgence of Greek columns and other motifs continued through the Victorian era in countless banks, museums, colleges, churches and other public and private buildings all over Europe and all over the world, with colonization and imperialism. China, in a rather dubious fashion, is succumbing to its rather spurious charms now. Why is Greek classical antiquity so popular?

The orders of Greek architecture, and the same is true for Greek Attic pottery, are instantaneous and clear signs of elegance, refinement and sophistication, in a direct lineage with an ideal, utopian age. They represent for everyone anywhere, constancy and continuity, stability and strength and they carry an overall implication of status and hierarchy. They embody power and authority, and they have this effect instantly. Their appeal has now become universal and timeless and I predict that this will probably always be the case. Quite simply, they are the most obvious signs for culture and civilization we have. In pottery forms the classicism of Attic vessels also instantly signify “ceramics” and they have become iconic for ceramics as an art form, itself.

The eternal forms of Greek architecture and Greek pottery, probably the most successful “designs” ever, in term of dispersion and resilience, anyway, do not change much, if at all, through time and even space, since, quite simply, they do not need to change. Whatever the time and the place, the time or the place, the same archetypal forms answer the same questioning. Their shape, be they columns or vases, are perfectly performing the task for which they are destined, whether it be structural (although they often remain strictly decorative), practical, symbolic, esthetic or quite simply iconic, as a familiar sign for stability and constancy, for status, sophistication, refinement and wealth. They are a rather rare example in the history of forms and of styles, of particular and specific shapes that remain the same, basically unchanged, over such a continuous and extensive period of time, roughly 3,000 years and counting.

Their genesis from their inception to their final resolution during the classical period is explained by the fact that works of art in Greek Antiquity were based on an ethical ideal

where perfection was the goal, as exemplified by the “Golden Means” of establishing proportion in architecture or elsewhere, notably in sculpture but also in pottery forms. This ethical ideal will resurface again in ceramics in the Neo-Classical period in late 18th Century Europe, with the development of industrial mechanization and production, as we will see in “The Industrial Esthetics” chapter.

The classical esthetics as defined here is, of course, not just specific to Greek art or European art for that matter. Some shapes of oriental ceramics, notably Chinese and Korean, pursue a similar aim, where the potter continually revisits, reworks and refines a single shape for centuries after centuries, yet, the shapes of oriental pottery are more simple (while being as complex, nonetheless), possibly even more refined, since their overall profile generally articulates a single continuous curve, while “occidental” forms usually articulate a succession of curves and/or straight lines, changing directions, sometimes unexpectedly. For this reason, oriental forms tend to be less specific and iconic, and similar shapes, if at times cruder than the oriental examples, can be found indiscriminately all over the world, irrespective of influence. By being generated around an uninterrupted wavy line they differ greatly from the broken, diverging outline of Greek pots where each aspect of the form is visually separate and distinct from the others. These kinds of forms are actually made or thrown in separate sections that are then subsequently assembled and joined together, while the classical esthetics of Asian ceramics usually implies the making of the form as a unique, continuous gesture. This specific method of making (in sections, later assembled together) is mostly responsible for the overall formal esthetics of Greek pots. Despite the impression they give, Greek pots, like any hand-made pots, are not as perfect and regular as they first appear in their stillness in books or museum showcases. If they were to be returned to the potter’s wheel and spun around, they would wobble and dance as they divert, even ever slightly from the perpendicular centre point, the axis around which they spin. This imperfection of Greek pots is reassuring to me, as it releases the unbearable tension generated by the otherwise extreme control.

The classical esthetics in ceramics can be found from very early on in history, even pre-history. The esthetics itself, as it is defined and used here, in fact predates Greek and Roman “classical” Antiquity by millennia, and it is still continuing today. It is by far the most far-reaching, long lasting, prevalent and influential esthetics to be found in ceramics. Most pottery forms are classical in nature, in that they comprise a limited

vocabulary of forms that hardly changes over time and even space. This is due to the fact that ceramic forms and particularly pottery forms, even more so if they are made on the potter's wheel, rely on an outline that provides an unbroken continuity, one of the major formal aspect of the ceramic esthetics, specially in oriental ceramics, but not exclusively. This generates a limited range of possibilities and similar if not identical forms are found everywhere, in an uninterrupted continuum through millennia, independent of influence, exchange or imitation. The potters of China and Korea (in a very different sensibility, looser and more organic, as we will see later in "The Material Esthetics" chapter, with Japanese ceramics as well) have pushed this potential to its ultimate perfected expression. For this reason, the basic forms of oriental ceramics are equally part of the classical esthetics and they have been as influential as their Greek counterparts.

The classical esthetics finds a variety of expressions, irrelevant of the particular stylistic modifications one finds from culture to culture. This esthetics is mostly relevant at the level of three-dimensional form and shape, although there is also a specifically "classical surface" as well, on which more a bit later. I need to stress that in the discussion of the various esthetics as defined by the structure of this book, each esthetics always imply a "form" aspect as well as a "surface" aspect, since the coming together of a volumetric form and a distinct surface is what characterizes ceramics as an art form. The classical esthetics is the longest, oldest continuing esthetics found in ceramics and as such, it is the most important esthetics in the ceramic tradition and its influence can be found in all the other esthetics under discussion in these essays, in this book.

The central characteristic of the classical esthetics consists of an emphasis on form nonetheless, rather than on surface. That form is usually left unglazed, with the bare clay surface providing the overall visual effect, whether it is left uncovered or adorned with decoration. This surface is frequently burnished (this is true just about all over the world, except in Asia, where burnishing is rare) i.e. it has been smoothened to a sheen, an effect that is obtained by compressing the upper layer of clay with a very smooth hard tool (a polished stone usually, often agate), which realigns the flat clay particles into a continuous and now reflective surface. When a ceramic object is burnished, this doesn't really alter the form or "add" anything more to it, but it does create a new surface that greatly modifies our visual perception of the form. It changes our reading of the outline and the overall shape, an effect enhanced by the reflective surface burnishing creates, confusing somehow where exactly the surface actually stands in space as it reflects its surroundings.

A similar effect can be obtained by covering the surface with a clay slip made with a decanted material (the Latin name is “terra sigillata”), retaining the finer particles, which then behave in a similar fashion to burnishing after a light polish with a soft cloth, for example. The actual burnishing of the surface of a pot to a reflective shine is a technique not found in oriental ceramics, until quite recently, interestingly enough. As we will see in the next chapter “The Flux Esthetics”, oriental ceramic surfaces are more concerned with glazes and glazed surfaces and this is where oriental ceramics has made its most impressive contributions to the field. It remains nonetheless interesting and somewhat puzzling, considering its rich and diverse contributions, that burnishing a ceramic surface has never been fully developed as a decorative technique in Asia. Burnishing is also done for practicality, as it closes the pores of the clay and reduces the porosity of low-fired clay. Considering that pre-Columbian ceramic technology presumably comes from oriental ceramics (however it may have developed totally independently, after the migrations from Asia to the Americas), if we are to trust historical precedence, something I personally greatly distrust, it is significant to note that after coming to the New World, potters from Asia developed their art independently and quite differently from their forebears, the Asian potter developing higher and higher firing technology and glaze surfaces while the “American” potter developed a variety of complex styles in low fired earthenware, very often burnished. Both techniques of applying refined clay slip and burnishing are often combined and found all over the world, with the best examples coming from pre-Columbian America, notably in the Moche and Nazca cultures of Peru and in the Pueblo pottery of south western USA, especially works made in the 20th Century to now. This surface can also be covered with images, patterns and symbols, yet these are applied with a very limited range of earthy colors, reds, browns, blacks, more rarely white, which provide a material, visual and esthetic continuum with the clay ground of the form itself in a symbiosis that is always very resolved. The clear contrast between form and surface, so clearly manifest in the other ceramic esthetics, as we will see eventually, is rather subtle and muted within the classical esthetics since both form and surface are usually made with clay materials and minerals which are largely similarly perceived by the eye or even the hand.

A Few Examples:

The classical esthetics comprises a vast body of work from all over the world. I will single out only a few here, a selection that I hope is representative but nowhere near

comprehensive. Included in this esthetics are the Neolithic potteries of China and Europe. At the esthetic and conceptual levels, the first pot ever made is still being made somewhere, today. This primal “Ur” pot is a very basic form, a lump of clay with an opening in it and it is at the origin of all and any pot ever made, even now.

In China, the potteries of the Yangshao, Dawenkou and Lungshan cultures (from 2000 B.C.E.) are particularly notable. The last one is of particular interest, since it produced eggshell thin, wheel thrown black pottery that is incredibly refined formally and it still feels so totally current and modern that it would be totally believable and appropriate if made now. The exaggerated, elegant forms produced were not readily practical, but served purposefully in ceremonial and ritual events, probably funerary. As mentioned previously, at the level of form, all oriental ceramics (with the possible exception of some ceramics from Japan made for the tea ceremony and that will be discussed in “The Material Esthetics” chapter) are also part of this classical esthetics. Another contribution of China is the “garniture” format, a suite of stereotypical and often standardized forms presented as a cohesive group “en suite”, with a unifying decorative surface and which was tremendously important to European “chinoiserie” decorative arts focused on sumptuous and ostentatious display, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where it represented a sign of taste, refinement and wealth for the aristocracy, then for the bourgeoisie, remnants of which can still be found today as knick-knacks in most homes. The “garniture” format has recently seen a resurgence in the work of many contemporary ceramic artists.

Included within the classical esthetics as well, are the pots coming from pre-industrial India and Africa and still produced to this day in these parts of the world; all pre-Columbian ceramics (I am speaking mostly of pots here, the figurative, sculptural works to be discussed later in “The Figure and Figurine” chapter) from the Iroquoian, Woodlands and Plains cultures of the Eastern and Central USA, to the Pueblo ceramics from South Western USA, the ceramics of Mexico, Central and South America. Although all these ceramic forms, from so many and very diverse cultures, are included since they all are unglazed pottery, made with a limited yet comprehensive vocabulary of forms repeated with little change and modification, if any, over vast expanses of time. They all nonetheless have specific characteristics and usually their own vocabulary of forms that can be quite different and distinctive. The “stirrup” funerary vessels of the Moche culture of Peru is a good example, since that pottery shape is actually specific to that part of the

world and found nowhere else on Earth (yet are repeated with only slight modifications, helpful in dating them, over three thousands years). The Moche stirrup vessel is quite different formally from the vessels of their Nazca cousins a bit farther south, which has two spouts connected with a handle bridge, another version of the stirrup format. The stirrup vessel of Peruvian pre-Columbian ceramics is an anomaly in ceramics history as it is a specific, highly distinctive form found nowhere else on Earth, in itself a rare occurrence in the ceramics lexicon of forms, which tends to be similar, more or less, everywhere. Archeologists and historians are still debating its function and its significance. Was it practical and/or functional, or purely ceremonial? Then how? And why? For carrying the vessel, possibly, since the shape doubles as a spout and a handle and the position of this handle suggests that they be lifted vertically, picked up from above, which implies that their user was located above them. Was the form symbolic? Then, of what exactly? They are phallic somehow, but then vaguely, considering that sexuality is major theme of Moche ceramic art, as we will see in the “Sex” chapter. Nobody knows for sure. Yet, they are very elegant and beautiful shapes, highly unusual and puzzling and their mystery is a large part of their real appeal. The earliest examples are from Chavin de Huatar, in Peru and they are close to 3,000 years old. The same constancy is true of the ceramics and pottery of Mexico, where the pots of the Mayan culture are stylistically quite different from the Aztecs or any other Meso-American cultures, yet these stylistic differences are mostly at the level of surface and modes of representation, with similar forms, classical, found everywhere. Pre-Columbian ceramics is also notable for the large variety of incredibly inventive anthropomorphic and zoomorphic vessels, but these will be analyzed in the chapter on “The Figure and the Figurine”. Also, the stylistic differences of the various surfaces will be looked at within “The Decorative Esthetics” in chapter three and “The Narrative Esthetics” in chapter four.

Greek Attic Pottery:

It is necessary here to single out for analysis and develop further the characteristics proper to Greek Attic Pottery of the classical period (roughly, seventh to fourth Century B.C.E.) since these objects were by far the most influential in subsequent developments in ceramics history, all the way to today.

The repertory of Greek pottery forms developed slowly from the Archaic period (+ or – 1000 B.C.E.) to their ultimate expression in the Classical period (fifth Century B.C.E.) to

their progressive degeneration during the decadent Hellenistic period (fourth and third Century B.C.E.), through Roman times, to today. These forms progressively develop and are modified according to practical, cultural and esthetic developments, yet each type remains identifiable over the whole of Greek civilization and in their influence all around the Mediterranean and subsequently, throughout the world.

The main forms, among many others, nearly two dozen, are the Amphora, a tall-necked vessel with two long handles on each side of the neck and sometimes with a pointed base so it can be stuck in the sand for stability (the amphora was used for the storage of wine and other liquids); the Hydria, for carrying and storing water, is a globular vessel with two horizontal handles on the shoulder for lifting and another vertical handle at the neck for pouring the content; the Krater, is a wide-necked vessel for the mixing of wine and water and it comes in four main types: the bell-krater, a tall bowl form with two side handles; the calix-krater, on a higher foot with two low positioned horizontal handles, a form that can still be found today in ornamental garden vases, the basic shape being based on the corolla of a flower, perfect by association for garden display and it is also found in certain types of Champagne ice buckets in silver, where they retain some of their original connection to function, in serving wine; the column-krater with two straight vertical handles around the slightly narrowed neck and the volute-krater, with two excessive, non-functional, curved and decorative handles positioned higher than the lip of the vase. The volute-krater and the kalix-krater are the most influential Greek forms, both often found as garden ornaments to this day, while the amphora is a close second, and all these forms can be found in large number in European decorative arts (their formal influence may even have extended to China and the Orient, though commercial exchange on the Silk Road). The volute-krater was and is still used for its potential in ostentatious display due to its excessive nature and impractical structure, which reinforces its symbolic potential of leisure and luxury, as it may have done for the Greek themselves. Another form is the cup or Kylix, a rather unusual shape for a drinking vessel (it is a rather shallow and wide dish on a high foot) and found only in Greek art, in itself a rather rare phenomenon in ceramics history (as we have seen with the stirrup vessel in pre-Columbian Peru), where similar, if not identical forms, are found all over the world when they serve the same practical purpose, independently of contact or influence. The Kylix is a flat, shallow bowl with two horizontal side handles, on a high, pedestal foot, and used for drinking wine; the flat shallow dish form of this drinking vessel provided two distinct surfaces for pictorial representations, a perfect frame for circular depictions inside the

wide bowl itself and another continuous frieze, barely interrupted by the handles, on the exterior, which became visible when the drinker lifted the vessel to drink its content. The shape provided a perfect surface for images within circular compositions, and very inventive uses of the round format can be found in the relationship between image and frame. The kylix offered great potential for surface decoration and for that reason, it is the commonest decorated shape in Greek pottery. Its unusual shape may actually be more informed by the necessities of graphic composition more than actual practicality. The wide flat dish was nonetheless useful for decanting and collecting the dregs of the crude wine of the time, and these dregs were then flicked at the wall while holding the kylix with a finger through one of the handles, a functional yet unusual action which probably explains as well the unusual shape for a drinking container, so specific to the Greek pottery vocabulary. The game of Kottabos was thus played by the Greeks at symposia, gatherings around food, wine and conversation. The lees of the wine collecting in the shallow dish were flipped at a target or, no doubt, at other guests, with a toast and for a prize. The targets were bronze dishes balanced on stands or floating in a basin, to be sunk. We understand the unusual shape of the kylix as a drinking vessel from its representation in libation scenes as often seen on kylix cups themselves, actually. The specific and unusual holding position with one finger holding the cup through one handle permitted to project the lees by turning the hand and flipping the wrist, all gestures clearly described on the scenes depicted. The handles on the kylix (there was really need for only one handle but there are always two, for the all important symmetry and balance in Greek esthetics) were also used for storing the cup on a peg on the wall, a storage position also depicted on pots. This form was eventually recycled in European ceramics into high footed dishes for serving and display, as compotes, a form still popular and in use today. There are also a few others I will not describe here, but for the Oinochoe, a pitcher form, as well as another important and distinctive vessel form, derived from perfume containers, the Lekythos, used for funerary purposes (see "Death" chapter). It remains important and necessary to have a knowledge and understanding of these basic Greek pottery forms as they greatly influenced the whole of the history of ceramics and they are still potent and in use now.

An interesting and important digression may be necessary here concerning Greek pottery. Ceramic and pottery forms are too often perceived by art history and the art world, as unimportant, unassuming, even irrelevant and futile. For that reason alone, Attic Greek vases are more often praised for their surface, their painted decoration, while the pot itself is usually dismissed and ignored, a situation reinforced by photographic

reproductions of these objects in books, where the painted image, the frieze or cartouche (a reserved area holding a representation) is usually singled-out and the actual pottery form remains invisible, not even shown, removed from the visual field as it is often from the field of interpretation and analysis.

Greek pottery remains one of the most spectacular and familiar craft of Classical Antiquity, despite the fact that in their basic materials and in their fabrication they are both common and cheap, compared to bronze or marble, for example. Only oriental ceramics can be comparably important in the culture and trade that they served. Greek pots were among the cheapest products of ancient crafts, although their price would vary depending on the complexity of their painted surface as well as the reputation of the maker(s), but they never were luxury products as we would understand the term today. They were commonly sold and bought in markets everywhere and exported all over the sphere of influence of the Greek world. This growth in export for classical pottery was accelerated by the recent regional innovation of a money-based economy. It is this distribution, far and wide, that helped in their transmission and preservation all the way to today.

Potter and Painter in Greek Attic Pottery:

In Greek pottery scholarship, a painted image is often attributed to a fictional painter to whom a name has been attributed, for example, the “Berlin Painter”, since his (we know from the names and signatures on a few vases that potters and painters were all male) most iconic work is found in a Berlin museum, or the “Achilles Painter” since his best work represents that hero, etc. Yet, another more perverse naming practice assigns the name of the potter, who actually signed the vase, to the painter who remains anonymous and, it is assumed, cannot possibly be the same person. We may not know who actually painted the vase, yet nineteenth century art historical scholarship, whose mindset is still very prevalent today in our still hierarchical approach to value and status in the visual arts and in art history, attributed the image to a fictional painter named after the actual, known potter who signed the pot. The “Amasis Painter” is a case in point, named for the potter Amasis who signed many of his pots. This practice is common in the attribution of images in Greek Attic pottery studies. Yet, for the Greek themselves, the prestige of the potter was nonetheless greater than that of the painter and it is the potter who was celebrated. The most admired artist was the maker who potted these exquisite, complex forms, not

the painter of the nonetheless similarly exquisite and complex images. I would argue that in many instances they very possibly were the same person. On Greek vases, signatures are either painted or engraved, as “X egraphen” (X drew me) or as “X epoisen” (X made me). On some vases we find “X drew and made me” when the same person was responsible for both activities and also “X made me and Y drew me”, when two makers are clearly involved. Signatures themselves are a rare occurrence yet about 30% of signed vases indicate one maker responsible for both the making of the vessel and the painting of the image it supports. “Epoisen” (made me) could also imply a workshop owner who supervised the work of others, usually slaves, in the making of the work. But signatures on Greek vases are very rare, only about 1% of the Greek vases that came down to us have any signature at all. We only know of about 40 names of artists from inscribed vases while there are nearly 900 different known artists, recognizable by stylistic differences in their work. All these anonymous artists are given fictional names to define the attributions. It is important to keep in mind that most ceramic objects and pots, anywhere and at any time, are never signed and this phenomenon of signing these types of objects is specific to Greek antiquity. Even Roman pots, which were made later, are never signed. We do not know the name of a single Roman potter from their name inscribed on their actual work! (see “Text” chapter). Before the Renaissance, this was also true of all European ceramics and even then, only pots painted in major workshops or the work of just a few painters are signed. In China, no ceramic object is signed by an individual maker before the 19th century. If the object bears a signature it refers to the emperor, never to the maker. In Japan, the earliest signed pot is by Nonomura Ninsei (1648–1690), in the Momoyama period in the 17th century.

The debate over the meaning of “epoisen” (made me) is still open. Is it the signature of the potter alone, or even the painter alone, or both simultaneously doing one job? I, of course, think that when a pot bears only one signature, the maker of the pot and the painter of its surface were in many instances the very same person, irrelevant of the format (made me, drew me) of the signature. For example, Euphronios, one of the most distinguished and celebrated potter of the Classical period, who had a very long career in Athens, both signed pots as maker and as painter. Yet some of his pots were also painted by others who may or may not have signed them and he also painted pots made by others. Pottery making in Greece, or elsewhere for that matter, has always tended to be a communal activity made by a large group of people working collaboratively, where personal expression, individuality and originality played a very limited role, if any. In

earlier times, during the Geometric period, potter and painter must often have been one and the same, but by the late Archaic (seventh century B.C.E. period), specialization begins to set in, in the form of production lines with pots being passed from hand to hand for the making as well as the decoration, with different experts being responsible for various aspects of the work. This division of labor is found elsewhere in the world, notably very early on in Chinese history, anywhere actually where large quantities of pots are made by communities of potters working collectively. Toward the end of his life, Euphronios is known exclusively as a potter and he relies on other painters (who may have been potters as well, of course) to decorate his wares, possibly due to failing health and a somewhat unsteady hand affecting his performance. He may have decided as well to concentrate on making masterful pots for which he would have received more recognition and fame than for his painting, anyway. It is recorded that Agathokles, for a while king of Syracuse, was at first a potter and when he fell on hard times, he returned to pottery, and made clay cups as fine as the gold ones he once held. The earliest Greek vase to bear a mark is the work of Sophilos, which makes him the earliest recorded potter in history. Since it is also the first work of art ever signed, this makes him the very first artist whose name is known to history.

I am aware here that I at times contradict myself, on purpose. My intent is to present information in a way that generates debate. By avoiding the imposition of a clear position, it is for the reader to decide. This discussion of the debate around names and makers may be seen as somewhat ludicrous, yet the scholarship of 19th century European art history, as well as the presentation and display of these objects in publications and institutions, has greatly affected our current perception and interpretation. In some ways we understand these artworks through the mindset and from the viewpoint of that 19th century scholarship more than we do from the perspective of the original makers and users or even through our own contemporary perspective. These objects, in a perverse way and in many ways, belong to the 19th century and are deeply Victorian, more than they do the 5th century B.C.E!

Art history has this tendency to reposition objects in time, dissociating them from their original context and thus their original meaning. The consequences of this mindset are still with us today in our evaluation of art works and art practices.

On Tradition and Anonymity:

The classical esthetics in its permanency and continuity implies the notion of tradition. “Primitive” pots, which are also profoundly grounded in tradition, are egoless and anonymous, yet deeply connected to the culture they embody and preserve for us, into the future. Tradition is a word used indiscriminately and I would like to define it differently here. True tradition in ceramics has nothing to do with stylistic conventions, which is how tradition is often thought to operate, falsely, i.e. that a pot is of a certain tradition if it looks like other pots from that “tradition”. One of the central and real traditions of ceramics is anonymity. Another true tradition is the notion of a conceptual constancy. It is important to keep in mind that tradition, like function and decoration, are all concepts and that any object or activity using these concepts is thus inherently conceptual. The conceptual constancy of ceramics implies that the basic aspects of ceramics are universal and timeless, that they are shared by all cultures throughout time and that they never change. A bowl is always a bowl, conceptually, no matter when, where, how and by whom it is made. Of course, all bowls are different culturally and their respective roles within diverse cultures can greatly differ; yet conceptually, they are all the same. That is how and why we know they are bowls! For that reason, all the stylistic traditions of ceramics belong to all potters and ceramists, as well as being integral to all of humanity. The familiar notion of tradition as belonging to a particular group or time exclusively is obsolete, although the “traditional” notion of tradition is still of value in an age where we have instant access to depictions and descriptions of numerous traditions, historically or currently. Technologies now give us instant and universal access to the whole visual and material culture (through the dissemination of images) of humankind. It is thus the heritage of all of humankind and as such, all of it can be tapped as source for future works. This doesn’t mean that it is acceptable to do this disrespectfully or ignorantly. On the contrary, ignoring this source of inspiration in continuity would be disrespectful, as if the past had become obsolete, useless and irrelevant.

There may be a need to reassess the value of anonymity and return to it. There is a need to end this contemporary obsession with originality and individuality, to end the false notion that art is the expression of irreplaceable personal originality. This contemporary notion is not readily applicable to ceramics, far from it. If the maker of a work of art has a personality, any individuality, it doesn’t need to be imposed or forced on

the work. It will be obviously present there, in itself, as a matter of fact. To impose a personal aspect to an artwork is the last resort of those with little personality or with no individuality strong enough to manifest itself by itself. Anonymous artworks are nonetheless the fruit of real individuals with personality, but the work transcends, if it is any good, the individual maker. Above all, a return to anonymity in culture now could and should be the battleground for a critique of all aspects of contemporary consumer and entertainment culture.

The Classical Surface: Black on Red and Red on Black pottery.

Besides the constancy and continuity of form, the classical esthetics (and it is important to keep in mind that this esthetics is not only specific to the Greek Attic pottery but most importantly can be found throughout time and all over the world), has provided ceramics with a specific “classical surface” as well. Since the content of these surfaces, for the Greek anyway, is more often than not narrative (a story is being told), they will be dealt with more depth in chapter four, “The Narrative Esthetics: Framing and Fiction”. Yet, the classical surface is not always narrative and can often be abstract in nature, either with a decorative or a symbolic intent, and usually, if not always, as a potent combination of the two. Again this will be looked at further in chapter three: “The Decorative Esthetics: Abstraction and Ornament”.

Greek Attic pottery specifically has a very distinct surface, which was almost as influential as the forms themselves and its analysis uncovers principles that can be applied to many other ceramic surfaces where a strong polar contrast is present between figure and ground. Basically, the surface on Greek vases can be defined into two separate historical phases: the Black Figure phase, from the Archaic to the beginning of the Classic period in the fifth century B.C.E. and the Red Figure phase from the beginning of the Classic period on, where red figure supersedes black figure. There was actually a short period where the two polar phases, one being the reversal of the other, technically, visually, stylistically, thus conceptually as well, can be found on the same vase, one side being painted in black figure (the older style), the other painted with red-figure (the newer style, which will take over very quickly). These rare vases are actually called “bilingual” vases, since they use both these visual languages on the same piece, as if the maker, while wanting to try the new style couldn’t quite give up completely on the older and wanted to test and compare their respective qualities on the same piece, while developing

their skills with a new technique requiring not only new tools but an actual reversal, in a strikingly different mode of perception and representation.

These two styles of image making may be specific to Greek Antiquity yet their resonance and influence was widespread and continues to this day. In fact a clear understanding of their operative differences could be most useful to the contemporary potter wanting to work with two contrasting colors to organize images and surfaces. The visual implication and the optical dynamism through reversal that they imply can be applied to the analysis as well as the making of other decorative conceits which operate in the opposition of light and dark contrast, something found on innumerable decorated pots worldwide since time immemorial and still valid now. An oriental example would be the Tzu-Chu wares of the Song Dynasty in China whose decoration is articulated, much more organically and freely than its Greek counterparts, around dark figures (usually stylized flowers) on a lighter ground. It still is important to keep in mind that black on red (very common) and red on black (somewhat rarer) decoration are found everywhere throughout ceramics history and that the basic figure/ground dynamic applies irrelevant of place and time.

In black figure painting, whether it is narrative, representational or on the contrary decorative and abstract, the “figure” reads as a dark silhouette against the lighter red clay background. The Greek potter, to use that example, would then scratch this flat silhouette with a pointed tool to define it further and add necessary details. The black shape against the red ground gives the dark figure a very physical, material presence, objectifying the figure which, while remaining flat, gains spatial density against the lighter ground, which in its turn is perceived as lit, deep, real, tangible, with actual believability as a physical space occupied by the figures, the patterns. Nonetheless, the black figure is perceived as presence while the red ground stands for absence in an ontological polarity.

In red figure painting, this polarity between presence and absence is even more effective and it is reversed, the red figure becoming presence and the black ground being absence and void. The red figure graphic system is actually much more realistic than with black figure painting (where the image is like a flat cut-out), and it is now appearing as volumetric, fleshy reality while the black ground is now perceived ambiguously, without real depth or reality; it is dark, mysterious, fictive, flat, shallow, empty and void. Thus black figure and red figure decorations operate in opposition to

each other, yet each with its own validity and expressive potential. A deeper understanding of their respective potential could yield very exciting territory to explore, even today.

In early archaic Greek pottery of the geometric style, strongly abstracted lines and patterns, mostly stylized and symbolic geometry representing simplified figures in very basic spatial environments, progressively develops into a more sinuous “orientalizing” style, more detailed, with the use of an expanded palette of white and red slips in addition to the ground color of the clay support and the

predominant black paint. This progression from abstraction to representation is found similarly in all ceramic traditions. Horizontal banding decoration is also often used by itself, done on the wheel as the pot rotates. It is also sometimes used to define concentric circles made with a number of brushes mounted on a compass. But the most effective and common use of banding on pottery forms is meant to articulate the variations of directions of the form of the pot itself, to clearly redefine each separate component. The articulation of pottery forms by banding is probably the most common and efficient formal device used in ceramics to define and animate the constitutive parts. Another use of banding serves to create continuous bands of decoration circling the vessel, bands that then receive “caravans” of animals, real or imagined, most often. The horizontal banding can also be interrupted with vertical lines that define (distorted) square spaces and reserved panels called “cartouches”, that will then receive ever more complex representations and scenes, usually mythological in nature, anywhere in the world this is done. Square reserved panels are not found on pre-Columbian pottery representations, where it is always the whole form of the vessel that “frames” the composition, all around the pot. In Greece, or elsewhere, these reserved panels separate, somewhat hierarchically, the “image” within the frame, inside its borders, from the other decorative elements outside the frame, with the two different pictorial devices operating quite separately while complementarily. The “image” describes a scene to be read as a narrative while the “decoration” may be symbolic following a standard code shared by all viewers/users or may simply have been used to beautify the vessel while acting as a visual transition between the framed representation on the pot, itself another “frame” within its limit outline (see “The Narrative Esthetics” chapter, for more on framing and on the pictorial space specific to ceramics).

The figures or patterns, whether in black on red or red on black are rarely represented frontally in Greek pottery (or in other pottery traditions as well, at least not since the Ming dynasty in China and the Renaissance in Europe, contemporary of each other, actually. I am of course speaking of graphic representation here and this does not apply to three-dimensional modeling). This lack of frontal representation is unusual considering how important frontal images of the human body were in Greek art. On pots, this is mainly due to the difficulty of representing the human form as seen from the front, since the profile view creates an easier silhouette to describe, more believable too. Interestingly enough, eyes are on the other hand represented frontally even on figures seen in profile! It is only by the classical period of the fifth century B.C.E. that synchronicity of representation between eyes and body appears (with the eye seen in profile, realistically, on figures seen in profile, frontal representation still being exceedingly rare, at least for the face, which remains in profile, usually. Yet, the nude in action on Greek pots provides the earliest representation of dynamic movement in art, especially on Panathenaic amphoras depicting athletes engaged in various sports, and this realism of active movement predates any such depiction in other art forms, even in sculpture, notably.

Greek Attic pottery technique: a theory

In black figure painting, the image is first painted, with a brush, as a silhouette shape which is then defined with linear details scratched with a sharp tool through the figure to reveal the lighter ground underneath. In red figure painting, the outline of the figure, as well as the interior details, are “drawn” so that all the figurative information is given by a graphic process. It is the background that is painted, to fill that negative space with the paint material, which will develop into a black color in the firing. It is important to keep in mind here that when the image was painted the paint itself was not black but probably of a reddish color not too dissimilar from the ground itself, unless another pigment, say ground carbon, was added to the paint to establish the contrast between figure and ground while the image was painted; since this dark pigment would have burned and disappeared in the firing, we cannot know for sure. The black color we see on Greek pots only develops as black during the very particular firing process used by the Greeks. It is still debated by archeologists whether the linear system of graphic representation in red figure pottery is actually done with a fine brush or with a “syringe” that traces a continuous, slightly raised deposit of the painting material (as it appears to

us visually, if we closely examine the pots), over a rough sketch lightly scratched into the clay, as is also often slightly visible. It is obvious that the figures in black figure paintings and the background in red figure painting are painted with brushes, since brushstrokes are often visible in that part of the design. One can also easily admit that some short or repeated lines may have been painted with a fine brush loaded with paint, yet, it remains that a marked characteristic of red figure pottery is a very flowing, continuous, sometime quite long and very fine line which is very even in thickness and density, something that would be very difficult to impossible to achieve with a brush, no matter how fine and how loaded with paint it is. I suspect that, despite the fact that no actual “syringe” tool was ever found in excavations in the potter’s quarters of Attic Greece, such a tool must have been used to permit the squeezing of the paint into such fluid, uninterrupted, sinuous and elegant lines. A simple test which I would very much like to conduct could answer this ongoing debate. If such a tool was actually used, it would have left a slight groove in the clay underneath the painted line since Greek pots were painted directly over barely dried, still unfired clay. When that painted line would dry, the groove underneath would create a slight depression along the middle of the slightly raised line of material deposited by the process. A close look at a broken shard seen in cross-section would reveal if such a line behaves in such a fashion and it would test my theory, to finally close the debate on whether a brush or a syringe was actually used in the making of these works.

Historical examples:

The influence of these pots made a dramatic resurgence at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe, a period of renewed classicism (Neo-Classicism) in all the arts. Following the discoveries of Pompei and Herculaneum in Italy, the first serious investigations of scientific archeology and the publication in printed form of the collection of Greek vases collected by British ambassador at the Italian (actually the Spanish Bourbons) court in Naples, Sir William Hamilton, Greek art and most importantly here, Greek pottery becomes once again immensely popular and influential. When the passionate and gifted amateur Sir William Hamilton, as well as more serious archeologists, discover these vases in the Etruscan tombs of central Italy, they are first thought to be Etruscan in origin, most logically, and it took a while for scholarship to realize that they actually were Greek and had been acquired, collected and imported by the Etruscans who were great admirers of all things Greek, to serve as offerings in their funerary rituals (see chapter ‘Death: The Fragmentation of Time”). If it were not for the

Etruscans, the whole History of Ceramics and Decorative Arts would have been much different, since they buried these pots with their dead, and very few would have survived relatively intact otherwise. The Greeks themselves were much more careless with these objects! In Greek funerary practices, specific types of pots were used, and these were placed on the tombs and exhibited in the open as tomb markers to be subsequently thrown in ditches, where they were found, broken and heavily damaged, by archeologists. The Etruscans, on the other hand, buried their dead with the funerary offerings, inside stone burial chambers, which protected and preserved the content. These newly discovered pots will influence early industrial ceramics in England, notably the exemplary work of Josiah Wedgwood and his black Basalt ware, made with a dense, smooth, unglazed body often shaped in the classical repertory of forms. Wedgwood actually named his factory “Etruria” in honor of the land of the Etruscans whom he believed had made the original shapes he was using as models. Wedgwood also operates a technical reversal in his neo-classical wares. While the Greeks used a red clay that is then painted with a material that will be black subsequently, Wedgwood uses a black clay painted with a red material, another example of an operative reversal, something quite often seen in ceramics. Wedgwood’s wares are not only inspired by Antiquity. The unglazed, dense, vitrified and colored stoneware clays he devised are actually inspired by the purple clay wares of Hi-Xing China, considered here as part of the classical esthetics, and very popular in Europe at the time. Others have followed suit. Recently, American light artist James Turrell designed and produced a series of black basalt wares that continue this esthetics now. The exemplary work of Richard Notkin is another probant example of a contemporary artist reinvesting Hi-Xing ware with relevancy. In Wedgwood’s time and after, others followed suit in the pursuit of classicism all over Europe, in Russia, in the USA as well, and notably in Copenhagen. Later in the nineteenth century in France, at Sevres, examples of Greek pots are translated in a bizarre fashion into polychrome, overly decorated porcelain! At the end of the nineteenth century in England, the Martin brothers fashion Greek inspired vases in their own quirky sensibility, as do countless others during the Victorian era.

Contemporary examples:

In the twentieth century, if we make abstraction of “The Industrial Esthetics” as we will see later, the most influential ceramic esthetics is generated around the writings and the works of Bernard Leach (who despised not only industrial wares but also Greek pottery

and its influence on European ceramics). Leach type pottery combines rather seamlessly aspects of Oriental and European ceramics. Yet what came to be known as the “Leach Aesthetics” is actually part of the classical esthetics as defined here. The pottery of Bernard Leach, his students, his apprentices and his imitators or followers is absolutely classical in spirit. A limited number of forms are reproduced with little variety or variation and these can be found worldwide now, mostly where English culture and civilization has left its deepest mark, in Canada and the USA, in Australia and New Zealand as well as in Japan, where it has had a rather pernicious effect, luckily rather limited, on what is otherwise one of the best and most creative functional pottery traditions to be found anywhere. If I define the classical esthetics as mostly based on unglazed forms, it is then important to clarify that although “Leach” type pottery is usually glazed, these glazes are very earthy and often made with natural materials which makes the glaze simultaneous and consecutive with the form, which is primary. If decorated, these pots are so in an understated, quiet and discreet manner, which never competes with the form. The most interesting practitioners are Michael Cardew in the UK, Mick Henry, Bruce Cochrane, Tam Irving and Robert Archambault in Canada, and in the USA, Warren Mackenzie, Clary Illian, Jeff Oestreich and the Minnesota (“mingeisota”) school, as well as Joseph Bennion and even Chris Staley who at times surfaces his pots with black and white abstract patterns that articulate the forms following the precepts and the lessons of Greek Attic pottery surfaces in the polar dynamic of black and white. Moving away from Leach, others follow nonetheless a very classical approach to form, with more idiosyncrasy and at times with the very best of them, originality. I think specifically of Lucie Rie and Hans Cooper in England as well as Roseline Delisle in the USA.

Magdalene Odundo is an interesting case study. Her very stylized work, in a dialogue with her origins and ancestry, refers to the extraordinary ceramics traditions of Africa, repositioned within expression and contemplation alone, beyond function, in a highly stylized and refined reworking of historical models now totally transformed and completely contemporary. The exquisite and absolutely perfect burnishing on her vessels exaggerates the taut, tight, bloated expanse of the equally perfect forms, which energizes the implied volume of the interior space. The reflectivity of the perfectly and highly burnished surface adds to this energy of the forms by contrast with the precise contours. The anthropomorphism of the shapes is also stressed by this burnishing, which conveys the soft, tactile sensuality of flesh and skin, both implied by the warm orange and dark, black tones of the clay.

In contemporary art of the last decades, one artist working in ceramics particularly stands out in his exploration of classical forms (both Greek and Chinese) to comment on contemporary culture and society. Michael Frimkess from Los Angeles, was one of the first, possibly the very first in the 1960's, with Robert Arneson, to introduce obvious political commentary in his work in ceramics (this will be discussed further in "The Narrative Esthetics" chapter). He is also the first, to my knowledge, to appropriate and quote classical shapes, from Greece and from China, and thus, to expand on the repertory of shapes available to the contemporary potter, beyond the necessity for the creation of new forms (for more on his seminal and influential work, see my article "Michael Frimkess: a Reappraisal", published in *Ceramics: Art and Perception* magazine). His use of historical forms, directly quoted and copied, with often political images on their surface, creates a reference to the history, the universality and timelessness of ceramics and it remains probably his most important contribution to the field. His example was very influential and many contemporary ceramic artists operate on similar principles. Grayson Perry, Cindy Kolodjiewski, Leopold L. Foulem, myself, all come to mind, as well as many others. All owe him a great and significant debt, since he showed the way towards the use of a system of familiar, historical forms that nonetheless permit the freedom to create within iconic archetypes, to paraphrase Grayson Perry, whose work is very closely connected, conceptually, to Michael Frimkess seminal work.

Suzanne Wolfe from Hawaii, in a symbiosis much different from Leach, since in her work it is not based on styles but on concepts, has also combined the classical aspects of both Oriental and Greek ceramics in a series of very intelligent and very clever (not the same thing!), and very original vessels, reconciling the perceived oppositions between East and West. Their primary intent is to put on display (maybe even "reify") the idea of the decorative, by combining various framing devices, one pot being framed by the other by being inserted, form within form, one inside the other. Each slab of clay, alternatively constituting each vase, also acts as a frame, holding and separating one form from the other. This combination of a Western (classical) form with an Eastern (equally classical) form is intended to deliberately reference the debt of Western ceramics to its Asian antecedents. It is interesting to note that for Asian artists to be accepted in the Fine Arts, they had to produce works according to "Western" styles and methods while in ceramics, notably in pottery, the reverse was true. This conceptual, yet highly material exploration of the problem of having two distinct yet familiar forms occupy the very same space provides

a potent commentary on ceramics relation to history within a very contemporary context. If each vase in the ensemble could have been made at different times in different places, their unification here could only have happened now. If we make exception of the highly original process of construction (and deconstruction) used in making them, nothing is new about these vases, yet their recombination in such an unusual yet efficient conceptual and visual format is groundbreaking.

The last artist I will now address is Montrealer Richard Milette, who has investigated the semantic potential of Greek vases (and Chinese models too, often as reinterpreted by European porcelain) with focused intensity and efficiency, in a large body of work over the last 25 years. The most common “Greek” form he uses is the Hydria, although he uses other antique vase forms for their stereotypical potential as well. They are sometimes presented whole, intact, and at other times with holes in their wall, as if they had been broken, with shards missing and then repaired by museum restorers, a process called “anastylosis” in museology. All this of course is “faked” and serves as semantic devices to comment on art history as a practice and on institutional display as a strategy and as the preferred context for art experience now, with all the limitations and problems that entails. It also brings to the fore notions of authenticity and quality, since value in the market place is largely predicated on provenance and condition, very often more than on esthetics, and on meaning, per se. These forms carry various images from a broad range of sources and references. Contemporary icons from art history (Picasso, Magritte, Warhol, and other pop artists) replace the narrative panels found on the Greek original, within the square cartouche area reserved for that purpose, and so specific to the formal strategies of the Greek potters. This device, the square frame, makes its first appearance at the time of the Archaic period in Greece. It is then a totally new conceit in art and in representation, and its appearance first on pottery forms will be groundbreaking subsequently in all other modes of representation. It will have a continuous influence on the subsequent developments of image making, in drawing, printmaking, painting, even photography, television or computer screens, which are all practices and spaces where images are presented on a flat surface in a square format, like it was first experienced on Greek vases! This is another example of the usurpation of precedence in art history, where the origin of this seminal development in art making and art experience is never singled out since it happens within ceramics (on pots!), the most neglected and misunderstood art form in art history. It is important here to establish such a seminal precedence in art history, when such an important and subsequently influential and ubiquitous format was

first devised on a ceramic pot, and not elsewhere as one would expect, erroneously. Another strategy for Milette has been to replace the pictorial space and fill it instead with a single word, positioned on a faux marble ground (reinforcing the antique, historical reference): Torture, Incest, Seduction, etc., which permits a direct reference to the narrative panels found on the Greek originals, replaced semantically with a simple and single word. This is all we have been provided to reconstruct the possible narrative content, the depicted scene expected in its place. Another series depicts four letter words, FUCK, LOVE, HOMO, etc., in very florid and ornamented lettering, bordering on illegibility, again to make manifest the power of words in assigning identity and meaning, often in a dismissive or prejudicial manner. On other works, a collage of a fragment of text, senseless and illogical, plays the same function. The theatrical arena, the territory where the “real narrative” based on recognizable representations was originally located, has now been invaded by a discontinuous text. By cutting text and words randomly, both lose their veritable meaning, thus annulling the narrative. Actually, this arbitrary fragment of “text” illustrates the negativity of narration, by making it impossible to define in a fictional manner, descriptively, the representative and metaphorical contents of the object. This work denies and negates narration, and frustrates our usual obsession with words, with texts and with theory in interpretation and in our reliance on the operative power of images for meaning to the detriment of other forms of experience, particularly in our relationship to history, in art or elsewhere. My favorite pieces show an abstract jumbling of shapes in black and red, where the figure/ground dynamic of Greek pottery, as discussed above, is now un-operational, both visually, in the optical shifting between figure and ground and as a readable sign implying a narrative. Despite the obvious non-representational nature of the abstract shapes, our minds struggle to make logical sense of the image, as it tried to make sense of the resistant text on the previous work. Milette’s ceramics work questions and contests art history as a science, which validates the dominant discourse based on the narrative aspect of images. By reestablishing a balance between image and object, by reworking familiar historical stereotypes and by disassociating style from personality, he effectively demonstrates the inefficiency of conventional art historical discourses to generate meaning around certain art forms and practices, if not finally around all of them.

Implicitly or explicitly, his works are critical. They challenge the accepted conventions, still largely operative, prescribed and prevalent in art practices, in their making and their appreciation and experience. This inherent fetishism of art objects, as

exemplified with our continuing obsession with Greek art, for example, is denounced and politicized. He does this as well in his “Chinese” inspired work, by replacing porcelain with earthenware (thus contesting the hierarchies of materials in ceramics itself, as well as in other art forms) and by incorporating elements of faux studded leather as well as faux historical fragments to signify alternatively desire and the commodification of the past by history, and specifically here, art history. This use of shards, broken fragments of historical vessels from different periods, styles and countries (thus subverting all these categories simultaneously by denying our obsession with order and taxonomic classification) is the equivalent of the synecdoche in literature, using a portion to stand for the whole. Despite the occasional presence of lids and spouts on these vessels, function is always clearly denied by sealing all openings or by piercing and opening the base, making the object non-functional in a practical way, yet not useless, on the contrary very efficient for its intended purpose.

All these strategies and references stress the intended conceptual (what it is about), phenomenological (how it is perceived and experienced) and most importantly here, epistemological (how we know and understand) contestation and opposition of the original icons, using material, physical, actual stereotypes to reveal, contest and challenge all the mental, cultural stereotypes that affect our evaluation, appreciation and understanding of ceramics as an art form. Milette deconstructs the potential for ceramic objects to be simultaneously surface and form, history and living culture combined. Contrary to most ceramics, the work is not about clay as a material, or plasticity as an esthetic property (as we will see in the chapter on “The Material Esthetics: Physicality and Process”), or about the inherent beauty and sensuality of materials and processes. It is not about technique, or glaze recipe, or firing process, or even function, use or content, all of which are irrelevant here. This work is not about the expression of a personality, or about biography, since the work, in its anonymous quality remains largely silent about the artist himself. It is simply an investigation of the nature of ceramics, within the larger context of art and its histories, by way of a sophisticated use and analysis of concepts specific to ceramics. These hybrids of different periods, different styles, different material references, challenge the accepted hierarchies and orthodoxies around materials, images and objects; they contest and critique conventions of interpretation imposed on us by the still operating hierarchies of art history, art theory and connoisseurship as well as those imposed by “tradition”. Their radical autonomy and potent example forces us to question everything else we may have learned before. This reconciliation of extremes and

juxtaposition of opposites and contradictory aspects is characteristic of many contemporary art and craft practices, and finds an exemplary realization in the seminal work of Richard Milette. As this work demonstrates (as I will repeatedly argue in this book) that reversal is basically intrinsic to ceramics as an art form and an integral part of its specificity. This is not work meant simply to seduce, or even work to be “liked”. Its intent is to make you think.

Conclusion:

In a series of golf events, part of the PGA tour, some of the trophies given to the winner are actually ceramic vases, in itself a rare occurrence, since ceramics is so fragile and trophies are usually made of metal, actually precious or faking preciousness, and much more resilient to handling. I am aware of three examples of these ceramic trophies for golfing: the first example is European, for the Deutsche Bank Championship. It is a large footed cup with a Wedgwood type pale blue ground, with white sprigged leaves and cursive, delicate, fragile white handles. You can see the fear on the face of Tiger Wood as he handles this precious yet so breakable object. Another ceramic trophy for a golf tournament is given at the Bridgestone Invitational in Akron, Ohio. It is made of white bisque stoneware, again in the Wedgwood style (!), with dark blue sprigs of a group of golfers and gold bands articulating the form. This footed bowl is lidded, and its overall form carries golf references coming from the indentations in the golf ball, in the spherical base of the bowl and in the lid finial representing a golfer in action. The third example is on the other hand Asian, from Korea. It is a round, globular bottle form covered with painted peony blossoms on an arabesque leafy ground. It is the prize given at the LPGA Kolon Championship in Incheon, South Korea.

It comes as no surprise that all of them are “classical” in style, carrying within their form notions of hierarchical status and class, of superiority as well as excellence.

Other artists to consider and look at are Steven Freedman, whose work will also be analyzed under the “Text” chapter later, Diane Buckler, Suzanne Wolfe, Ilona Granet and her “Primal Wedgwood” 96–98 in the USA; Lisa Milroy and Hilbert Boxem in the UK; Eddy Varekamp from Holland; Mark Heidenreich and Stephen Bowers in Australia as well as Adam Rish, with his contemporary interpretations of Mimbres and Attic pottery vases. In Australia, I would also single out Alan Peascod and his pottery influenced by Islamic

ceramics, both in forms and in surfaces; Greg Payce, Gary Williams, Eric Metcalfe and Laurent Craste in Canada, among so many others.

Also around the “garniture” and all in Canada, myself and Richard Milette but also Greg Payce in his exploration of the “negative” space between pots and Jeannie Mah, with her suites of paper thin vessels with sequential narratives; also Johan Creten in Belgium/France and Constantin Betsmerny, in Macao.

Chapter Two

The Flux Esthetics: The Unifying Surface and the Drip.

Over many years of teaching and too many students to count, countless times I have watched them in their first tentative attempt at glazing. They would dip their ware in a bucket of glaze to cover the overall surface with this new substance, adding its new material coat to their clay work. This glaze will then melt in the heat of the kiln and transform the dry, matt, often rough surface of the clay itself into a shiny, soft and smooth, glassy new skin which will greatly affect the work and drastically change its esthetics. I then also have seen so many students load a brush with a contrasting glaze color and systematically drip it all along the rim of the pot so that it runs along the exterior (or interior) wall and “decorates” it. I have experienced the results of this glazing method numerous times and each time, the effect is disastrous, not only dumb but incredibly ugly. Yet, year after year, student after student, this esthetic crime, the equivalent of a kind of fakery, reappears and probably does so elsewhere, in art schools, colleges and universities, in community art centers or kindergartens, even probably in professional pottery studios, anywhere and everywhere pots are made and glazed. Why is this gesture so common, considering that its effect is so banal, awkward, gauche, so stupid and ugly?

I happen to believe that one of the most beautiful effects one can achieve in ceramics with glazes is the use and control of the runniness of glaze; this effect, though,

can only be achieved successfully by process alone, it can never be “made” or faked or forced but must be the result of a natural process generated by gravity, not so much at the time of application but actually, in the kiln, by the firing process itself, outside the deliberate control of the maker. In the kiln, gravity will make the fluxed glaze move, as it becomes liquid again, fluid, and it will then “freeze” and set, as the kiln cools. It is by the serendipitous capturing of this arrested movement, this frozen moment that the best effects are achieved. Application of the glaze is important but it is the firing that is crucial. It is a universal law in ceramics that what the maker does to the work can lead to disaster but the process itself, if it is at all understood, with the least amount of interference, is never wrong, as it is natural, and nature is never wrong. People behave appallingly, in esthetics as everywhere, yet nature is always beautiful and always behaves beautifully, except when it is destructive, at times. By using the natural processes of glazing and firing, by relinquishing control, the best results are often and usually achieved. When used appropriately and effectively, runny, drippy glaze surfaces are magnificent and very beautiful indeed, and their visual effect constitutes one of the major esthetic contribution of ceramics to visual culture. When badly done through the deliberate intervention of the maker who doesn’t know or worse, doesn’t trust the materials and the processes, thinking that they must be controlled, the results are horrendous and insultingly awful and banal. It is important to note that these kinds of mark-making in art have become very familiar to us through expressionism in abstract painting, yet this esthetic is not new in art making, but actually finds its origin centuries ago, in ceramics, in the application of patterns of glazes on pottery forms. Here again, the usurpation of precedence in art history makes this simple fact escape its integration in art appreciation.

The absolute and unsurpassed masters of this esthetics, and the first historically to use it with a certain degree of complexity are the potters of the Tang dynasty in China (618–907 AD) in their magnificent wares, pots and sculptural works. These supreme examples have had a tremendous influence on the subsequent development of the ceramic esthetics worldwide and this influence can still be felt today.

History of glazes and their developments:

If the “classical” esthetics is basically organized around the continuous repetition of a standard set of forms hardly changing, if at all, over time, since they represent an ideal of perfection, practically, symbolically and esthetically, which does not require any drastic modification, the “Flux” esthetics focuses primarily at the level of surface and glaze surfaces more specifically, usually even a monochrome surface covering the form (which itself can be and often is classical), changing its nature from matt to glossy, from “clayness” to glassiness, shifting the emphasis and overall visual quality from the form to its surface instead, from its skeleton to its skin.

The originators (in sophistication anyway) and best proponents of this esthetics are by far the potters of China, whose mastery of glazes and glazing (not the same thing) is unparalleled anywhere and was, and still is, tremendously important for other ceramic traditions who have strived to absorb and transform, for their own needs and with their own sensibility, its towering accomplishments. The Chinese potters are responsible for the development of more glaze surfaces, than any other ceramic culture. This flux esthetics as it is defined here, is specific to ceramics, and monochrome glaze surfaces provide a unique, very particular esthetic experience that cannot be found anywhere else. It constitutes in itself a major contribution of ceramics to art-making, to art appreciation and to esthetics.

This being said, glazes themselves originate not in the Far East but, expectedly, in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, probably simultaneously and possibly independently, around material and technical discoveries (experiments with new materials, the development of progressively better, more efficient and controllable kilns, etc.). The recent, contemporary discovery of glass and glass making probably provided impetus as well, since glass materials and glaze materials are closely related, chemically if not so much esthetically. At the material, technical and even, if less so, transformative levels, glass technologies and the development of glazes are closely related since they basically make use of the same minerals as well as similar kilns to fuse the chemical compounds. In Egypt, the earliest “glazes” are found in the making of small sculptures and jewelry beads, and obtained by mixing a certain amount of soluble alkalis (a form of salt) to the clay body, which then becomes self glazing, once fired in a kiln. As the object fashioned with this peculiar material dries and while the water evaporates, the soluble salts move to the

surface where they will melt in the still relatively low heat of the kiln and create a “glaze”, a glassy, vitrified, shiny surface on the ware. If the development of glass in Egypt is connected to low fire glaze materials and technologies, this may explain why glass doesn’t develop independently in China and in Asia since the materials and technologies in use there, although in many ways superior in their relation to high-fired clay and glazes, were nonetheless inappropriate for the discovery of glass. In the historical time frame, technological developments in glass or even in metal technologies always happen following developments in ceramic technologies, which happen first, since they are all connected through the use of fire and heat. In Egypt, around 4500 B.C.E., more often than not, this early “glaze” is turquoise in color due to the addition of a small amount of ground copper ore to the clay mixture. This color is known as “Egyptian blue”, the clay body as “Egyptian paste” and, a gift to ceramics terminology from French archeologists, also as “Egyptian faience”, another example of the misappropriation and misapplication of nomenclature in ceramics terminology by experts in their field (archeology) who know nothing and understand even less about another one (ceramics), since this ware has very little to do with “faience” itself (see “The Decorative Esthetics” chapter). So the glassy, vitrified, shiny surface of Egyptian paste is not really, actually a glaze, i.e. another mixture of chemicals suspended in water, applied to the previously formed clay object and fused to its surface in a kiln. Chemically, Egyptian paste is close to a glaze but the process of its making is actually quite different. Its actual applications are rather limited and for these reasons, Egyptian pottery for practical, functional needs remains unglazed, Egyptian paste being reserved for small, decorative and votive objects most often related to funerary offerings for which small jars and lidded containers were also made. The small size of the objects is due to the limited formal and technical possibilities of the material itself, not very plastic and difficult to handle and to form. This is the reason why most of them are beads and small molded plaques used as inlays in jewelry, notably necklaces. The most arresting examples are body coverings resembling netting and made with thousands of the small, colorful, turquoise beads. Their draping over live bodies in movement must have been spectacular even if the examples that came down to us were draping very dead mummies.

Mesopotamia, what is now largely known today as the Middle East, can thus be seen as the birthplace of glazes, as it is the birthplace of the wheel, of the first true kilns, of so many other important ceramic technological and esthetic advances (and the earliest source of mathematics and writings too, both deeply connected to ceramics as well, as we

will see in the “Text” chapter). In Mesopotamia, the earliest truly glazed pots we now have from the archeological record are small, lidded funerary boxes from the Ziwiye culture of the 9th century BCE. A few of these small, glazed containers have been found in tombs yet no practical, functional, domestic wares from this period exist with a glazed surface. Glazes were used for their esthetic, possibly even symbolic potential, besides their obvious decorative qualities, as these objects are undoubtedly beautiful. As is so often the case with early ceramics, if they were made today, they would feel contemporary to us and absolutely believable as modern objects; they remain as fresh and as current as if they had been made yesterday. This esthetic application of a new technology usually precedes a practical one (and glazes have very obvious practical qualities as they render vessels water tight, non-porous, with a surface that can be easily and readily cleaned, thus more hygienic) often by centuries, if not millennia. This is often true for any type of material and technological developments, in ceramics, in metallurgy or elsewhere. All cultures historically tended to develop new materials and new technologies for esthetic applications first, and if the intent was practical, there is always a clear, strong striving for beauty in the making and experience of the object. We, of course, have now reversed this time frame and our technologies are primarily practical and functional, with little esthetic value and applications, if any. The Romans, for example, used colored glazes, mostly yellow and green, on decorative wares but unexpectedly and somewhat surprisingly, they preferred their functional, practical wares to remain unglazed until the 4th Century C.E. Since these glazes contained high concentrations of poisonous lead, this was a good thing for the Romans.

Interestingly enough, with the Ziwiye funerary objects from Mesopotamia, very few were produced and rapidly the secret of their fabrication was lost, maybe due to the fact that it did not find practical applications, which would have helped in preserving it. For a few centuries, glazed ceramics disappears and it is rediscovered and reintroduced again later, in a very different application in the form of glazed bricks for the gates of Babylon and Susa, in the 6th century BC (see “Shelter” chapter). Once more, the technology will disappear for a while and be rediscovered again later in the pre-Islamic ceramics of Persia and then find a superb resolution in Islamic Art. Glass on the other hand, since it can readily be applied to practical needs and also, for the fact that in glass, form and surface are one and the same, and there is no need for two distinct processes (making and glazing) or two distinct materials (clay and glaze), enjoys a continuous, uninterrupted development from its origins on and, while potters alternatively find and lose how glazes

can be made and applied to their wares, the glass makers refine their craft uninterruptedly. The Romans, for example, had a knowledge of glazes that was rather limited and consequently they used them very sparingly, yet their glass technology and esthetics was quite refined, sophisticated and developed. Interestingly enough, as we have seen, the Far East never discovers glass independently, which will be brought to China by European missionaries in the 17th century and much later in Japan, in the 19th century! It is quite amazing to realize that despite their incredibly advanced ceramic and metallurgic technologies, much more sophisticated than in Europe at the same time, China and the Orient, interestingly enough, never discovered glass independently and it is only recently, comparatively, that glass fabrication is found there.

It is probably important and relevant here to continue this brief historical/technical digression. Until the early Renaissance, the ceramics of the Middle East and Europe (as well as Africa and the Americas) are all low-fired ceramics, made with earthenware clays. The same is true for Chinese and other oriental ceramics, from their beginning in the Neolithic until around 100 B.C.E. It is in the Far East, from the 1st century B.C.E. on, that there is a shift in ceramic technology from low temperature earthenware to ever higher temperatures of firing, due to the development of more sophisticated kilns and firing methods, as well as the abundance of appropriate source materials, the stoneware clays that can withstand much higher temperature without slumping or even melting (as would earthenware clays) to become tight, vitrified and non-porous. These stoneware clays are fired with wood and the ash produced by the combustion can deposit and collect on the surface of the pots and melt there, as a natural glassy substance, a “natural” glaze. This is how the first forms of glazing happen on high-fired stoneware, at the very beginning of the 1st century C.E. It doesn’t take long for potters to realize that if you mix ash with clay and other minerals and suspend the mixture in water, this can then be applied in a controlled, deliberate manner to the overall surface of the pot, inside and outside, covering (after firing) the object with a smooth, impervious surface that can be more easily cleaned, and most importantly, more beautiful, and offering a wider variety of different surfaces than could ever be possible with clay surfaces alone. In China, although known during the Han dynasty, the knowledge of low temperature glazes had subsequently been lost. It is the potters of the Jin dynasty, influenced by the new fashion for Persian imports, who rediscovered the lost art of low fired lead glazed pottery. But it is the Tang potters that will exploit these glazes to their utmost potential.

Meanwhile, a wide variety of high-fired glazes are eventually developed, in a broad range of earthy tones, deep browns and blacks, light to dark greens, then on progressively, on lighter and purer clays (which will lead to translucent porcelain in China around 1000 C.E.), very elegant, refined and sophisticated glazes that are clear, to translucent, to white or with a soft, yellowy or greenish tint, resembling ivory, jade or other semi-precious substances. These celadon glazes come in a wide variety of green tones from almost white to deeper and more intense greens. If they provide a direct association with other materials like jade or ivory, they never imitate or simulate these other substances and these glazed ceramics always remain independent by providing, even if with subtlety, an esthetic experience, a visual as well as tactile experience, that is unique and inimitable.

The phenomenon of depth perception is also particular to glazes, which are alternatively transparent to translucent to opaque, giving visual access or obscuring what they cover, making it possible for the gaze to penetrate into the depth of the material or be confined to its outer surface. Other glazes are matt and dry and they reinforce this impenetrability of the surface, yet their softness is also skin-like, very tactile and even erotic, at times. Others still are highly reflective, bright and shiny and they seem to mirror their environment while distorting it in the lens of the convex or concave surfaces. In the process, they project into their surroundings, reflecting it. Glazes that are intensely glossy and shiny stress and exaggerate the distance between the user/viewer. The sheen overwhelms and isolates the effect of the color (whatever that may be) and reduces or even removes the intimacy usually implied by ceramic objects. Glossy surface are distant, cold and superior, they are aristocratic in feel, an impression that can be reinforced by the very shape of the form they cover. The tactile aspect of glazes is an equally important part of their esthetic workings yet the tactile experience of glazes is located at the cold end of the spectrum and all glazes, to various degrees, feel cold, thus distant, whether they are experienced visually or through touch. Any ceramic object always feels colder to the touch than the ambient temperature would suggest. Glazes, and especially shiny, reflective ones, reinforce this inherent visual and physical coolness of ceramic objects.

In the Tang dynasty, stoneware glazes are also formulated and widely used on domestic wares. These deep brown glazes are very rich and beautiful, and they have been given very evocative, descriptive names, like “oil spot” or “hare’s fur”. They also have a dripped aspect since, in order to achieve their maximum effect, they must be applied quite

thickly and have a tendency to collect, to pool in the interior well of bowls as well as build up in a thick, drippy bead all around their exterior limit to great tactile and visual effect, which made them so attractive to Japanese tea masters much later, who transformed these ordinary rice bowls made by and for peasants into rare, expensive and highly praised tea bowls. The ceramic technologies that the Tang workshops developed in all the main three categories of ceramic wares, earthenware, stoneware and porcelain, were the most advanced in the world at the time and remained unknown outside Asia until centuries later. Nonetheless, the supreme achievements in glaze esthetics are debatably those of the Song potters (960–1279 C.E.), according to many experts and connoisseurs, the historical period that provides us with the best examples of the potter's art. The Song potters developed further the celadon glaze, a translucent glaze with a green tint, in a wide range of tones and values, which the Chinese have exploited to its maximum esthetic efficiency and potency, notably in exquisite crackle glazes, taking advantage of a firing "defect" and controlling it to create unusual and peculiar beauty, especially when the crackle network of fine lines reaffirms the torque inserted into the clay during the fabrication of the object on a potter's wheel. Numerous others have written eloquently on the esthetic appeal of these glazes, yet I will look further later on to their contemporary applications in the chapter on "The Material Esthetics"

The Tang "sancai" glazes:

I now want to return to my personal favorites in the whole of ceramics vast history, the pots of the Tang Chinese, a period of rare peace and stability in Chinese history and considered to be their classical period, not only in the visual arts but also in poetry and in literature as well. If the Tang potters were the earliest masters of high-fired stoneware glazes, which they produced in large quantities for their practical, domestic needs, they also made vast quantities of funerary wares to bury with their dead as offerings. These funerary wares are almost exclusively fired at low temperature and they have very bright, brilliant, colorful glazes, called "sancai" or three colors. These colored glazes were a recent development of the Tang potters and they provided a very contrasting palette from the dark, drab and rather mundane stoneware glazes of everyday functional, practical objects. This polarity of effect may even be part of the reason why each occupied such a specific space in Chinese culture, one for the living and the other for the dead, one for the people, the other for the elite, one for the poor, one for the rich, one for the Earth, the other for Paradise. As I have mentioned earlier, glazes look and feel cold, to the eye and to the touch, yet colorful Tang glazes, made with lead oxide and colored with various

metallic ores like iron for yellow and brown, and copper for green, feel warm in their runniness and fluidity as if they had retained some of the heat that produced them in the kiln. If glazes appear cold visually, the movement of the drip “warms” them up. Tang sancai glazes are soft, fluid and warm in feeling, due to their richness and clarity of color and their fluidity over the forms. The clay body itself is an under-fired stoneware which remains in actuality as well as visually very soft and open, porous, dry and matt, a light beige in color, which offers a great and effective contrast with the warm, shiny, bright, deeply colorful runny glazes. These glazes are basically made with raw lead, which will readily melt and fuse at a rather low temperature and also take color readily with the addition of iron oxide in various concentrations (yellow to brown) and copper (green), providing us with our three basic “sancai” colors. More rarely blue is found, with the addition of a bit of cobalt but this color in Chinese ceramics is very rare at that time, since the cobalt had to be imported from the Middle East through the Silk Road, no local source having been found yet then. Cobalt blue will subsequently have a very important role in Chinese ceramic esthetics, in Blue and White porcelain, something discussed later in “The Decorative Esthetics” chapter. The sancai three colors will also be used later during the late Song and Ming dynasty to provide the basic palette for early experiments in over-glaze enamels, on which more later too. If “sancai” literally means “three colors”, there were more than three colors actually since the number three can also have the meaning of “many” in Chinese culture.

Another important characteristic of lead glazes is that they are so easily fusible and thus very runny, and they move over the surface of the pot and can collect at the base or even underneath the pot, causing the object to fuse to the kiln furniture, which damages the kiln and the wares. For this reason, The Tang potters rarely glazed the whole surface of the ware, applying the three colors of glazes strategically on vases around the rim and shoulder, from where they can then drip and run over the unglazed, bare surface of the lower portion, until setting and “freezing” there as the kiln progressively cools. This effect of contrast between the superior, shiny, glossy, bright, colorful surface and the dull, matt, dry and drab lower portion of naked clay makes for great visual, esthetic contrast and impact, an effect reinforced by the irregular, organic, fluid, wavy linear transition between the two. This transition, again, is not controlled or deliberate, yet it is premeditated by an understanding of the behavior of materials submitted to certain known processes and conditions, here a strategic application of the glaze(s) and a controlled firing. The materials in the heat of the kiln and through the pull of gravity take care of the rest. These

sancai glazes are also used very successfully on funerary sculptures, on gods, guardians and monsters, on architectural models, on figurative effigies of attendants, soldiers and officials, musicians, acrobats and dancers. Yet their more supreme expression remains on the rightfully celebrated Tang horses (camels too), which represent the most efficient expression of, alternatively, calm, tranquility and repose or again, energy, vitality and tension to be found in animal sculpture, anywhere at any time.

It is important to remember that Tang sancai three color glazes are reserved for funerary purposes exclusively and even dishes and other “functional” pottery forms were made exclusively as offerings in tombs. This is lucky for the Chinese, since lead glazed wares are highly poisonous and toxic, as the lead can be easily released through use and abrasion of the soft glaze surface, and also leach out in contact with acidic food or liquids, leading to poisoning and death eventually, an unfortunate effect for the living that they could not have in the afterlife, for which they were produced, since that natural, organic process, death, has already taken place.

Another particularity of the Tang three-color sancai glazes is the exploitation of the unique dispersion qualities of heavy lead molecules as they melt and push away the lighter minerals coloring the glazes. The Tang potters made great use of this process with amazing esthetic results. A surface would be glazed by applying splashes of green and yellow glazes, or again by dipping the whole superior surface of a vessel in a monochrome glaze. Then, the potter would strategically apply dabs of uncolored, clear lead glaze over the colored glazed surface. As the two melted and merged in the kiln, the clear lead glaze will displace and disperse the color in the other glaze underneath, creating beautiful, soft, fuzzy, white patterns of dots and lines which could not be achieved otherwise. This was exploited to great effect, most beautifully on the very rare dark cobalt blue ground and to create mottled fur patterns on the horses, for example. The Tang surface is usually organically abstract, composed of seemingly random patterns that do not provide, even resist easy association, and remain totally non-representational (a first I believe, in art esthetics). This application of “random” patterns and shapes, find their closest relatives in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock or the stain and color field paintings of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, which they precede by centuries. The “drip” as a technique in art making is actually a specific ceramic trope, and its presence can be found earlier there than anywhere else. On Tang ceramics, loose geometric abstractions can also happen and

even floral decoration, all achieved with the limited but rich three-color palette and the white dispersion method so unique to these materials.

There are actual precedents for these glazes and effects, on a more limited scale, in the Han dynasty ceramics of China. Here again, funerary furniture, often architectural models of all kinds, are glazed with an overall greenish glaze simulating bronze quite often and used as a substitute for the more expensive and rare material, while providing a similar role for the dead in their afterlife. This monochrome glaze is lead based and as expected, runny. This runniness of the glaze in Han wares is used with particularly great efficiency in “Hill Jars”, lidded containers with a modeled representation of the wavy, peaked mountains of Heaven on the lid. To save space in the kiln, this pointed lid was always fired upside down over and inside the cylindrical jar itself. In this manner, many could be stacked, one on top of the other in the kiln, saving space and reducing cost of production, always a consideration of potters everywhere. Yet, by placing the lid in such a way, upside down, the glaze is permitted to run down (up) the mountain peaks of the lid and collect there at their summit as glossy drips and beads. After firing, when the lid is repositioned correctly over the jar, these glassy, glossy peaks enhance the mountain modeling and lift, elevate the form to great visual and evocative effect that supports and reaffirms the loftiness of the heavenly image and the ascendancy of the soul to Paradise. This effect of lift and elevation is also stressed on the jar itself by the presence of feet at the base to elevate the heavy cylindrical form from its horizontal, grounded context. Tang Hill jars are among my favorite objects in the history of ceramics. Their apparent simplicity hides their extreme sophistication, as is so often the case.

Influence and dispersion:

The lead based, low temperature glazes of the three-color sancai esthetics will eventually disperse and find their way to the Middle East, then Europe in Medieval ceramics, where a purplish tone, given by manganese, will be added. These may also have been independent developments due to similar applications of similar materials and of technical discoveries while using their esthetic potential and inherent limitations. It remains that the three colors sancai palette is the most common and ubiquitous found anywhere, all over the world where glazes are used.

Tang sancai wares have influenced ceramics everywhere since their incipience in China in the 7th Century AD. I would argue that it is one of the most influential glaze esthetics there is and its followers can be found all over the world, all the way to today. Historical examples include similarly colored lead glazed wares from 9th Century Irak, also found all over the Islamic world, and the Nara sancai from 12th Century Japan. Another strange influence of three-color sancai can be found in enameled wares (an over-glaze technique where an oil based enamel, made with colored ground glass, is applied over an already vitrified glaze and re-fired at a lower temperature); while they also are usually lead based, over-glaze enamels behaves very differently mechanically and esthetically than their sancai cousin since enamels are applied over the already smooth, glossy, vitrified surface of another fired glaze, itself applied on a white ground body, often porcelain. By being fired at a much lower temperature than the original glazes they “imitate”, they are less mobile, and remain more stable over the surface, permitting a more controlled location and position of the effect, which is expectedly much more stiff and predictable than their predecessors. Examples include Kang-Xi (1662–1772) porcelains from China, enameled to imitate or emulate Tang wares; other examples happen later in the Yongsheng period porcelain of 18th Century China, in 19th Century Satsuma wares in Japan and in England, in Spode Bone China in the early 1800’s. Colored lead glazes resembling Tang sancai are also found in folk pottery traditions all over the world, from the Middle Ages on, in Europe, in Colonial America (in Mexico, in Oaxaca notably) as well. Early Wedgwood/ Whieldon wares decorated with manganese sponging are particularly favorite examples of mine exploiting very effectively the rich potential of colored lead glazes, in a direct ancestry with tang “sancai” glazes.

Tang type glazing also has had an important impact on contemporary ceramics, in the work of George Ohr in the late 19th Century, as another example. We could actually consider George Ohr to be a contemporary potter, since his work was so ahead of its time and it was only recently rediscovered in the 1970’s. From the early 20th Century on, it was stored away and could not be experienced by anyone. His wares remained largely unknown by invisibility. It is only when they resurfaced in the 1970’s that they became available again and that their influence actually begins in earnest. It could be extrapolated that this is also when they were “made” since this is when they finally had an opportunity to exist fully and have the impact that was previously denied. Examples closer to us are found in the work of Betty Woodman and her Mediterranean Pillow Pitchers, an interesting hybrid of an exaggerated Cretan form with a splashy three-color sancai surface. Tang

Sancai is one of these iconic ceramic surfaces that instantly produce an historical association, reinforcing the fact that ceramics is an art form with a strong, direct connection to historical precedents, with its own specific visual qualities and its very important and seminal contributions to visual art. This iconic association is used very effectively in the early work of Richard Milette and the more recent work of Leopold Foulem, again here hybridizing Western forms with Oriental surfaces to comment on the potential for ceramics to create original visual metaphors while retaining its specificity and formal independence. By either removing the expected volumetry of the form (Milette) or reducing it to a mass by closing the expected opening on top (Foulem), these works make us aware, through denial, of the operative workings of pottery forms. Their referential surfaces continue this intellectual process by contesting the expected relationship between form and surface usually found in ceramics. By being altogether non-functional and non-decorative, while remaining clearly pots semantically, they challenge us to rethink our familiar and rarely considered relation to these kind of objects and to the experiences they usually provide.

The contemporary potter who has exploited the most thoroughly and efficiently sancai glazing is Japanese potter Takeshi Yasuda while working in Ireland and England in the 1980's and 90's. I have analyzed this important work at length in an article published in Australian magazine *Ceramics: Art and Perception* : "Pushing Boundaries: The Pottery of Takeshi Yasuda", which I now resume here:

Takeshi Yasuda's work is direct, sensual and simple yet with a sense of excess reinforced by flexibility and fluidity. Fluidity is the central formal aspect of his work and he succeeds in making clay act, if not exactly as water would, then as if it was and remained fluid. In this regard, the glazing is particularly noteworthy and efficient. The glazing affects how we understand the work, their epistemology and informs how we experience the work, their phenomenology. The forms themselves, often resting on feet, provide the objects with amazing elevation, lifting the form from the ground, making it feel more aerial than earthbound, defying gravity. This is rather unusual for pots and for ceramics where gravity and horizontality play such an important role. These forms, like the Han Dynasty "Hill Jars" with their uplifting drips, are fired lifted on stilts so that beads of glaze can collect underneath the feet of the forms. After firing, this bead elevates the feet, which then seem to visually hover above the ground. Thus, in the work of Takeshi Yasuda, many reversals take place: top becomes base and vice-versa, lips becomes feet, flat becomes

round, plates become bowls, vase forms become platters and the rims, which usually act as frames, stable and clearly confining, here become edges, falling over, unstable, “over the top”. Yasuda has pushed this reversal to its utter conclusion more recently by throwing forms until they collapse on the wheel, a process that would normally destroy the usefulness of the form; he then flips them over while still attached to the wood bat on which they were thrown, to re-stretch them to a recomposed, if unusual, pottery form. They are then dried upside down as well, to be subsequently fired in a kiln, right side up, to become uncommon yet believable and functional vases. In the firing, such an object may also respond more readily to gravity as it vitrifies and softens under the actions of fire and heat. Here again, Yasuda controls this pyroplastic effect to achieve his goals, to use ceramic processes in ways that inform the esthetics of the work, in ways never done before. All pottery is fashioned by harnessing the plastic potential of clay and the plasticity of clay exists only through water, water in the clay itself and water lubricating the pressure of the hand shaping the material on the potter’s wheel. It could be said that Yasuda is the potter of water as much as the potter of clay. Takeshi Yasuda uses the potter’s wheel for its unique expressive potential and he does so in amazingly original and endlessly inventive ways, something not that evident considering that pots have been made with that tool for close to ten millennia. In his work as well, the positive ambiguity of borders is reinforced by the runny glaze, sliding over the rim, inside and outside the form, as if the interior content of the pot was spilling out over the edge, to the outside, running down the exterior in a manner that could be construed as abject in the work of a less deft hand and mind.

This particular glazing deserves further analysis. Influenced by Sancai Tang wares of China, the glazing articulates the form through repetition, not mindless repetition but repetition that creates trust, which comes from experience. These repeated patterns are rarely (never?) present for purely aesthetic purposes. The fluidity of the glaze, its runniness, is used for perceptual reasons, blurring the passage between interior and exterior, from the horizontal to the vertical, and brings to mind the fluidity of experience as well as the fluidity of time itself. The beads of glaze underneath the feet to raise the form from the horizontal plane, play a similar role, proof that nothing is arbitrary or gratuitous here. As well, the glaze is picked up by texture, by impressed lines and raised dots on the handles and feet which attract the eye, providing visual and tactile grip, but also demanding and begging for touch– thus creating a movement from the esthetic to the erotic. This sensual quality is stressed by the folds, the drips, the stretching, the

squeezing, as well as the animal feet and the organized, vaguely symmetrical patterns, stable, logical when applied, but becoming organic, changing, uncontrollable, as they run freely all over the form, despite being periodically stopped and collected by ridges and tracings, bringing some form of order to the potential chaos released. The balance of tensions is always taut, the equilibrium sustained by symmetry.

The reference to Tang Chinese ware in his use of blurred green and brown markings creates an historical connection with the past, with different cultures (a contemporary Japanese potter quoting ancient China from England) but also establishes distance, temporal distance and a distance created by the switch from earthenware to stoneware, from China to England, from then to now. The forms of Takeshi Yasuda are original, idiosyncratic and unique, yet their glazing and colors are not. They are appropriated from a memory, a remembrance of things past. This borrowing is justified since it is conceptual rather than esthetic or simply stylistic, and it operates to direct our experience of the work and how we come to understand it. Its use is phenomenological and epistemological (to use scary, big words) rather than simply formal. While deeply material and physical, it is true conceptual art.

More recently and since living in China for most of the year, his work has explored other avenues, by using porcelain and thick, oozy celadon glazes. The forms he makes to support such watery yet gooey glazes are expectedly appropriate for the task at hand. They are thrown on a bat on the wheel as a rough cylinder, which is then thinned and stretched in its middle section, to weaken the wall. The wood bat is then removed from the wheel head, and while being held with both hands over the potter's head, it is violently flipped down between his legs. This causes the cylinder to split at the weakened section and create a thin, organic and exquisitely wavy line at the lip of the object, which could not be obtained in any other way. The celadon glaze will then move and thin as it stretches over the form to collect at the foot on a wider base also provided by the making, where it remains, frozen, as if broken off an iceberg.

If certain objects must necessarily be part of everyday life, it is because they are too complex to be experienced by a single glance, through vision alone. They have to be lived with for a long time, in a fashion as intimate as possible in order to apprehend them fully. Usually, the simpler they seem, the more familiar they seem, then the more effectively

complex and foreign they are. The more they have to offer. Takeshi Yasuda's work is of this type.

The Drip:

Before ending this essay it remains necessary to define a vocabulary of the drip, to help the student as well as the professional potter interested in using its possibilities in their work, to have a better understanding of that potential and how it can be differently used. This may also be of interest to the amateur or even the connoisseur in fostering appreciation for certain effects of particular processes in ceramics, and their esthetics applications.

It is important to keep in mind first of all that the "drip" must explicitly be created by a process that remains as organic and spontaneous as possible, where the overall esthetic effect is created by a loose yet embodied application. This application requires an intuitive instead of too rational a gesture, at it is then completed through the workings of heat and gravity in the firing, in the kiln. Drips coming from process are integral to the object of which they are a critical component. When correctly used, the drip is self-referential and it does not imitate. Such drips are not about another drip but about "drappiness" itself, as a physical and esthetic process. Drips that are forced, willfully, deliberately placed and positioned are but imitations of drips, representing drips instead of embodying them, which is where the mistake lies. I would disagree with myself here and make one exception for the deliberate drip, the proverbial exception that proves the rule. In the work of Jun Kaneko, one of the best user of glazes and of geometric, abstract decoration in the field, can be found deliberate drips that actually work, efficiently and beautifully. On his large, tall dango forms, he sometimes drip a variety of colorful glazes, running down in more or less parallel lines from the top of the forms to various points along the sides of the large ceramic object. These deliberate drips work through excess and exaggeration (a hint here for those who may want to follow in his footsteps), by being so long, continuous and steady as to become metaphor for process through time and space in a subtle, simple yet efficient gesture so characteristic of Jun Kaneko's work. They are realized, I think, by using a rubber syringe filled with glaze, so that the dripping line can be fed and sustained for as long as necessary. The dreaded effect that I described at the beginning of this text, is now sophisticated, resolved and beautiful. This sophistication is stressed by the use of a dark background, which gives the impression that the colorful lines of drips are floating in

space, ambiguously positioned over the form, where they nonetheless obey the laws of gravity. Ceramics is at the physical level mostly about a fight with gravity, a fight that is lost by many. Like Yasuda, Jun Kaneko uses gravity in his magisterial work instead of fighting with it. In doing so, they both succeed where lesser artists would loose.

There are nonetheless quite a few variation of drips, each with their own distinctive signature that deserve to be singled out and described, with their particularities, qualities and shortcomings, with defined, appropriate and relevant examples provided. They are:

The Run: where the glaze is left to move vertically over the surface of the vessel (or the sculpture), either moving unencumbered over a smooth surface, or again responding to indented marks and articulations in the form, which alternatively stop or redirect the flow and movement of the glaze. Takeshi Yasuda's work demonstrates these possibilities eloquently. He even takes advantage of the "run" to let it build up underneath the foot or base of pieces fired on elevated stilts in the kiln, so that the glassy glaze can collect and provide a new foot to elevate and lift the piece, releasing it even more from the vertical pull of gravity toward the horizon on which the object eventually sits; in doing so, it challenges the expectation we have of the tension between the vertical and the horizontal that is so common in ceramic forms. It even permits some light to shine through the glassy bead and foster even more perceptual lift and floating.

The Pool: In plates and dishes, the run can lead to the collection of pools of glazes at their interior centre if the piece was fired flat, and slightly off centre if the object was fired at an angle, to the extreme expression of this method in plates or shallow bowls fired standing up on their rim with the glaze running in lines over the interior well.

The Reverse Drip: The drip is at times pushed even farther in works fired upside down so that the run, the drip collects at the lip, the edge of the piece. Examples of this are to be found in Han Dynasty Hill Jars, and in Oaxaca Mexican Colonial pottery, where bowls are stacked upside down in large piles inside the kiln, to save space; after the firing the pieces are all stuck together yet they can be individually released since their point of contact remains small and the soft glaze breaks at that joint with ease. In contemporary ceramics, we find its use in the early and exceptional work of Nancy Selvin, where it is applied to deny or at least contest the expected orientation of ceramic forms by reversing one of its familiar, expected aspects. This contestation of gravity challenges our familiar

expectations and force us to rethink our visual understanding of daily experiences, as if the liquid content of the tea bowl was willfully, independently attempting to escape the interior space of the object.

The Dispersion: This is a rarely used esthetic effect, often found in Tang Sancai glazes as explained previously. When glazes melt in the kiln, the various chemical and mineral elements react with each other, often in an attracting or repulsing manner, due to their respective “weight”, for example. This is the principle at work in the characteristic texture of most ash glazes, also behaving in a runny, drippy fashion. With lead based glazes as used by the Tang potter, the effect is very soft, hazy and quite subtle yet clearly noticeable. Contemporary potters using that effect in high-fired porcelain include Tom Turner and Linda Sikora, who both revisits the lessons of Tang potters in a fresh and relevant way with very different materials and at a very different firing temperature too, in porcelain. Another amazing use of the dispersion is also found in Jun Kaneko’s work. He often uses a “glaze”, first discovered by Colin Pearson in the UK, I believe, which is mostly a mixture of metal oxides, notably a lot of manganese and some copper as well. This “glaze” fires to imitate the matt and metallic surface of patinated bronze, with golden highlights. Colin Pearson first used it on original forms derived from ancient Chinese bronzes, to great effect. Lucie Rie (who may also have been at its origin, I am not sure) also uses such a metallic glaze very efficiently by making it run over another glaze where it combines to create a third effect. But the most sophisticated user is Jun Kaneko. In his work, it is most often used to define wide bands of dark, matt and metallic divisions between fields of glossy, colored glazes. In the process, the copper in the mixture travels into the edges of the surrounding glaze where, during firing (as it volatilizes in the heat of the kiln, possibly), it turns into a reddish halo (the dispersion effect) of great beauty and subtle yet definitive efficiency, operating a fuzzy transition of unusual color between two contrasting (matt/shiny, dark/colorful) yet interrelated elements. The effect, probably discovered through unexpected luck, is brilliant. In Lucie Rie’s work the halo is green since she fires in an electric kiln that produces an oxidation atmosphere while in Jun Kaneko’s work, the halo is red, since he fired in a gas kiln, which produces a reduction atmosphere, each affecting copper differently. Another unusual example of dispersion can be found in Mocha ware, which I would suggest for the curious reader to research further.

The Pour: where the glaze material (or at times a clay slip, which will not move in the kiln later as it will not melt like a glaze would) is literally poured locally over the form,

using a ladle or other spouted utensil. Great examples of this method are found in the pottery of Japanese potter Shoji Hamada. This must be done quickly, with great assurance and confidence to really work. This can only come from repeated experience, with a large number of forms glazed with that method over many years. When it is masterful, it is very striking, when badly done, with any hesitation for example, it is very unsatisfying. There is very little room for error with the Pour. You only get one go at it and the effect takes place in seconds at most. No hesitation or doubt or uncertainty is possible.

The Splash: where a loaded brush is forcefully hit against the surface to be glazed and leaves there a blotch with exploded edges. Betty Woodman has used this technique successfully on some Pillow Pitchers, yet it must be used judiciously with some deliberation as it can yield otherwise predictable and boring marks with little impact, character or quality.

The Throw: where the material is projected with various degrees of force as it hits the clay. The brush here never comes into contact with the object (as it does in the Splash), but is instead flicked (like a priest blessing his flock with holy water) at the piece. This method, unfortunately rather common, among students and novices anyway, but also professionals unfortunately, usually yields rather poor results and should be excised (like the deliberate, controlled drip) from the vocabulary of ceramic processes. The marks that it makes are very repetitive with little variation and interest. My speculation is that as the material leaves the brush, it reconfigures itself as it flies through space, by the combined effect of gravity and the surface tension of liquids so that when it hit its mark, it always behaves in the same way. No good examples actually exist, although numerous bad examples could be cited. Just don't do it, or prove me wrong.

The Spill: The name itself says it all and its negative connotation speak for itself. Spilling glazes haphazardly over ceramic forms is to be avoided as much as possible. It never works. Period. Again, I dare anyone to prove me wrong. The Spill is the arbitrary and un-sensitive version of the Pour, which is more informed by experience, more controlled, more planned and articulated in relation to the form, while remaining free and spontaneous. The Pour describes the action of the maker who understand what is happening, the Spill, the result of inexperience and ignorance of how materials and processes must come together with experience (and sensibility) to be efficient. The two are not to be confused. Again, no good examples could possibly be mentioned.

The Shake: where a generous amount of glaze, and often different glazes are simultaneously applied (this can work well with shallow bowls and plates) and then shaken forcefully to make the glaze surface change shape and move, before it sets and stiffens completely. This happens very quickly, so the process does not permit or afford any hesitation. It remains rarely used successfully and rarely effectively as well, except on the over-glaze enamel wares of Clarice Cliff, where it was largely experimental due to its limited potential. Its unusual quality bordering on weirdness would not be easily marketable, always a consideration in Clarice Cliff's work. For that reason alone very few examples of "Delicia" were produced. Overglaze enamels when mixed with an oily medium and applied to a smooth, vitrified glaze surface will retain fluidity for a long time and will respond well to the Shake for quite a while. The Shake can also be attempted with clay slip over a wet or leather hard form, but then one must be careful not to distort the shape in the rather forceful and violent gesture necessary to create the effect. The shake is not as readily possible on bisque ware since the porosity of the material will dry and stabilize the liquid, be it a slip or a glaze, too quickly for the effect to be produced. The Shake is more interesting again simply as a visual precursor of many color field paintings of the 50's and 60's, than for any other reason. It is very rarely used but could be investigated more closely, as it remains with a high, rather unexplored potential for success and unusual results.

The Bead: where a thick application of glaze causes it to collect as a raised bead at the edge of its expansion as it moves in the kiln. The best examples are the Tang stoneware bowls glazed with thick, oozy, dark brown to black tenmoku glazes (made for domestic use in vast quantities), which were later on so greatly praised and valued by the Tea Masters for the Tea Ceremony, in Japan. The Bead can be found on these tea bowls (originally rice bowls) as a thick "love handle" all around their exterior, as the viscous glaze collects where it hits the dry, rough, groggy clay surface just above the foot. Inside the bowl, the thick, runny glaze will collect as the Pool. For the Chinese, the thick drip that builds up all around the exterior of these bowls just above the foot, would at times run too far and touch the shelf in the kiln, ruining the desired effect. Thus, a successful piece with a thick, arrested drip was seen as a sign of particularly good luck and the object itself as auspicious. The design collective Klein/Reid in New York has used the Bead very interestingly in tall, colorful bottle forms. These are glazed with thick, viscous runny glazes that collect at a deep ridge just above the foot. This ridge created by a narrowing of

the base permits the glaze to collect as if it was separate from the clay body, hovering just so slightly away from it and suspended in mid air as if ready to fall. It is an original, totally new take on a very old trick, something that doesn't happen very often in ceramics. Like so many contemporary re-workings of historical precedents, it works through excess and exaggeration. Again, the contrast found in Tang pots between the shiny glaze and the dry clay surface is very effectively used in their work. In contemporary ceramics, Japanese potter Masamichi Yoshikawa has pushed the Bead to its extreme, by letting his bluish celadon glaze collect all around the bottom edge of his sculptural vessels. The glaze collects and builds up as it hits the shelf in the kiln (a phenomenon that is usually considered a major defect that yields unsatisfactory work), where it creates an accumulation of round spheres that could give us yet another drip effect, the Pearl Necklace.

The Spray: if only tangentially connected to the drip, the spray, as a form of glaze application requires to be discussed here as well, since it is so often badly used. The Spray is a method of applying a glaze using air under pressure, which lifts the liquid glaze through a tube in the container to project the material as fine droplets all over the surface of the object to be glazed. As a general rule, glazing, like most if not all ceramic processes, prefers excess and extreme in applications. Glazes should then be applied rather thin or again, rather thick. "In between" just about never works correctly and efficiently in ceramics. The spray permits the application of the glaze really thin or again really thick. If thickness is actually desired, the glaze needs to be applied even thicker than it would appear necessary, since the spraying projects these droplets of glaze and makes them assemble over the surface in a rather loose fashion. Thus, a thick application will collapse on itself in the kiln as it is fired, as the droplets get closer together so that the glaze will lose a significant amount of actual thickness in the process. This has to be compensated during application, by spraying an even thicker coating. Chinese potters wishing to apply a very thick layer of glaze, usually a celadon or a copper-red, to a thin walled object, would apply the glaze by spraying it, until the thin wall of the object was saturated with the moisture present in the glaze, which prevented more glaze to be applied. The object would then be dried, then sintered in a kiln (i.e. firing it at a rather low temperature, to fix the glaze without vitrifying it, keeping it porous and its surface absorbent). Another layer of glaze could then be applied to the object and the process repeated as many times as necessary until the desired thickness was achieved. Only then would the pot and the glaze be fired to vitrify the material and melt the glaze. In some

cases, the glaze would even have a thickness superior to the thickness of the clay wall of the object itself, to great esthetic effect. But, the spray is also often used to decorate the surface of objects by using cut-out stencils to reserve areas of the image over which a color field is sprayed, usually as a thin, light, hazy coating. Often water motifs of waves or mountain landscapes and scenes are created this way. Again I have never seen a truly successful example of this, unfortunately rather common method of decoration. Exceptions include some Seto wares from Japan where the crudeness of application, before mechanically pressured air was available, creates more substantive droplets of different sizes to achieve an effect that is rather unpretentious and charming. Spraying over-glaze colors can also be efficient and sophisticated. The most notable examples are the exceptional works of Ron Nagle, with their “fake” drips carved or molded within the clay wall itself. It is not totally surprising that such a control freak would actually build his “drips” deliberately in order to fully control their effect and only such a master could do so convincingly, as he does. Another example of successful spraying can be found in rather kitschy industrial wares from mid 20th Century Czechoslovakia that are nonetheless very fresh and charming. This is achieved by using reserved cut-outs effectively. The spray as a decorative method works better with over-glaze enamels since these are oily and fat and present an effect of richness and generosity not found in under-glaze materials, which are always stiff, dry and retain an impression of cheapness when applied thinly, as is usually the case with spraying, even when covered with a glaze that wets and intensifies the color but keeps the under-glaze effect starved and bony. This is also why the spray works so well on Nagle’s work, since he uses oil based enamels, applied in multiple, layered coats, each fired independently, connecting his work to the fetish finish found on car detailing. Yet, as a general rule, the spray as a decorative technique lacks substance and presents an impression of facile cheapness instead of generosity. Spraying can nonetheless be used efficiently to apply a glaze very smoothly, with total control and this is how it is best used, exclusively, for practical more than esthetic needs.

The Arrested Drip: The most common, familiar and effective use of the drip happens quite naturally when a ceramic object is dipped in the liquid glaze and then, as the object is removed from being submerged in the liquid, this one solidifies and sets, leaving behind, usually, differences in thickness that will be visible as arrested drips after firing. By being aware of how the object is held, how it enters into the liquid glaze, how it comes out, if it is rotated or not, shaken or not, this effect can be mastered and controlled with spontaneous, fresh, free, unpretentious yet dynamic and beautiful results. By holding or

even moving the object in different positions and directions as the glaze stiffens, these drips can then be either horizontal or vertical, or lateral and diagonal markings on the form, each affecting our appreciation of the concave or convex surfaces and the dynamic between form and surface which is such a crucial and essential factor of pottery esthetics. The best examples are found in the folk potteries of Korea, who then so greatly influenced the folk potteries and tea wares of Japan. If these effect are rather unconsidered by the Korean potter (which is what gives them their great spontaneity and charm), they will become intellectualized in Japan and developed there into a deliberate process bordering on cult and mysticism, yet often very effective and beautiful, nonetheless. Whitish, “spermy” Shino glazes are particularly responsive to such application, where their orgasmic quality can fully manifests itself.

The Smudge: Again this is an extension of the drip (like the dispersion) and it can be used with great efficiency. Usually, if a pattern is painted over a runny glaze, this pattern will be greatly disrupted when the object is fired, even becoming unrecognizable, as both the glaze and the pattern disrupt each other as they travel together over the form, pulled down by gravity as the glaze liquefies in the intense heat of the kiln. It is best avoided unless such a disrupted, messy effect is desired. Yet, if such a pattern is painted directly on the clay surface UNDER the preferably clear or translucent glaze, the runny glaze will then carry some of the pigment, the metallic oxides, found in the pattern, while leaving the pattern itself largely undisturbed, in place, stabilized by the clay surface on which it rests. This effect works best on vertical surfaces, where the glaze can actually travel a fair distance and generate this subtle yet efficient and quite beautiful smudge effect to its utmost potential. Jun Kaneko has used this to achieve very sophisticated and intelligent results on large white slipped platters with simple black motifs. By firing them vertically, he can cause the blurry, smudgy blue outline to act as a dimensional shadow to the original pattern. By orienting the object in various ways in the kiln, the direction of the smudging can be controlled further, to activate the pattern in relation to the form, further. Again, such an esthetic effect is almost exclusive to the vocabulary of surfaces possible in ceramics (although watercolor can also go there, as does diluted acrylic paint, as seen in the color field paintings of Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, for example. The inherent flatness of paintings, compared to ceramic forms, limits its potential greatly, though). This efficient use of a natural process produced by gravity is another example of deliberately controlling what happens in the kiln, without direct interference as it happens.

American potter Andrew Martin also uses this effect in a more purely decorative manner on slip cast functional wares.

Other examples:

In America, Ken Price has rarely used the drip in his work but always with amazing originality, as one would expect from this master who is probably the most important ceramic artist alive. Probably the most interesting and exciting user of the drip now is Ron Nagle, as we have already seen. His work is to be closely studied by anyone interested in a renewed potential for the drip in ceramic esthetics. One of the main operative tensions created by the drip has to do with the arresting of movement. One feels that at some point the material was in movement, alive and free while it is now stopped, frozen, forever fixed. It is the dynamism implied by this contradiction (something active now passive, yet still full of unrealized potential) that characterizes the effective energy of the Drip in its many forms. It is similar to the capturing of an instant that happens with photography where the moment is arrested and retains all of its potential.

If Tang sancai glazing is exceedingly beautiful and dynamic when done correctly, it can also yield the worst and ugliest ceramic surfaces and should thus be used judiciously, with extreme care. It is important to study and look closely at the originals, since one cannot find a bad example of Tang wares, despite the great variety and inventiveness of the type, and to absorb their lesson well before attempting emulation. For the viewer, this work provides appreciation of the intricacy, complexity and difficulty of making such masterworks, considering their directness, unpretentious simplicity in the application, and the reliance on process. All this comes together effortlessly, beyond the reach and control of the potter, as the materials melt and respond to gravity inside the kiln. They are a lesson for every potter who intends on making good pots and they remain great examples of the potter's art. Their potential is yet to be exhausted.

Finally, I need to comment on the current and popular reuse of historical glazes, celadon, crackle glazes, copper reds, shinos, crystallines, etc. by many contemporary potters. In my opinion this is a worthy exercise as it creates a deep connection with the past, with history, with all the previous pots made similarly and all the previous potters who used these materials, these techniques, these processes for esthetic effects. Yet it remains important to keep in mind that it is not sufficient to simply imitate or emulate

these precedents, even if it is as well and as beautifully as what can be found on the originals. To honor them fully, one must also use such glazes as they were originally used, to say something new, something different, something that had not been said before in such a way, about the people and the culture who produced them. The responsibility in using such glazes now consists in saying with these glazes something that can only be said today, something that can only be expressed now. Otherwise it is a worthless technical exercise, clever maybe but rather meaningless.

Other examples: the French potters Claude Champy and Jean-Francois Pouilhoux, both masters of the thick, viscous celadon and in Japan Yueharu Fukami, who also uses similar glazes on his abstracted, sculptural forms. From England but now living in Prague, Tamsin Van Essen and her unusual, somewhat abject “Acne Bottles” of 2007, covered in round, thick, very tactile and seemingly oozing glaze beads.

Chapter Three

The Decorative Esthetics: Abstraction and Ornament

Abstraction is at the very core of the concept of decoration and all decoration is inherently abstract, and even representations (say, flowers) within decoration play predominantly an abstract role, i.e. their role is more optical than referential. In fact it could be argued convincingly that abstraction in the visual arts begins with the concept of decoration and this beginning goes all the way to the very first objects made by humans. If graphic representations are also found since the cave paintings of the Neolithic and also in the fired clay votive figures (usually female idols with exaggerated fertility aspects, as we have already seen of the early Bronze Age), abstraction also goes as far back in time and manifests itself primarily on functional and votive objects. Among these are ceramic objects, mostly pots and vessels that have come down to us, due to the permanent nature of the ceramic material, so resistant to the ravages of time.

The History of Art wants us to believe, in one of its most enduring myths, that abstraction in art begins in the early 20th Century in the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky in Europe or, simultaneously in the watercolor drawings of John Marin in America. Neither is true. In fact, even within “visual arts” this history is not quite accurate since abstract art, in the form of non-objective drawings, were first exhibited in London in 1864 by Georgiana Houghton and her “spirit drawings”. The fact that these were done by a woman artist while in a spiritualist trance, probably precludes them as well, as pioneer works of abstract art.

Of course, non-objective drawings, ink on paper, also have a long, ancient history in oriental art, notably in Zen painting from Japan. Here again, their non-Western origin generally prevents their inclusion within the canon of art history. Unless of course by “art” we mean flat, square things, made by white males, that go on the wall; then, maybe, abstraction in art begins with Kandinsky and Marin, at that specific time. What we really have here is yet another example of an appropriation of precedence by art history. Since the concept of pictorial abstraction has been part of the formal vocabulary of ceramics for millennia, by ignoring the concept of abstraction in other forms of human expression and experience, namely in functional objects and decorative arts (closely related intrinsically), art history establishes a fallacy and in the process does not only a great disservice to important productions of human creativity but, worst, to the field of art history itself, since this negation or dismissal of abstraction in visual and material culture prior to the beginning of the 20th Century makes it impossible to really understand, explain, evaluate and appreciate the contribution and development of abstraction in the visual arts in the last one hundred years as well. As an example, in the 1950’s, a prominent “abstract” painter predicted that we would have a period where abstraction in art would predominate for one thousand years. By art, as is so often the case of course, he meant images, paintings, etc. Not only was this important artist proven wrong almost instantly and definitively within less than fifty years of his prediction (there is not much “abstract” art, in the stylistic sense, being produced anymore, although like all things stylistic, it is enjoying another revival right now), but what is essential to remember is the complete fallacy of the statement, since there had already been a period of abstraction reaching back into the past for at least 30,000 years, and that will hopefully reach into the future for much more than a thousand years! Yet, this investigation of abstraction as a concept was not taking place within image making primarily, but within other cultural practices (object making), which were deemed, and still often are, irrelevant or even worse, impossible to consider as valid within art, and are relegated to the domain of anthropology and archeology, instead, where they are much less troublesome. Even within Modernism itself, in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, abstraction really begins within craft practices and decorative arts, what would become known eventually as “Design”, and these early Modernist examples of abstraction are all geometric in nature. Check out the work of British designer Christopher Dresser in the 1880’s or in Austria, the groundbreaking designs of Michael Powolny, for example. It is hard to believe that these “minimalist” objects were conceived so long ago. There are even anonymous example within folk art that are even older still. All would feel totally contemporary if made today, even.

If abstraction as style, abstraction in its visual and formal aspects has been embraced by art institutions (and most abstract art is stylistic in nature and predicated on a personal, expressive, idiosyncratic and recognizable approach to form), in practice and in theory, abstraction as a concept hasn't been fully understood yet. To do so would require a complete reexamination of the contribution to art history of certain practices (largely craft practices, where abstraction has existed since the beginning of culture) and this would mean the dismantling of the present power structures of hierarchies of materials, of art forms, created by current art history and still operating in art institutions.

The main problem is the result of an association within decorative arts between abstraction and decoration. Within craft practices, abstraction, as patterns and motifs added to form, is closely related to decoration, if not totally relegated to it. Of course, within Modernism in visual arts and most notably painting, decoration is the ultimate interdiction. When the Austrian architect Adolf Loos writes "Ornament and Crime" in 1908, he specifically targets decoration as irrelevant and unessential within Modernism. Ornament, according to Loos, is a superfluous appendage, unfitting to the Modern Age. Within the reductive logic of Modernism and Abstraction in Art, at the beginning of the 20th Century, we see the progressive removal of ornament from functional objects. By 1925 and Art Deco, geometric abstraction reigns supreme in all forms of design and it could be successfully argued, that geometric abstraction in art and in decorative arts is nothing but a stylistic revival of historical precedents going back to the origins of mark-making and object making by humans. What differs is that the work now has a slickness and perfection given by mechanical processes, not quite generally available before when things were hand made. The irony of this is that we have also seen Abstract Art quickly reduced to decoration and product merchandising, something evident in all the posters, postcards, greeting cards and calendars available in Museum shops worldwide.

The resistance of institutions toward objects and specifically decorative objects, and toward decoration as a valid concept, is a resistance to abstraction as a concept as well.

What is Abstraction?

Figurative representation, as we will see in the "Narrative Esthetics" later, imply a system of familiar and recognizable signs directly referencing nature, that is basically

shared and can be read with reasonable consensus by anyone within a culture and even beyond.

Abstraction, on the other hand, is much more ambiguous or should I say, is ambiguous in a very different way. Figurative representation implies “mimesis” in the imitation of external appearances coming from nature, while abstraction comes from pure form and is not referential or imitative. In that sense, abstraction is more intellectual, cerebral and conceptual. Yet, in our hyper mediated and representational visual environment (very few, if any, of the images we encounter on a daily basis are abstract), we tend to forget that the most basic artistic drive found in pre-historic and “primitive” art has nothing to do with the faithful representation of nature, but is instead based on abstraction, an abstraction usually geometric in nature; think of scarification marks or tattoos on bodies, for example. Ornamentation is the form this type of abstraction usually takes. Thus, ornamentation is an independent formal category, one that implies strict order, symmetry and repeated patterns. Whether we use the term ornamentation or decoration, the first term being somewhat more positive in art historical discourse, both imply abstraction.

An ornament is an adornment, a decoration with no specific meaning. It is there to animate, accentuate and modify, superficially, the form, whether it is a building or a vase. But if meaning is implied, if the ornament is meant to refer to something, then it becomes a sign, that is to say a single element, and when used in combination with other signs, will signify and convey meaning (rain, for example, as diagonal lines on a pot). If the sign operates independently and is non-referential in a direct fashion, it then becomes a symbol, which is an abstract figure with meaning, different from other signs and symbols. When used in narratives, symbols are allegories, and together they are methods of conveying meaning. The dialectic and dynamism between ornament, sign and symbol are at the core of the operative power of the decorative esthetics and of all forms of abstraction.

This can also be expressed in another way with three other definitions, where the iconic is a singular element, which represents a group or a category (for example, a pottery forms that is also an anthropomorphic representation), the indexical is a sign representing itself (a bowl, for example, since bowls, like all objects, are foremost representation of themselves) and the symbolic is another type of sign, a kind of code,

which represents something else (for example the color black representing night, or absence, or death).

It is the art historian Herbert Read who wrote that pottery, and music, are the most abstract of all the arts. This was a rare moment of lucidity and perceptiveness by an art historian, and a courageous, daring and true statement to make. Pots and objects are inherently abstract (conceptually). They can only represent themselves, even if metaphorically they are often substitutes for the human form and physically they often act as extensions of the human body. At the same time, a vessel, such as a teapot, is not an abstraction (conceptually, although it can be abstracted, formally); it is representational. A teapot is only a teapot because it looks like a teapot; all teapots represent “teapot” as a type of vessel, as a prototype (the first of a kind) or even a stereotype (one of many, all identical). Teapots, like all objects, are simultaneously abstract in their form, while they are representations of the concept of teapot. Objects are inherently conceptual; they are the materialization of an idea, even if that idea, that concept, is more often than not function and/or decoration. Containers and objects are the ultimate form of abstraction and their genesis is also profoundly conceptual. In order to make a container or any other object, a rigorous mental and intellectual process must take place, preceding the material, physical process of making itself, or at least simultaneous with it. Containers and objects are conceptually abstract since they do not represent anything (except themselves). They are what I have come to call a “homotopia”, a space representing itself.

Yet, these notions of abstraction and conceptualization have been appropriated and absorbed by visual art practices, theory and criticism, and they are generally perceived to be largely unique to visual arts and to language. Object makers need to re-appropriate their historical ownership of these terms. Since obfuscation and appropriation of precedence have been trademarks of art history, I do not foresee redress in the near future. If we were to acknowledge the seminal and important contributions objects have made, through decoration (ornamentation), abstraction and conceptualization to the history of art, the whole structure of art history would have to be rethought and the whole of art history would have to be re-written, from scratch. The history of art we now have is basically, fundamentally useless, except as a subjective accumulation of highly selected “facts”.

Decoration itself has a rather negative image in the art world. It is often perceived that decoration exists only to please the eye, to create optical interest, not to engage the mind or strike deep into the imagination, like images, specifically, can. There is an aspect of truth to this and decoration or the decorative is often nothing more than a pleasant, meaningless organization of forms, shapes, patterns and colors, and this seems to be true especially today, unfortunately. Yet, to reduce all decoration to that limited role is not only doing it great injustice and disservice, it is also missing out on its great potential for meaning through symbolism and metaphor, and for actually engaging the mind, beyond the narrative, fictional nature of images, through pure abstraction, when art distances itself from external reality to focus on the internal reality of art itself. Decoration and the decorative as concepts have such a bad reputation within both art making and art history that it is often debated whether abstract painting itself is not anything more than mere decoration, intrinsically, and cannot have the potency and efficiency of representational art. This may be actually true of much abstract painting engaging exclusively with issues of style, yet it remains that abstraction, wherever it finds itself, is intrinsic to human expression and should be embraced and understood for all the potential it contains. In 1917, poet and art critic Hugo Ball asked the question: "Abstract Art? Will it produce more than a revival of ornament?" The question is still valid today.

Recently I found myself in a family restaurant in a small rural town and all around me were local farmers with their family enjoying a Sunday dinner. On the wall were framed reproductions of paintings by Kandinski (one of the "fathers" of abstraction), which no one was looking at or even noticing. When these images were painted in the 20's, 30's and 40's, they would have been deeply insulting and revolting, absolutely ugly and offensive, to the present company, who would not only have noticed them but been deeply shocked by them as well; they were now nonetheless enjoying their meal in total indifference to the artworks surrounding them. What had once been ground-breaking, confrontational art had now become invisible, mere decoration in a country restaurant. Such a state of affair will eventually repeat itself with other phenomena as well, now shocking, tomorrow irrelevant, or easily ignored.

Ceramics and Decoration:

Decoration in ceramics is a vast subject of inquiry. It is connected to representation when it refers to the natural world, and to abstraction when it refers to signs and symbols, usually connected to an imaginary or spiritual world.

Decoration on early ceramic objects and pots may actually have had a direct connection with human bodies and skin ornamentation. Decoration on pots, since the earliest Neolithic idols and Bronze Age vessels, often reads as ornament, as jewelry applied to the anthropomorphic parts of vessels, the neck and shoulder for example. Ceramic jewelry, like any jewelry is a form of ornamentation, of decoration, for bodies. We know from found archeological evidence and from anthropological studies that humans have been adorning their bodies with jewelry and more significantly here with tattoos, scarifications and other bodily mark-makings for a long time. Decoration on early pots and figures, usually consisting of various combinations of dots, lines, spirals and circles organized as geometric patterns, often of great beauty and complexity, may have referenced these skin ornaments on human bodies. We also know that abstract motifs and patterns on pots historically held great symbolism and that the meaning and power of these symbols could be understood by the communities making and using these objects. Nothing was arbitrary or superfluous. This symbolism of abstraction is connected alternatively to sexuality and reproduction, to gender or social roles and positions, to mythologies and religion, and to rituals around birth, growth, death and rebirth and the cyclical rhythm of nature (rain, snow, thunder, etc.) and the rotation of the seasons, as well as geographical references (mountain, cloud, river, tree, etc.) and animals, including humans. In Oriental art, this symbolism can be of great variety and complexity and thousands of forms, shapes, icons and colors are used to signify a vast repertoire of symbols. This intricate language of references, at times obscure, is rather complex and its study demands a dedication I do not personally have. What is important to remember is that any abstract pattern or form or even any use of color was never merely decorative and used only for optical effect and seductive interest, but was always meaningful as a symbol that carried a specific reading, related to the function and intended use of the object itself. Today, images and other marks on objects are unfortunately too often merely “decorative” and the decoration has retained none or little of the symbolic power of historical signs (often abstract) on objects, which connected humans among themselves and with the larger natural world surrounding them and the imaginative world of myths, spirits and

religion. Our present unfortunate obsession with personality and individuality is also evident in our relation to decoration. Historical pots remain anonymous and are never merely decorated, especially those of pre-historical, "primitive" cultures. Their designs always convey symbolic meaning, even if that interpretation must remain for us, by necessity, speculative. This symbolism is very complex yet tends toward universality. It is never purely stylistic and optical, like most contemporary work made today, where personal, individual expression more often than not produces weak and disconnected work.

All old pots are good. It is impossible to find a bad one. They were made anonymously, in symbiosis with the culture that produced them. Most pots made today, and most of their decoration, are much weaker since we have lost that connection with the culture we now live in, in order instead to focus on individual expression. Our pots may actually be very beautiful or often very well made, and they usually are, yet they are still bad, or not as good as they could be or even need to be, since they remain in the end meaningless, except as commodity in the exchange of (cheap) gifts. Nonetheless, like all other ceramic objects previously made, they will outlive us and remain as emblems of our schizophrenic culture. This is why it is so important to analyze and absorb the lessons of historical objects. In their forms (function) and in their surface (decoration) they embody a lack of authorship, which also happens to be a characteristic aspect of abstract ornament. Ornament is expressed in art based on a reductive concept. It speaks of an interest in repressing artistic personality, which corresponds to the lack of authorship in ornament. Like so many other aspects of ceramics history, ornament is fundamentally universal instead of personal. It speaks of humanity instead of individuals and this is where its great power lies.

At best, decoration on objects today only plays an iconic role as referent to other signs, for history and for culture, for example. As well, signs on contemporary objects are too often simple optical devices for seduction in order to foster consumerism. This is true for industrial design products as it is for unique, hand made objects, with few exceptions. The decorative now denotes the superficial, the unessential; yet, the surface itself of historical objects, as we have seen, is not just decorative at the conceptual and perceptual levels, but constitutes a system of signs where everything is on the contrary essential, relevant and meaningful where the surface with its ornamentation plays a powerful symbolic role. That surface was never merely decorative. Objects made today need to

return to the stage where any marking is essentially symbolic and not only ornamental, void of meaning, beyond visual and optical excitation. Signs (decoration) on the surface of objects must be there essentially to inform us about the nature of the object (it's ontology), how it is perceived and experienced (it's phenomenology) and how we come to understand it (it's epistemology). Any other sign on an object is unnecessary. Modernism and modern design have largely resolved this problem of decoration and ornamentation by altogether dispensing with them. I predict that this situation will very soon change and due to the expanding role and use of computer technologies in both the design, fabrication and marketing of things, the potential for extremely complex and excessive ornamentation will grow and we will see the creation of individualized, and customized to each consumer, idiosyncratic and varied decorations on all the industrially fabricated things in our daily lives. One can already see the effect of this potential in advertisement on city buses. This might create a visual revolution the like of which we haven't seen since the reductive, minimalist, "negative" esthetics of Modernism.

A technical aside:

Decoration in ceramics, except when it is within the clay form or surface alone, is usually defined in relation to a glaze. It can be painted under the glaze, on the glaze or within the glaze itself or, as well, over the glaze. Each type of decoration has a logical name and is referred to as under-glaze, in-glaze or over-glaze decorations.

Under-glaze decoration is done in or over the clay object, which is then covered with a glaze, usually clear but if colored, then transparent or translucent in order to reveal the decoration underneath. The glaze protects the decoration and usually enhances the colors by "wetting" them. That is to say that these same colors left bare, uncovered and unglazed would be much more dull, matt and less vibrant.

In-glaze decoration implies an image, representational or abstract, painted or applied over an unfired glazed surface, which will fuse the diverse processes and materials in the heat of the kiln. Maiolica is a great example, and it will be prominently featured in the next chapter on "The Narrative Esthetics". In-glaze decoration embeds the image within the glaze and both become one. It is mostly used for painterly effects and descriptive figuration, as it permits the creation of very complex, elaborate surfaces.

Over-glaze decoration is applied over an already glazed, fired and vitrified surface. The colors, called ceramic enamels, are basically ground glass, and are usually mixed with oil (acrylic medium is now also used) then applied to the smooth, shiny surface of the fired glaze, to be subsequently fired again at a much lower temperature than the original glaze to which they will adhere in this “third” firing. Most ceramic objects are fired twice; the first firing is called a “bisque” and it solidifies the clay body, making it stronger, easier to handle but also porous so that it will then readily absorb the liquid glaze when it is applied. Once glazed, the object is fired a second time, to melt the glaze and fuse it to the clay form. Over-glaze decoration, applied over the fired glaze, requires a third firing. It tends to “sit” on top of the glaze, and feels separate from the form it covers. Since it is fired at a rather low temperature, it abrades and scratches more easily and tends to be reserved for non-functional objects simply meant to be admired.

These distinctions between three types of ceramic decorations (under-glaze, in-glaze and over-glaze) can be complexified further, which often causes more confusion and misappropriation of techniques, even by experts assigning nomenclature to objects. For example, blue and white under-glaze decoration from China became in-glaze decoration when it made its way to Italian maiolica and in Dutch or English “Delft” wares and it then became over-glaze decoration when transferred into decal wares in the work of Paul Scott, for example, and other contemporaries using the historical referent as a sign while adapting the technique to their specific needs. The use of printed decals also operates as a reversal when an original, unique, handmade pattern becomes multiplied, endlessly.

Four Types of Decoration: the “Geometric”, the “Arabesque”, the “Floral” and the “Blue and White”.

The Geometric:

The earliest and longest, continuous decorative tradition is without doubt geometric abstraction. The “Geometric” is at the origin of all ornamentation through repetition and symmetry. In fact, any decorative schema can be reduced to three main aspects, the dot, the straight line and the curved line. The basic language of decoration can be written fully with just such a limited vocabulary of forms and they are at the very root of geometric abstraction. They are also purely conceptual since they do not exist in nature in their

purest state (you can find a dot on things in nature but not an independent dot). Their use usually, but not always, leads to patterning, that is, the repeated organization, following mathematical principles, of a basic motif. Abstract ornamentation is much older than the figurative, mimetic imitation of nature. Geometric decoration and patterning can be found all over the world, in all ceramic traditions, through all times, and it is still an efficient and frequently used method of surfacing in ceramics. Its endless potential for new combinations makes it inexhaustible, and it will probably continue to play a significant role in ceramics decoration for a long time. It remains important to keep in mind and to repeat again that this type of abstract, non-representational decoration is at its best when it retains a highly symbolic nature. This symbolism is also very often universal, with similar shapes and patterns having basically a similar if not identical meaning no matter where and when they were produced. This again speaks of the universality and timelessness of ceramics as an art form. Often, historians make connections between cultures by presenting as evidence the recurrence of identical motifs on pots and other objects. In most cases, these connections are spurious and hide an ideological agenda that is often disturbing as well. Humans are all the same everywhere, fundamentally, and when confronted with an identical problem, tend to come up with similar solutions. This is true as well at the level of form, where similar if not identical pottery forms are found everywhere pots are made and this is also true at the level of surface decoration.

The absolute masters of geometric abstraction and patterning in historical ceramics are the pre-Columbian cultures of the southwest USA, notably the Anazazi and Mimbres cultures and their descendants to this day, the Pueblo peoples. No other cultures have achieved more diverse, complex, sophisticated and intricate use of geometric patterning, at times combined with abstracted, highly stylized animal and human forms. This is achieved with the exclusive use of black paint on a lighter, whitish ground and the dynamism of contrast they create is sufficient for maximum results. Sometimes, black on red with the addition of white is also found, depending on locally available materials. In fact, I would argue that the Anazazi and Mimbres (and now Pueblo) cultures offer the best examples of graphic design to be found anywhere at any time (the Islamic world is a strong contender too here), and certainly on pots and pottery forms, especially on deep, half-spherical bowls and on “olla” jars where the overall effect is achieved on either a deep concave surface or as an all around pattern on the convex, bulbous, so characteristic shape of the olla, specifically designed to carry precious water while preventing spilling as it is balanced on one’s head. This energized dynamism operating between the seemingly

flat, bi-dimensional surface and the concave or convex three-dimensional form is a specific characteristic of the ceramic esthetics and it finds its best and most potent manifestation in complex, contrasted geometric patterning on simple, basic shapes. This dynamic visual relationship has been analyzed further on with narrative surfaces in “The Narrative Esthetics” chapter, as well.

Another significant and exceptional example of geometric abstraction in ceramics can be found in the Islamic world, all over its historical sphere of influence from Indonesia all the way west to Morocco and southern Spain. This preeminence and importance of geometric abstraction is due in part to the interdiction found in the Koran for representation and the predilection of Arabic cultures for intricate, complex geometry due to their advanced knowledge of mathematics. Islamic cultures explored the esthetics potential of symmetry more deeply, with more complexity than any other. Due to this veto on representation of living things, which is often transgressed in amazing ways, notably with floral motifs, their art was driven in a very different direction to that found in the Christian cultures of Europe. In architecture, elaborate tiling and tessellations are used to cover space as fully as possible, hardly leaving anything empty or uncovered (an esthetic effect called “horror vacui”, the fear of emptiness). Many of their great buildings are almost overwhelming in their exploration of symmetry and periodicity. These periodic coverings of large surfaces are composed with complex, interwoven patterns that repeat themselves with geometric predictability. A long-standing mathematical challenge has been to discover whether it is possible to tile a never-ending plane with a systematic tiling pattern that is NOT periodically repeating. In the 1960's, British mathematician Roger Penrose decreased the number to two tiles, in four different shapes, making “kites” and “darts”, and also with two slightly different lozenges, whose angles are calibrated so that they fit together to create an infinite number of different tiling patterns within the plane. Recent discoveries have brought forth that in Uzbekistan, in 15th Century Islamic architecture, “girish” patterns were made with a complex aperiodicity inscribed into larger tiles that underlay the design. This underlying design remains invisible yet is conceptually essential to the overall, visible design. A scroll at Topkapi palace in Istanbul depicts how to inscribe larger pieces with a sub pattern necessary for large scale non-periodic tiling, used as a design guide and tracer for architects. A 15th Century mathematical genius got there five centuries before recent discoveries in geometry and mathematics, aided by computers. The best applications and manifestations of this discovery are found in ceramic mosaic and tile panels all over the Islamic world.

The more sublime uses of tiling, mosaic and the most intricate examples of geometric decoration are found on the interior and exterior of mosques everywhere (see “Shelter” chapter), yet the most complex, dynamic, inventive and mind-bogglingly intricate patterns are found in the “zelij” mosaics of Morocco, in public and private buildings. These patterns are also found painted, but to a lesser degree, on pots and other vessels forms. Zelij mosaic deserves a special mention. Usually, when ceramic mosaics are made, each tile is individually shaped and glazed. The problem with this method is that the glaze will be a bit thicker all around the edges, since fluid mechanics will make the glaze slightly thicker there, as can be observed with water on a plane surface. When the mosaic is assembled, these differences in glaze thickness will reflect light in such a way that the pattern will then be less sharp and clear and the overall surface will appear mottled instead of smooth and flat. This smoothness and flatness is important in order to make the great complexity of the geometric pattern the main visual feature of the ensemble. Zelij mosaic are made from large glazed tiles that are then laboriously cut and shaped, after firing, with chisels and hammers. This is a highly skilled and difficult process but each element of the mosaic design is then assured to have a very sharp, defined edge, with the overall color of the glaze having the same thickness all over the surface. These bits of chiseled tesserae will then be positioned closely, side by side and upside down, and organized following an incredibly intricate pattern. The whole panel is then covered with a binding material, usually plaster. When this has set, the panel is reversed and finally mounted, right side up on the wall to be covered. The final effect hardly shows any space between each individually colored element and the overall surface appears regular, smooth and flat, with no distracting reflections that would conflict with the intricacy of the geometric pattern.

The geometric in decoration is a vast field of inquiry and it takes many other forms. I nonetheless need to single out here the rather common use of binary striping on pots, when bands of alternating black and white, or other contrasting colors are organized in horizontal stripes (much more rarely vertical or diagonal, since it is much easier to apply horizontal banding on a circular form rotating on the wheel, than to add vertical or diagonal lines on a similar form). This creates an optical dynamism that animates the surface of the vessel to activate the form and connects the finished object to the transformative process of making. It is as if the object was still in movement, as if it had retained some of the rotation and spinning that took place as it was formed and as it was

decorated. Numerous examples could be cited from time immemorial, all over the world, notably from Crete. I also single out here the exemplary vessels of Roseline Delisle.

The Arabesque:

The arabesque is based on a transformation of the organic palmette, a fan like vegetal motif often found on Greek pots. Like the palmette, the arabesque is organic in origin and is composed of an organization of curves and curving lines, often changing direction, unexpectedly, with the potential to endlessly divide, endlessly repeat. Within the arabesque one curve responds to the other, either by diverting direction or again by intersecting at a point. The flowing line of the arabesque is the most basic system in design principles, particularly in the aerodynamic forms so endemic in industrial design, to this day.

In geometric decoration, the “figure” predominates over the “ground” or the two are in a position of equilibrium, at least in the best examples. In the arabesque, the figure/ground relationship is reversed, the arabesque making visible the space between things. Its organization of dynamically sweeping elements animates the ground and reveals the energy between the ground, the negative space, and the figure. This dynamic oscillation between figure and surface, this alternation between pattern and ground is at the origin of all ornamentation.

The absolute masters of the curved line, the essential characteristic of the arabesque, in all of its possibilities, are again the Islamic cultures. The calligraphy observed in the writing of the Arabic language already provides the best example of a curvilinear graphic sensibility to be found anywhere. Koranic script has two main forms, the “kufic” which is rectilinear and geometric in form and is often used for that reason in brick architecture, and another cursive calligraphic form, very sensuous, fluid and curvilinear, based on the principles of the arabesque. In Islamic architecture, quite often, Koranic quotes are located in spaces that are not readily, if at all, accessible to the viewer. To write something or decorate something that cannot be read or seen, except by God, is an act of defiance toward reality and of reverence toward the spiritual. (see also “Text” chapter) If the Arabic potters learned a thing or two from their Chinese counterparts, through the commercial exchange of the Silk Road, it is nonetheless during the Ottoman period in Turkey that the best examples of the use of the arabesque can be found, more

specifically in the ceramics produced at Iznik for the sultan's court and the coverings on the major mosques in Istanbul. The arabesque is an abstracted form of organic, floral patterning. Its basic principles consist of a curved line that divides in two, then again and again, repeatedly. The arabesque never ends or begins, it endlessly unfolds and bifurcates, and as a structuring principle, it has universal validity, and it is found everywhere. It is actually a form of simplified fractal-like design and one of its most beautiful uses is in the paisley shawls, woven in wool in Kashmir, in northern India. The symbolism of the arabesque represents the universal dynamism of growth in nature and the power of creation through regeneration. The arabesque makes visible the form of the cosmos (galaxies are generated as arabesques), and to infinity through repetition. It expresses all universal relationships as they relate to the principles of order and disorder and to natural law. In Islam, ornament is an expression of the divine omnipotence, and the arabesque is an organic design representing flowers as abstracted gardens, with echoes of paradise. In the Orient, it represents constant change and movement, the fact that nothing is static in nature, or what Physics calls entropy in the second law of thermodynamics.

In Europe, the arabesque finds its ultimate expression in the Rococo scrolls of 18th Century decorative arts (see the figurine in "The Figure..." chapter), so influential, to this day, remnants of which can even be found in the streamlined, aerodynamic designs of industrial Modernism. The arabesque is the last true ornament in the history of ornamentation. The "rocaille" curves and scrolls of the Rococo actually constitute the last true ornament in the history of decorative arts, in the sense that it is different from anything that preceded it and nothing new in the language of ornament has been discovered since. Art Nouveau, for example is but an extension of the principles of the arabesque, more naturalistic. Since the 18th Century, we have simply composed with a decorative vocabulary that has been passed down to us and that we may have modified, yet without adding anything substantially new. The next thing would be to come up with a new form of ornament, one that has not been conceptualized before. Maybe the exciting and potentially new applications now afforded by recent computer technologies will make that possible.

The Floral:

If the arabesque is floral in inspiration, its basic structure and virtual quality, while wildly organic, remains fundamentally abstract. A more representational approach to floral design is also frequently, very frequently in fact, found in ceramics. Despite their descriptive believability, at times to the point of “trompe- l’oeil” illusion (see “The Simulation Esthetics” chapter), flowers in ceramics are not representations per se, since they do not imply a clear narrative. Instead, like geometric abstraction, their role is usually if not always symbolic and this symbolism can be quite complex. Most of that symbolism of flowers is basically familiar and despite the fact that it changes somewhat from culture to culture, it retains a lot of universality and can be interpreted with a certain ease.

Floral decoration in ceramics, usually painted on the surface, are found everywhere, all over the world, a fact that comes as no surprise. Flowers can also be realistically modeled at times, especially in European Rococo porcelain and all its numerous derivatives all the way to today. Great examples of this can be found at Meissen in Germany, at Bow in England, at Capodimonte in Italy, then Spain, and today in the incredibly realistic flower sculptures of Boehm in the USA (see “The Simulation Esthetics” chapter). Not to forget their efficient use in Jeff Koons’s “Michael Jackson and Bubbles”, whose base is covered with gilded porcelain roses, one of the few elements of this sculpture to retain a ceramic quality (the rest of it is actually painted and covered with a clear resin, a fact that is never mentioned anywhere on museum labels or in the extensive literature on this artwork). Koons figurine inspired sculpture was fabricated, in an edition of three, to the specification of the artist at Capodimonte in Naples in the 1990’s (for more, see “The Figure and the Figurine” chapter).

The earliest examples of floral decoration on ceramics can be found, not surprisingly, in Mesopotamia, in the Babylonian glazed brick walls, adorned with rows of white and yellow daisy like flowers and in Egypt as well, as we would expect. Yet one of the most interesting early example is found in the pre-Columbian vessels of the Chavin culture of Peru (900 BC). It is in the Chavin culture that we also find the earliest appearance of the distinctive “stir-up” vessel shape, which will play such a continuous and important role in funerary and ritual Peruvian pottery, all the way to today. As we have seen in the Classical esthetics chapter, the stir-up vessel is a specifically ceramic pottery from, in itself a very rare thing, and is not found in any other material or anywhere else

than in the pre-Columbian cultures of Peru. Variations are found in all of these nonetheless diverse cultures, over a two thousand year period. This peculiar shape is still puzzling to us today, and no plausible explanation has ever been brought forward as to its use or function. Chavin ceramics is also distinctive by its burnished black color surface and its minimalist, modern looking forms that are never painted. Their design instead is carved or modeled in the clay, within the form. Some of these carvings are depicting very specific flower patterns, bold, reductive four petals blooms with a circular centre, very similar, identical really to those seen in 1960's pop art designs. In fact such a stylized, minimalist approach to floral decoration will only reappear later in 17th Century Japan, in the work of Ogata Kenzan (1663–1743) and the Rinpa school of decorative arts and then again in 1960's Pop design, art and fashion. Decorative arts flourished and developed rather independently in Japan, when the country closed its ports at the end of the 16th Century, due to the unwanted influence of meddling European missionaries. Until 1854, when the American Commodore Perry got them to reopen, only the port of Nagasaki was accessible to foreigners and then only to Dutch vessels. During this long period of isolation, Japan developed an extremely refined, sophisticated and specific decorative esthetics and floral patterning is at the core of this burst of creativity. The ceramics of Nonomura Nensei (1648–1690, and the first Japanese potter to sign his work) are a great example of this explosion of a specific approach to decoration in Japanese art. His pictorial vessels with floral, all around depictions are particularly impressive.

An analysis of all the possible and different uses of floral decoration in ceramics would require an extensive study, one I hope someone will undertake someday. To single out a few possibilities, one of the most interesting conceits in the use of flowers and other plant forms in ceramics happens, most often in Rococo ceramics, when multiple, contradictory yet consecutive decorative schemes are mixed together, say a realistic bouquet framed by a garland of abstracted blooms, with modeled, dimensional blossoms elsewhere on the body of the vessel. This mixing of stylistically different and potentially confusing floral forms disorients our perception, by combining a representational perspective image with a stylized one and another even more realistic modeled flower form. This presents us with three diverse yet similar floral schemes altogether in continuity thematically and in separation, stylistically and conceptually. This use of formal and perceptual disorientation is specific to ceramics and is not found to that degree anywhere else in the visual arts, until the recent experiments with collage within Modernism and the stylistic confusion and appropriations of post-Modernism. Recent

works of Leopold L. Foulem, the “Bouquets”, explore this potential with great sophistication and efficiency. Another similar disorientation of the senses happens when multiple different decorative schemes are used on the same object, say a heraldic or symbolic icon in the middle of a plate, framed by a decorative, ornamental border itself surrounded by a representational, narrative, perspective image. Italian maiolica of the Renaissance made great use of this multiplicity of techniques and of this mega-visual approach, yet it can be found in Oriental examples as well, specifically on objects made for exports to the European market. In Europe, a great example of this kind of formal mixing can be found in the famous Swann service made at Meissen, in Germany, which combines a coat of arms in polychrome enamels over a water landscape with swimming swans in low relief carved on a ground representing a large marine shell form making the white porcelain dish itself.

The most extreme examples of the use of flowers in ceramics remains the “thousand flowers” decoration in “famille rose” overglaze enamels made for export in China during the Qing dynasty (late 18th and 19th Centuries). “Famille Rose” decoration is part of a group of decorative styles developed in China, during the reign of emperor Kang-xi (1654–1722), following the introduction by French Jesuit missionaries of European enamel colors. These recently developed European enamel colors used colloidal gold and their discovery comes out of experiments made at Meissen in Germany, at the beginning of the 18th Century, at the court of Frederick the Great, in an attempt to discover the secret of transmuting lead into gold. These fruitless experiments in alchemy led nonetheless to the discovery of true, hard paste, high fired porcelain in Europe (see Introduction) and the development of a wide range of new enamel colors based on gold, which could be added to the existing palette of enamel colors used since the Middle Ages on glass and enameled metal wares. All these over-glaze enamel colors provided a full color spectrum and could be fired on the new (to the Europeans), white porcelain body to achieve a richness and pictorial complexity, similar to oil painting eventually (see ‘The Simulation Esthetics’ chapter), not found previously on ceramics. In fact these new enamel colors on porcelain provided the most vivid and intense chromatic experience one could have at the time and were surpassed only with the discovery of chemical dyes used in textiles and printing in the 19th Century. When the Jesuits brought these new enamel colors to China, along with blown glass technology, they were instantly adopted and to this day they are called by the Chinese: “foreign colors”. The Chinese potters had been using color enamels on stoneware since the Song dynasty but their palette of colors was limited to the lead based colors

available for glazes since the Tangs (brown, yellow, green and rarely blue), now supplemented as well with a rather dull iron red. These colors were used on porcelain during the Ming dynasty in a very effective combination with underglaze blue, the color that is the most defining of the Chinese ceramics esthetics. These lead-based enamels are translucent and somewhat runny so their use is limited to accents to define simple shapes. On the other hand, the new “foreign colors” enamels are very stable when applied and when fired, and since the colors are made with ground glass that has already been fired (the technical term is “fritted”), they look almost identical when applied as they will appear after firing, which provides great control and predictability for the painter. These enamels are made opaque with arsenic and when they are mixed with oil they can be easily painted on ceramic surfaces, where they provide a full spectrum permitting complex painterly images to be fired on ceramics, as well as incredibly intricate decorative effects. These opaque colors could also be easily intermixed to create gradations of tone and shade, and could be used like oil paints to create highly representational, realistic images, something that was not possible before. Depending on the main color used by the Chinese potter in the decoration, the various decorative surfaces of these over-glaze enamels are named *famille rose*, *famille jaune*, *famille verte* and *famille noire*, each distinctive not only visually but also in the range and type of patterns used in each “famille” group. “Famille Jaune” and “Famille Noire” wares usually refer to the use of these colors in the monochrome background of scenes, a very spectacular use of color, rather unusual since it is unrealistic yet highly effective as a decorative effect. The “famille verte” enamels actually use green only as an accent and for that reason it is the least obvious of the four to define and recognize. The color green is rarely used for executing designs in ceramics. Contrary to blue, which is widely used, or even red or black, less usual but more common, especially together, green seems not to possess the necessary independent substantiality. The color green in ceramics is usually transparent and this reduces its efficiency, since it lacks the depth, consistency and materiality to sustain a design by itself. The color is also highly fusible and tends to bleed, run and appear fuzzy, all of which prevents it from being used to define or delineate designs. The color most often used in ceramics remains blue, which is easily and readily obtained, remains very predictable and provides great control and consistency. “Famille noire” wares are very theatrical and spectacular, and their all-over black ground is usually overlaid with the transparent green enamel, which helps in reviving and enhancing the vibrancy of the black ground, which would be a bit too flat, with a shallower depth otherwise. If green as a color is rarely used, except as an all-over color (celadon, for example) or in a descriptive role (for leaves and foliage, usually), it can

nonetheless be used very effectively by combining the two effects, all over and description, on molded botanic surfaces in dishes and plates where their after-image will enhance the redness of a polished wood table top on which they are placed. These kinds of botanical dishes were very popular in England, for that very reason, in the late 18th and 19th Century and they are still being made today. This notion of after-image needs to be explained here. When the eye looks at a color for a certain amount of time, a retinal imprinting happens and when we move our eyes slightly to look away at a white surface, a fuzzy after-image of the observed pattern, in a complementary color will seem to appear, floating on the light ground. If one looks at red, for example, the after-image will be green, and vice-versa. With blue and white, this phenomenon is particularly effectively produced, and when we look at the blue image and then look at the white ground, an after-image in orange will tint the white to a warmer tone. This will greatly change the dynamic of the visual experience and the overall effect of the blue and white pattern. According to Philip Rawson, whom I am paraphrasing here, it is virtually certain that this effect was considered by Chinese potters and that they accordingly adjusted and deliberately calculated the color quality of their white ground so as to either cancel or assert the complementary after-image of their blue. Depending on the color(s) used in the composition, the white porcelain would be made cooler or warmer, in order to balance the after-image with the composition and energize the image. This was also considered with their polychromatic, over-glaze enamel designs. Again this after-image effect is rather specific to ceramics esthetics and to oriental porcelain specifically, where it can be used and controlled very effectively. It is very noticeable on Kakiemon porcelain from Japan, where the whiteness of the porcelain ground, quite expansive and considered very carefully within the overall composition, very effectively operates an after-image with the red enamel color, supplemented with yellow and green, of the characteristic Kakiemon palette.

The “famille rose” enamels are by far the more popular and widely used. The “thousand flowers” pattern presents us with an all-over surface of realistic flowers covering the whole vessel completely. It is one of the most extreme and iconic surfaces found in floral design and in enamels on porcelain and its excessiveness has been tremendously influential in decorative arts. It represents a tour-de-force technically, stylistically and esthetically, bordering at times on bad taste, and could only have been devised and realized by the Chinese mind.

Blue and White:

Without a doubt the greatest contribution ceramics has made to visual culture is blue and white decoration. It is the most important and influential ceramic decoration and its impact can be felt widely, in textile patterns and designs, in printed wallpapers, and in dinnerware patterns as well, all the way to today.

Blue is far and away the commonest and, incidentally, the oldest, non-clay color in the history of ceramics. Blue as a color is very reassuring and it is psychologically calming in human experience since it creates a natural and inevitable association with water as well as the open sky. The use of cobalt, the mineral providing the color blue in ceramics, originates first in Mesopotamia and Egypt as we would expect and then finds wide use in the Islamic world, where blue represents paradise, while green represents the prophet Mohamed himself, and green is used as a substitute for the prophet, since his image, his representation was forbidden by the Koran. Cobalt blue pigment was then exported from the Middle East to China through the commercial exchanges of the Silk Road. It remained a very rare, expensive material in Chinese ceramics and it was for a long time very rarely used, and only very occasionally found, on Tang ceramics. It finds its use more commonly in blue and white porcelain first during the Yuan dynasty when the Mongols are actually the masters of most of the Orient, from Persia in the Middle East all the way to the China Sea in the Far East. This vast Mongol empire facilitates not only commercial exchange but, most importantly, technical and artistic exchange. Thus, the cobalt blue pigment can finally be exported in sufficient quantities to the Imperial potteries of Jingdezhen, where it finds a ready use in underglaze painting on the recently refined, pure, white porcelain clay body, reserved for the needs of the imperial court in Beijing. The Yuan cobalt blue is of dark color, even turning black depending on concentration, and it is called by the Chinese Mahomedan blue, since the cobalt ore was imported from Islamic areas, coming all the way from the far western parts of the Mongol domain. Some of the patterns used by the Chinese potters were actually Islamic as well in origins, and after spending some time in China where they were transformed and adapted to the local sensibility, many of these patterns returned to Persia and Turkey where they were subsequently influential in the current wave of ceramic decoration. Iznik ceramics, which is white earthenware emulating Chinese porcelain but rarely imitating it, often makes use of these oriental patterns that may have been Islamic in origin, actually. The Arabic and Turkish potters were not aware that they were somewhat copying not only Chinese patterns but indirectly the altered

designs of their own ancestors from centuries past. During the Ming dynasty, contemporary with the Renaissance in Europe and the beginning of the Ottoman empire in the Middle East, a Chinese source of cobalt mineral is finally found and the distinctive Chinese blue, with a warm, purplish tone and a finer, more consistent color value than the Yuan blue, is developed and applied to wares that constitute the supreme achievement of blue and white under-glaze painting and decoration on porcelain. These blue and white porcelains produced in vast quantities will be traded and exported to Turkey then to Europe where they will have a tremendous impact, not only on the development of new Islamic (Iznik wares from Turkey) and in European ceramics traditions (early experiments in Venice and Florence in “Medici porcelain” which is not actually porcelain at all but a translucent white earthenware, then finally in Meissen in Germany, where true, hard paste porcelain is first discovered in Europe, in 1710), but in all the decorative arts, notably in the mania for “chinoiserie” decoration in furniture, textile and interior design in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

If blue and white decoration is the most commonly found in ceramics, white on blue is much more rare. There are limited uses found in a few examples of Italian maiolica, usually combined with areas painted in the usual palette. In these examples, a white glaze is applied in intricate, very fine patterns over a glaze that has been colored light blue. The effect is very refined, lace-like almost, yet rarely used and never by itself, as an overall decoration on an object. White on blue is also found, more commonly this time, in the unglazed Blue Jasper wares made by Wedgwood in the late 18th Century (and to this day), where ornaments and figures sprigged in white porcelain are positioned over a blue ground. Cheaper imitations abound as well, often is a strange interpretation where the ware is glazed, trapping the sprigs under a thickish substance that is almost unpleasant. The white on blue effect in ceramics is usually quite subtle if unusual, a bit unsettling even, at times, thus, its efficiency. It is also a form of reversal of the very common and familiar blue on white. It has never really taken hold, interestingly enough and its potential rewards are still largely to be explored.

The example of the “willow pattern”:

One of the main pictorial conceits of the Chinese blue and white esthetics consists of an idealized landscape with figures. This formalized image was to have a tremendous impact in the development of subject matter in all the decorative arts and specifically on

ceramic vessels and figurines. The figurine in ceramics is a Rococo invention and it comes directly from chinoiserie decorations, themselves coming from Chinese porcelain designs, where idealized landscapes, with or without figures, can be found as a painted motif. It eventually finds its way in the familiar pattern found in “toile de Jouy” in France, and in rather tasteless wallpaper patterns all the way to today. Toile de Jouy depicts a pastoral scene of shepherds and shepherdesses, inspired by the bucolic scenes of oriental porcelain, transported to an ideal, utopian, European context. The scene is organized within a rocaille frame and is repeated as a pattern all over the printed fabric or wallpaper. The color combinations vary from blue and white, to brown, red, green, even black on white. The action within the image, the scene within each frame changes within the repeated pattern of the framing device. If this was an abstract pattern, then the repetition could be continuous but within a narrative subject, repetition becomes senseless. Repetition can only happen at a farther distance (two identical scenes cannot be side by side) in order for memory (visual and literal) to forget the previous experience of a similar image. This is also done with descriptive, realistic scene on pottery forms, for the same reasons. This ideal, innocent, bucolic landscape of Chinese porcelain serves as a model for the creation of the most widely used pattern in ceramic tableware, to this day, the “willow pattern” designed by Thomas Minton in England in 1780. The willow pattern is printed from an etched copper plate into paper and then transferred to the ceramic object, which is then glazed and fired to bring out the blue color. This transfer printed decoration is an under-glaze technique, and for that reason it has remained very popular due to ease, speed and cheapness of production and to the resilience of the pattern to wear, since it is covered by the protective layer of the clear glaze. It is the earliest use of printmaking and of a true industrial process of image making in ceramics. The “willow pattern” represents a formalized set up of a pagoda under a willow tree, with an arched bridge over a brook or a lake, with two birds facing each other as they fly in the sky. These birds are meant to represent two fateful lovers, killed in a fire set by a disapproving father. None of this passionate melodrama is actually depicted in the pattern itself, which is meant nonetheless to convey the feeling of impossible yet eternal love. Since it is so widely used all over the world and still popular and in production, it has been used by many contemporary ceramics artists as a stereotypical iconic ceramic surface, efficient as a symbol for ceramics itself as well as for its potential for metaphorical associations with history and utopian, ideal times. Contemporary artists who have used the pattern in such a fashion and others who make great, efficient use of the blue and white esthetics include Paul Scott and Robert Dawson in England, Daniel Kruger in Germany, Sing-Ying Ho,

Charles Kraft and Ann Agee in the USA, and Richard Milette and Leopold Foulem in Canada. In Australia, Gerry Wedd, Mel Robson and Danie Mellor have also explored this potential in various ways. The “willow pattern” like all blue and white patterns is reassuring, calming, familiar and innocent. Contemporary artists tend to use it in rather confrontational, often political works in order to create an opposition between form and content. These kinds of oppositions and contradictions are often found in contemporary ceramics and the use of the blue and white willow pattern is very efficient example of this practice.

A bit more historical context: Blue and white decoration on porcelain of the Wan-Li type (1573–1619) first appears in Holland in the 17th Century, where it is imitated on the white earthenware pots from Delft and its derivatives in England, then all over the world. The same phenomenon will be repeated a bit later through Meissen imitations in Germany of the Chinese Kang-Xi and Japanese Imari enamel decorations, which will both greatly influence European ceramics and other decorative arts as well. The Japanese Imari color palette is also very distinctive and if it is relatively easy to recognize, it is also difficult to assign effectively, since it has been so widely copied everywhere and is still popular now. Imari wares are painted in under-glaze blue, which is then painted after firing with over-glaze red enamels, and then exuberantly finished with gold luster decoration. The use of gold, the intricacy of the patterns, the laborious process as well as the multiple firings necessary to achieve the impressive results, all converge to make Imari ware very expensive and luxurious. The combination of the deep blue, the bright red and the flashy gold, and a very effective use of black elements, will prove irresistible and that decorative scheme is one of the most popular in ceramics history.

The example of the after-image in blue and white porcelain provides the opportunity for this kind of subtle, informed use of the perceptual mechanisms of visual experience, as they affect the esthetic experience. This needs to be understood and absorbed by the contemporary potter, if the superb examples of Chinese blue and white under-glaze porcelain painting are to be not only imitated slavishly but their achievement met if not even surpassed, eventually. Another aspect of blue and white that could be of interest to the student or the maker of such decorative wares now is that the color blue in chromatic image making can actually replace black where it then becomes, to cite Rawson again “active shadow” and “positive darkness”. Rawson is very eloquent about the use of various colors in ceramics and I would refer the interested reader to his very perceptive

and informed comments on the subject. Suffice to reaffirm that distinctive polychromy is probably one of the pre-eminent formal characteristics of ceramics and the aspect where it situates itself with the most independence from other art forms, including sculpture.

Contemporary examples:

The accepted discourse concerning ceramic objects often mentions the symbiotic relationship between form and surface. Actually, it could be stated that the surface is actually more important than the form itself, in its potential to carry symbolic meaning more readily. If forms in ceramics are more generic and less specific, the surfaces can be highly diverse and offer much more potential for variety. And after all, it remains obvious that images (surfaces) are always more powerful than objects (form). Ceramics is in many ways an art of surface and how surfaces are articulated remains an essential aspect of the autonomy and specificity of ceramics as an art form.

Leopold L. Foulem's ceramics work has as a subject this very specificity of ceramics, and not just formally through specific contexts and functions, but more importantly, conceptually. In the ceramic works of Leopold L. Foulem, whose ideas and theories I am using here, the binary proposition form/surface is rendered more complex in the formula form/surface/surface, where the object itself presents a surface, over which another surface is applied to constitute the ground over which another surface exists, the figure or decoration, per se. The first surface is the physical and conceptual surface of the form, the second and third surfaces are specific aspects of the "decorative" and as such, they are another conceptual aspect of the work, distinct from, yet married to the form. In Foulem's exceptional, seminal and highly original if puzzling work, the association is not only between the tension form/surface where the form itself determines the surface. On the contrary, often in his case, it could be said that it is the surface that creates the form, in another formal and conceptual reversal, as if the object had no "form", no perceptual thickness and the interior pressure extended all the way to the exterior skin; as if the clay had dematerialized and all that remained were the two surfaces, the surface of the ground and the surface of the figure, suspended in the air without any real support. The fact that the expected openings on top of vessels are here closed and sealed, making the volume appear as a mass, only reinforces this impression. The form is not as much a shell anymore as a bloated balloon, with no real physicality. It has become pure representation, with the excessive, exaggerated "foot" at the base, covered in gold, serving as a frame to

reaffirm the nature of the object as image, as abstracted representation of a thing, and not a thing in itself. This complex analysis of the various and distinct surfaces implies a surface as physical presence and pictorial field (the ground color) and another surface as a non-representational formal component, as abstract concept (the decorative pattern). This form/surface/surface is emblematic of Foulem's work and it represents a totally new field of inquiry for ceramics. It explores the notion of spatial aporia, that is to say the inherent irreconcilability between the spatial and the planar in art. The container and all pottery forms, can be perceived as a deliberate space which is at once spatial and planar, altogether three-dimensional form and two-dimensional surface. Within this system, the ornamental motif is not just an observation of nature but operates instead and grows out of its own internal logic, in this contradictory dialectic between form and surface. Ceramics, and particularly in its intimate and specific connection to decoration, is the ideal arena for such investigations to be developed further. Foulem's work and theories examine the intrinsic plurality of functions surface has in ceramics, where we can find alternatively: surface as process, when the traces of making informs the surface; surface as covering, when another surface alters the original surface; surface as structure when the surface reaffirms the structural nature of the form; surface as narrative, when it carries representations; and surface as signifier, when its abstract nature as an independent image, as a sign, is the most evident. Here again, it can be noted that pictorial abstraction in surface designs has been part of the vocabulary of ceramics for millennia. If the surface in ceramics is therefore essentially a shell, the outer perimeter defining the volume of a pottery form, it is nonetheless very complex in its language and in its various manifestations. For example, we could say that the interior surface of a bowl is the exterior aspect of its interior. This may seem like a futile semantic game, but it is but one example of what can be implied when we use the term surface to designate an aspect of a pottery form. The form/surface/surface theorem as defined in Foulem's works and writings is of that nature as well. Most glazes on decorated vessels create a surface as surface; one of the layers (the clay surface) establishes the real nature of the thing itself, and the second layer (the glaze surface) establishes the superficial (used here as a descriptive term) appearance. The reason to affix a third surface in the equation is to stress the singularity of ceramics as an art form, since a third surface, a decoration over the glaze is also often present. The necessary difference within the context of ceramics, and not found to that degree elsewhere, is that surface as surface as surface is about the representation of a stylistically recognizable surface proper to ceramics as a specific and autonomous genre, in art. More surfaces can even be added, not only physically to

objects, but conceptually as well. Each of these will also operate, visually, esthetically and conceptually independently from the preceding or succeeding surface. In conventional painting, the canvas, the support for the paint is not a surface per se, it remains more structural and physical than conceptual. In ceramics, all surface aspects need to be properly considered, nothing is merely structural. In ceramics, the support, the primary surface offered by the clay form is independent conceptually and it operates according to its own logic and necessities. It has an independent role and meaning from the other surface itself, and all the other surfaces, as well. Another example of such surface complexity, at the perceptual and conceptual levels, is found in the seminal work of Ron Nagle, which also explores effectively the role of frames and framing in ceramic surfaces and on ceramic forms.

I have mentioned earlier, within the geometric decoration, how black and white stripes can be effectively used to create an optical dynamism of opposites, in order to reconnect the static object with its rotating genesis, which energizes the form. In the work of Roseline Delisle, this is used to great effect. Beyond the obvious banding, “fins” are also used as pointed, decorative elements encircling the piece, like rings preventing it from bursting at the seams. They serve to contain the interior pressure retained by the form as it was expanded on the potter’s wheel. The painted stripes play a similar role, containing the implied pressure, that tautness of the precise, perfect, mechanical forms, blown, expanded, dilated from the inside, like a balloon. The decoration is similar to the concentric circles and the banding of Cretan and Greek pots as well as the banding found in the work of Greg Payce, another exemplary model among many. The perfection of the banding and stripes is partly an illusion caused by the optical play of dark and light and the kinetic jump of the eye over the surface. The stripes, in their variety and slight differences, make the eye move over the piece. This adds to the impression of movement and contradicts the apparent stillness of the piece. This tension of the horizontal band with the vertical shape is the main energy animating their work, which are singled out here as exemplary.

Swiss ceramic artist Philippe Barde intelligently decomposed and deconstructed a standard blue and white pattern while in residency in Jingdezhen, China, in 2000. This work was subsequently shown in the exhibition “Retour de Chine”. In one work, consisting of six porcelain rice bowls, he deconstructs a Ming blue and white pattern, by changing to a new bowl each time a new person intervenes in the process. Actually, he is off by quite a

few persons. When French Jesuit Father d'Entrecolles first went to Jingdezhen in the 18th Century and reported in an influential series of letters on the manufacture of porcelain in China, he counted 72 different processes, thus 72 different hands necessary to make a porcelain piece from start to finish. In Philippe Barde's work, the fragmented images in the first five bowls allow us to mentally reconstruct the completed pattern found on the sixth. In this work, Barde decomposes a benign pattern over the six bowls, showing the intervention of each worker. His problem and inquiry had to do with a rapport to perfection; the big question of the opposition between symmetry and asymmetry, the Ming potter having perfection as a goal, thus perfection as a means to an end. This opposition between symmetry and asymmetry is also found in the dichotomy between classicism and modernism. Barde was curious to see if the equilibrium of the pattern, the balance of the drawing, would be maintained despite its deconstruction and incompleteness on each object. Of course, the Chinese painters with whom Barde collaborated succeeded nonetheless in maintaining that order and each bowl remains a masterpiece of balance, despite the fact that the remaining decoration is missing on the first five bowls. This is due to the fact that in Chinese ceramics pictorial space (as we will see in the next chapter, "The Narrative Esthetics"), the white, empty ground is not void and irrelevant but always considered fully as part of the image and integral to it. This is even true when the image is willfully incomplete and decomposed as is the case with Barde's intellectual, conceptual and perceptual problem. He also repeated the same exercise with a five color, polychrome enamels image of a dragon, to similar effect, analyzing by deconstruction, the mentioned relation of the image to the white ground in Chinese art.

At the recent Olympic games in Beijing, blue and white porcelain medallions could be purchased as souvenir and their publicity stated that they were conceived to "express China and impress the world". When contemporary Chinese artists make use of blue and white porcelain decoration, they mean to refer to Chinese culture, which is exemplified by blue and white porcelain. But when artists from other parts of the world do the same, their use of blue and white is meant to represent ceramics as an art form, because blue and white porcelain not only represents Chinese culture but more importantly here, it also represents ceramics in all its distinctiveness.

Surface decoration in ceramics, either geometric abstraction or organic arabesque, whether floral or representational, polychrome or blue and white remains one of the intrinsic aspects of ceramics as a distinctive art form with its own specific esthetics, where

the surface is independent, conceptually from the form itself. This dynamism form/surface is energized by the inherent opposition between a three-dimensional form and a two-dimensional surface. This is particularly evident in the extraordinary, complex and varied solutions found in ceramics within the decorative esthetics and in its influence on all the other decorative arts as well as visual arts. The contribution ceramics has made to culture through decoration is seminal, tremendously important and, hopefully, continuing.

Other artists to consider:

The Geometric: Elizabeth Fritch, Jun Kaneko

The Arabesque: Alison Britton, Betty Woodman

The Floral: myself, Leopold Foulem

The Blue and White: also, Meng Shi You with his work “Coca-Cola Colonisation” and Li Li Hong, as well as Yang Jie Chang and her blue and white painted porcelain bones and skulls “Underground Flowers”, all in China; Sarah Goffman, Michael Kiery, Jim Henlan in Australia; In England, Peter Dwyer, Andrew Livingstone who has made video installations using the Blue Willow pattern, and C.J. Oneill who water jet cuts patterns in existing plates. On the Willow Pattern itself, I also recommend Lucienne Fontannay’s “The Willow Pattern Story”, a fascinating book on the contested origins of the pattern. Recently Companhia de Dança Deborah Colker, from Brazil performed a dance “4 por 4” staged around suspended blue and white porcelain vases, hovering half a meter above the ground and around which the dancers precariously and dangerously move.

Chapter Four

The Narrative Esthetics: Framing and Fiction

Consciousness is image based and images are the stuff of thoughts. (read somewhere...)

Function and decoration; form and surface; object and image. Ceramics as a distinct art form is predicated on the coming together of these pairs of seemingly contradictory conceptual aspects, not to be perceived in opposition or polarity but in continuity, in synthesis and symbiosis. This coming together of form and surface is particular to ceramics and nowhere is that more relevant than with the narrative esthetics. Here again, the forms are largely pottery forms, standard, stereotypical, functional or ornamental forms, coming mostly from the vast repertoire of the classical esthetics. The Narrative Esthetics is also manifested in sculptural work, usually figurative, but these will be addressed more specifically in “The Figure (and the Figurine)” chapter. So, if the forms are the expected basic shapes of the standard pottery vocabulary, bowls, plates, dishes of all kinds, vases and other containers, the surfaces on the other hand are greatly varied. The main characteristic of these images on ceramic forms is their narrative nature: a story is being told. This distinguishes the narrative esthetics from the classical esthetics and its emphasis on form alone, and from the flux esthetics with its emphasis on monochrome or chromatic glaze surfaces, as it distinguishes it, as we have seen, from the decorative

esthetics, which focuses on abstraction and pattern, on symbolism instead of description, in surface decoration.

The narrative esthetics, like the classical esthetics to which it is closely related, finds its earliest manifestation in Greek then Roman pottery, where complex pictorial representations were first developed in ceramics and pottery; it is also found later in Islamic art, but more rarely, with its particular relation to abstraction and representation, following the restrictive prescriptions of the Koran on image making; it is also found, most importantly, in the Renaissance maiolica of Italy, then in the rest of Europe. In pre-Columbian America, narrative ceramics are found particularly in the painted cylindrical vessels of the Mayans and the fine line painted vessels of the Moche culture of Peru and in the Mimbres and Anazazi “Pueblo” cultures of Northern Mexico and South Western USA. This is less true of the Peruvian Nazca vessels whose narrative surfaces make references to mythological beings instead of chronological events, a common characteristic of narrative structures.

On Greek pots, the narrative is usually two sided, with two distinct if at times complementary images on each side of the vessel as articulated by the usual handles on opposing sides of the form. In Mayan pottery, the narrative on cylindrical vessels is continuous, with no obvious beginning or end; this is also true of Moche ceramics that doesn't use cylindrical vessels but prefers instead globular and other closed shapes. Within the Mayan cylinders, the most common form for pictorial representations are bands of script or text, usually describing the scene and naming the protagonists, that help in defining the sequence. These vertical bands of text divide the pictorial field and provide the sequential, chronological order of the possible reading of the image or the story all around the object in an otherwise continuous manner. Yet, the sequence of the image depicting a clear narrative is nonetheless logical as it is read all around the pot; In Moche ceramics from Peru, the fine line drawing is often combined with modeled elements on the top of the vessel and the graphic, linear images are organized in a circular fashion over the usually globular vessel. This object is more often than not a stir-up vessel, a specific ceramic form that has made its appearance in other contexts before, in these essays. It is interesting to note that both these very different pottery traditions were produced for funerary purposes and that they were preserved largely intact for us due to their burial as tomb offerings (see “Death” chapter). The same is true, expectedly, for historical “Pueblo” pottery. I will not analyze specifically each of these remarkable ceramics traditions,

although each deserves deeper study, but I will make here general remarks that can be applied to all of them independently of stylistic differences, since they all have surfaces that are narrative in nature.

It is more interesting and important to note the different approaches to depiction of narrative scenes on ceramics (usually pots) in Greek art and later in Europe, where the “two” sides of the pot are stressed as distinct (if complementary) and where the image is clearly framed, again, as distinct (if complementary) from the vessel, compared to pre-Columbian or oriental ceramics where the relation between the depicted scene and the pottery support is much more symbiotic and continuous.

The narrative esthetics, where a representation, an image is organized specifically on a pottery form, finds its own particular manifestation in Chinese and Oriental porcelains as well, in an approach to narrative and formal composition that is quite distinct from European ceramics, where it was, as a matter of fact, greatly influential in the development of ‘chinoiserie” decoration in the 18th and 19th centuries. All of these diverse and yet distinct ceramic cultures from all over the world may nonetheless be analyzed and understood successfully within the narrative esthetics, since they are all organized around the coming together of surface and form, joining in symbiosis image and object, within a narrative context. It may seem at times that the distinctions I make between the various cultures using this narrative esthetics imply a hierarchy between them, as if one was superior to the other. That is not the case. Each culture expresses its own genius in combining narrative scenes on ceramic forms and each achieves impressive, if different, results.

To expand here on the depiction of figures in Greek pottery, it is sometime noticeable that the frame cuts a figure, which is then perceived as entering or exiting the scene. This conceit of incompleteness of the image is not found in oriental representation to the same degree. In oriental pictorial space, incompleteness is manifested by total absence, where a large area of the images are left empty, totally “blank”, as we will see later, and with a degree of spatial sophistication never found in the bare, empty ground of the depicted scenes on Greek Attic pottery. The sophistication of representation in Greek pottery is of a different kind than the sophistication of oriental pictorialism in ceramics, one being descriptive (the Greek), the other evocative (the Chinese).

Another characteristic of Greek pottery (and later in Renaissance Europe) consists in the occasional interaction with the frame itself, where the frame becomes the ground with which the figure interacts, in an unexpected and not realistically logical manner. This is particularly remarkable with circular framing within the well of kylix cups and on large Italian Maiolica platters. The frame is not just there to contain the image, it is an active participant in the overall composition and in the operative workings of the image. Again, such active framing is not found in oriental ceramics.

On Framing:

In “The Classical Esthetics” chapter, we have seen how pictorial, narrative images on the surface of Greek vessels are organized, more often than not, with framing devices where the scene is composed within a stretched and deformed rectangular shape on the side of pots, with one image on each side, divided by the two opposing handles. This compositional device of restricting the picture to a framed, rectangular space is original to Greek pottery, where it originates in the Archaic period to reach its final development in Greek Attic pottery of the 5th Century B.C.E . This framing device makes its appearance there for the first time in art representation (bi-dimensional) and it will subsequently have a tremendous and continuous impact on image making, in painting, drawing, printmaking (comic books, manga), photography, advertising and billboards, even cinema, television and computer screens, where the same editing conceit is applied. Again this is a precedence, in sophistication, first found in ceramic objects that is never acknowledged by art historians. It doesn’t register on their very selective radar screen. Ceramics is the stealth practice of the art world.

Framing devices are of course found earlier than on Greek Attic pottery, notably in Egyptian art, possibly elsewhere as well. But the Egyptian “frame” is a simple device to divide elements in an overall composition, one from the other. That type of framing simply contains the image it isolates and the frame itself is independent, compositionally, from the images therein. It is as if the images within the frame are stuffed and stacked within its confines, instead of relating to the border. It hardly plays a compositional role establishing a direct rapport with what it contains. Its use always remains highly conventional, with the same solutions applied to the same, limited, spatial problems. The accumulation of frames within frames, like in a comic book, simply divides the narrative in its constituent elements. The Egyptian frame is packed to the edges, filled with

information, where the figure clearly predominates over the ground, which is really only there to support the image. The ground plays a very limited physical and spatial role within the frame. The Greek frame on the other hand defines the limits of a tightly considered and dynamic composition. The image composition in Egyptian art remains highly conventional even if it develops over time to include limited elements of depth perception, basic figure/ground relationships and spatial relation of figures in relation with each other. The main relation between figures remains nonetheless hierarchical more than descriptively spatial and small figures are not farther in space necessarily than larger ones, they are simply subservient to them. Representational images on Egyptian ceramics are used very sparingly, and they are commonly instead of an abstract, decorative nature, usually. An exception could be made for the charming blue Egyptian paste hippopotamuses, painted on the skin of the animal with lotuses and other water plants, bringing together the element of water in the overall color as well as the habitat and staple food of the hippo, altogether joined with great sophistication. Although this is clearly and absolutely a ceramic object, it is not in any way a vessel form, notwithstanding the fact that the hippo is also a container, of course.

The making of pictorial, descriptive, narrative images on clothing and other woven fabrics also happens later than it does on ceramics. Clothing as a form and weaving as a process are more suitable to patterning and abstraction than to representation and it is evident that patterning in weaving has greatly influenced patterning in ceramics, and may have preceded it in fact. More complex images on fabric require technological developments that will come later with more sophisticated looms. Of course, some of this analysis of precedence and simultaneity is speculative since, contrary to ceramics, the historical record for textiles is at best patchy, if not altogether inexistent due to the impermanency of the material itself.

It could be argued that the framing of images on movable, domestic objects like pots, is one of the most important contributions ceramics and pottery have made to art. The frame selects and shapes within its borders, making irrelevant what is exterior to its limits. It is interesting to note that this editing, this selection operates differently in a graphic medium, like painting or drawing, whether this happens on canvas or on pots. In the former, we do not consider what is outside the frame as relevant, since what is of meaning and relevancy in a painting or a drawing has been included within the frame. While with photography, or cinema, on the other hand, in their more direct relation to an

actual, physical world of familiar, everyday experiences, what is outside the frame (the rest of the world) is in continuity with what is inside (the selected image), despite the fact that what is outside the frame remains invisible, yet not altogether irrelevant, as tends to be the case with painted images, created from scratch by a singular vision. The frame, this amazing gift of ceramics to art making, is an editing device, one could say a curatorial device, which defines what is included from what is excluded, what is considered from what is ignored. In that sense, photography, which relies so heavily on the compositional potential (and limitations) of framing, is also an editorial practice, a curatorial practice (which may explain its extraordinary appeal to curators!). The “cartouche” on pots, which is a reserved shape to define a specific space for the representation, is also an editing device, a tool for selecting. Our present relation to reality through our continuous bombardment with mediated experiences is greatly informed by this predominance of framing in our daily lives and framing devices on pottery forms are at the origin of the “modern” and “contemporary” phenomenon. In many ways, this gift of ceramics to world culture may be somewhat poisoned...

The pot itself, the vessel, the object is also a frame, its very edges, its silhouette defines a border, a frame where things change, physically, visually and conceptually, where one perceived reality makes way for another, where an image, an illusion, a representation makes place for the actual, physical world. When representations happen within frames on ceramics, there are three different levels of framing operating. The image is framed by the cartouche itself, the cartouche is framed by the object’s surface and the object itself is framed by its own silhouette in relation to the rest of the world. These multiple (physical and/or conceptual) frames affect each other in ways rarely seen, if ever, in other art forms. One frame operates within the context of images, while the other (the edge of the pot) operates within the context of objects. The other frame, defined by the surface ground of the object is a transitional space between object and image. Hence a pot is always both an object and an image, simultaneously, and when an actual image is located on the object, this relation is complexified even more.

All over the world, one of the most constant devices used on pottery forms and ceramic objects consists in the articulation of the overall form with lines, bands and framing devices that will then contain spaces for pictorial elements, or even empty spaces. This compulsion to divide the form into constitutive parts is even found on objects with no picture, no image of any kind. One finds bare, blank plates with a gold line at the rim, for

example, which is not there to frame an image but to frame the object itself and reaffirm in the process the nature of the object itself as a frame, creating a shift between two physical spaces, two realities. For objects are not things like other things are things. An object, while in continuity with reality and the surrounding world, always remains independent and separate from it, yet not to the degree that images are independent and separate. It is this ambiguous nature of objects that constitutes their greatest potential for meaning and especially when objects are containers, which complexifies the problem.

The frame, the cartouche on Greek pots creates a pictorial depth-box where representations, figures, objects, interior or exterior spaces, can all be organized logically and believably. This depth-box acts as if the image was breaching “through” the pot, penetrating the form and at times, the image even appears as if located “inside” the pot itself. The physical reality of the object is thus contested by the pictorial illusion that pierces the wall of the object. It “dematerializes” its surface that then appears to project inward, within the object. It creates a cavern-like, concave space that contains the image. With this system, the flat representation can actually be perceived as tri-dimensional and believably real, since the object on which the representation exist is actually tri-dimensional and real. This creates a visual paradox, which is specific to ceramics pictorial space. The realism of the scene is often contrasted with decorative, abstracted devices like floral, organic or geometric elements, at times even architectural references, positioned elsewhere on the surface of the pot, often reframing the frame for emphasis. On Greek pottery this dialectic between figuration and ornamentation is reinforced by the figure/ground dynamic of the black on red, then red on black formal devices afforded by the materials, the technologies and the particular processes developed by the Greek potters, as we have seen previously. Excellent books exist on these technical aspects for the curious reader and I have analyzed further their formal/conceptual aspects in “The Classical Esthetics” chapter.

The psychological necessity for borders to define space (totally absent in Neolithic art for example) contests the emptiness of undefined spatial experience. Frames are highly reassuring by controlling our perception. Our perception craves borders, if only provided by the distance in how far the eye can see. Borders are comforting, which may explain their success and efficiency in the two great arts of borders, painting and photography. This permits again some informative analogy to be made between photography and ceramics. A photograph is also an object (the paper) with a distinct

surface (the image). But that difference between the two is much more subtler than in ceramics, since both the paper and the image are flat and bi-dimensional and the distinction found between object and image in ceramics is largely irrelevant, conceptually, in photographs. Yet, both with the photograph and the ceramic object, the image, the pictorial surface appears to be absorbed into the object, while remaining distinct from it. There is a blank state for the object (the paper, the pot) before the added surface is layered onto it. With painting, the surface is clearly, physically added on top of the supporting surface and this distinctiveness is always manifest, even, evermore so, when the paint is totally absorbed into the canvas (color field painting). On the other hand, in ceramics, the surface and the form are similar to identical physically and materially. The same appears to be true with photographs where there is no clear passage between paper (support) and image, while this passage is always evident in painting or even in prints.

Since the narrative esthetics operates around the coming together of an image (narrative) and an object, it may be necessary to define what is meant by these terms, to clarify their differences as well as complementary aspects, as far as ceramics esthetics is concerned.

What is an image, what is an object?:

An “image”, in the limited definition I am using here, is a cultural (as opposed to natural) phenomenon experienced through sight alone, visually. On the other hand, objects, while being experienced by sight as well, are also experienced by touch, in a direct, physical, embodied experience that acts and performs upon the world. Sight is a passive experience while touch is an active one.

Objects are basically ignored by art history, which is at its core, the history of images.

Images are experienced visually, primarily. This visual experience is one of removal, of distance, of separation. Images are always hierarchical (they imply an inherent system of values, unequal between them, i.e. some are “better” than others) and their mode of operation is opposition and polarity, while objects function in duality and resonance; objects also operate in plurality, working on numerous levels (and not only as symbols and carriers of meaning, like images), simultaneously. Objects reconcile extremes (all

polarities and binaries), embrace continuity and annihilate difference. The “object” aspects of images are almost totally non-existent physically and, one could say, to make a point, absolutely, at the conceptual level. While on the other hand, objects are altogether images and object, whether they transport representations within their form or not. An object, any object is at the same time not only a real, physical, tangible thing, physically and conceptually, it is also a representation of that thing. Objects operate simultaneously, conceptually, as an object and as an image (as an homotopia, a space representing itself, an idea inspired by Michel Foucault’s “heterotopia” and explored further in my essay “The Space of Pottery”). This dual relation gets still further complicated when the object is also the carrier of representations, of other images. Only objects operate in such a complex fashion within culture and if images need to be explained, due to their inherent narrative nature, and necessitate the formation of fictions and theories, objects instead need to be experienced directly to be understood and they largely escape the urge to fiction and theory (the necessity to create fiction and meaning and the urge to fictionalize and theorize), which are all necessary for images to perform, so effectively. If images are complicated and necessitate elaborate verbal and literal discourses, objects are complex and this complexity resists language, to reside instead within experience, which is unique to each individual, while retaining universal aspects.

Objects are of two main types: tools and containers, the latter being particularly interesting and relevant here. Containers are spaces where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled. All the binaries, polarities, opposites and dichotomies present in language (and implicitly in images as well) are reconciled within the container, within any object. Containers combine in symbiosis top and bottom, front and back, interior and exterior, surface and form, representation and presentation, image and object, material and concept, nature and culture, art and life, body and mind and all and any other binary oppositions we can conceptualize (life and death, dark and light, etc.). Objects are obviously inherently material and physical, but also and importantly, inherently abstract (in the sense that they only represent themselves) and inherently conceptual, since they must be thought first, in order to exist. Handmade objects are the preferred domain of craft practices.

It is important to keep in mind that to work in craft practices today is highly subversive and a form of contestation. The current, hegemonic definition we have for “art” is really a definition for images (even 3-D images, like sculptures) and the criteria

used to evaluate art are criteria that apply to images primarily. The images we produce are ever more impermanent and mediated. They are also ever more intrinsically institutional and only really exist and are effective inside institutions or the support of institutional, bureaucratic structures. Images are localized and operate in very specific places and they are highly contextualized. Images are also highly directional and operate clearly only when right side up. Flat images are meant for the wall, the vertical, while tri-dimensional images are meant for the floor (or the plinth), the horizontal. But objects go everywhere in the world, and a pot is a vertical thing in contact with a horizontal surface (say a table). Objects combine wall and floor, they are altogether operating in BOTH spaces, simultaneously. Although the result of an action, an activity, images are passive, they do not DO anything. The photograph is more the record of an action, and even less of an action than painting or drawing. Objects are not only the product of an action, they are actively engaged in work as well. They do something. But work remains too proletarian for the aristocratic sphere where art operates, to this day. When objects are used as props in art performances or installations, for example, their presence remains more theatrical than truly operational in a transformative way. Crafts, on the other hand, are much less ephemeral than images and in the case of ceramics specifically, more permanent. Yet beyond physical and material permanency, they most importantly are conceptually constant and their basic concepts (function and decoration within the dialectic between abstraction and representation) do not change significantly over time and space since there is no need for them to change. They are only informed stylistically by context, which, as far as I am concerned, is of little importance. Craft objects are also hand made thus unique. They contest the mechanically produced design and industrial objects, which are otherwise similar conceptually to craft objects. In fact before mechanization and industrialization, all objects were craft objects. There was no such thing as design as there used to be no such thing as art either. Craft objects have no need of institutions (museums, for example) to exist, they belong and operate everywhere (even in museums!), in any context, including art contexts, if given the chance. They may need museums politically, since museums are the necessary transmitters of legitimacy, of relevancy and value in culture now. Craft objects are not directional either and they retain their identity and meaning even when upside down or back to front. To work in craft practices today is to subvert and contest the very nature of contemporary art. Objects reaffirm the inherent limitations of images. While in no way denying the extraordinary importance and power of images, the crux of the issue lies at the conceptual differences between images and objects. Images are conceptually conceived to operate solely visually, they are experienced

with the eye and, interestingly as well, through language (literally). Objects on the other hand, are phenomenologically much more complex since, while also being experienced visually, they incorporate the other senses, at times ALL the other senses. An object is conceptually a thing in the world and, simultaneously, an image of that thing itself, as well. If the surface (or the form) of the object also holds other images, this complexity is even greater. And objects operate largely beyond (or before) language, which renders them inaccessible or at least difficult to access (contrary to images) by discourse and theory and by people with a mind set that is limited to the verbal, the literal, the discursive.

What then is the one concept specific to crafts? My answer is the concept of containment. Containment has to do with the relationship between an object and its environment. Containment bridges an object with its environment. Containers are about difference as continuity not difference as rupture. This is readily obvious with ceramics and pottery, but it is equally true whether containers are made of clay, glass, metal, wood, leather, wool, cloth, paper or plastic, etc. If you think about it, all furniture is, at the conceptual level, a container (a chair, a table, a chest of drawers, etc.), as are all clothing and objects made of fabrics. Even carpets and tapestries act as coverings that contain a space on the floor or the wall. Similarly picture frames, which were historically craft objects, contain the space for the representation of images. Jewelry is also clearly tied to containment: the necklace for the neck, the ring for the finger, the bracelet for the wrist and the brooch as a setting for stones. Beyond its physical properties, jewelry metaphorically contains wealth, status, memory, etc. It is about display, a form of presentation, which is complementary with the representation of images. For example, frames (and plinths) are about presentation, while images are about representation. Actually, the physical property of containers, since they are so permanent (physically and conceptually), is to contain and preserve not only goods and things, but time and memory itself.

A container is a space where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled. Containers are diametrically opposed to experiences that need to be framed (i.e. images, which have intrinsically a discrete boundary between themselves and their surroundings), yet, of course, frames, actual physical frames are themselves containers. Containers bring together the extremes in reconciliation; they cancel the contradictory impulses of language, leading usually to irreconcilable disagreement. All the binaries, polarities,

opposites and dichotomies (art/craft, image/object, etc.) found anywhere and everywhere are reconciled within the container, within any craft object. Art (images) reaffirms these dichotomies and if you can now have art without any craft, you cannot have craft without art. I repeat, the container combines in symbiosis the top and the bottom, the front and the back, the interior and the exterior, the surface and the form, representation and presentation, material and concept, image and object. All are equal and essential. In that sense, containers are non-hierarchical since you cannot have one aspect without the other; they remain equal and inseparable.

The interior space of containers is not just a space for containment, whether it is void, empty or full, literally filled or metaphorically pregnant. A container is at the same time in space and space itself, which it contains. A vase is but a shell between what is around it and what it contains, even if that is emptiness. It is a gap in space (like the physical frame) between two distinct spaces. A container is a solid space between two emptiness, one inside, one outside. This solid space defines a wall, a shell and it operates a transition. Art as a conceptual activity is concerned with space in all its manifestations and experiences. The space of containers is manifest in that thin wall between two other empty, unfilled spaces. Somewhat like framing, it is a transition but never a division. The surface of an object in ceramics is thus essentially a shell, the outer perimeter defining the volume of the pottery form.

Contrary to containers, images are always hierarchical and their mode of operation is opposition and polarity, while objects function in duality and resonance; objects operate in plurality, working on numerous levels (and not just those of symbols and meaning) simultaneously. Objects reconcile extremes, embrace continuity and dissolves differences. An object, any object is always at the same time not only a real thing, physically and conceptually, but also a representation of that thing. It operates simultaneously as an object and as an image (what I call an homotopia, a space representing itself). This dual relation is made more complex when the object is also the carrier of representations, of other images. Only objects operate in such a complex fashion within culture and if images need to be explained, due to their complicated nature, by fictions and theories, objects in their complexity need to be experienced to be understood. If images imply knowledge, objects imply understanding, in a full engagement between body and mind. The container represents the complexity of the artwork, of art itself as an experience. The container is actually beyond sculpture, since the form of the container is nothing without its content

(even if that content is empty space or the idea of space). The container is also beyond the object as a thing, thus beyond design, since the container cannot be reduced to function alone. The container is potentially the more complex problem to solve as an artist, which may explain the recent and current prevalence of container forms in contemporary sculpture. If images are powerful, they remain easy in their conceptual simplicity. Within painting and other forms of image making, surface is flatness, while in sculpture, surface is mass. The interior in sculpture is never considered (these are general, broad statements that apply in general to sculpture but not to individual cases, necessarily. I am not talking about the exceptional, here). Painting only represents the presence of the thing (if only paint itself), while conventional, mass based sculpture denies or ignores any notion of interiority. The vase, the object, combines the two, the thing itself and the potential of the thing, in duality. Painting and sculpture are usually about exterior aspects, about surfaces. Whereas the vase, the container, while it insists on the exterior, in its form and in its painted or decorated surface(s), also makes manifest the reality of the interior space, hidden, dark, mysterious, yet ordinary, quotidian, mundane and useful.

A short narrative:

A few years ago, I was teaching ceramics in a university program at the undergraduate level. One day I assisted at the presentation given by a British author, art critic, theoretician and curator who spoke on his researches to the graduate students in visual arts. His talk was centered on a show he had recently curated and organized, bringing together the very diverse works of a group of “Third World” artists. His principal interest in these artists lay in his attempt to grasp and understand, at the conceptual level (of course) what were the possible links between these diverse practices, beyond issues of content like colonialism, economic disparity, cultural imperialisms and gender/racial conflicts. Well, one of these artists worked with vessels, dried gourds used in installations (of course), both within a natural context, presented as documentation in photographs (of course) and in the institutional gallery space. Another used embroidery on clothing and fabrics. A performance artist pierced the human body with jewelry and metal works. Another focused on painted skin, body markings and tattoos. The last one, I recall, used the motif of oriental carpets on large billboards installed in the urban environment, also presented in the show as documentation in photographs. Has anyone noticed how, and increasingly, the art experience is evermore mediated by the documentation of past events

in photography? Am I the only one craving for the real, the actual, physical experience, esthetic experience of works of art? Anyway.

Now, it is of course obviously possible to associate such artworks with various practices; i.e. the vessels with anthropology, the jewelry with rituals and status symbols, the tattoos with minority practices and cultures, with ornamentation and decoration (more iffy...), and the carpets on billboards with advertising and consumer culture. Yet, the British curator of this show felt that there must have been a deeper connection, conceptually (of course), at the level of theory, among all these works, within contemporary visual arts, one that he could not quite grasp. After his informative and articulate presentation, during the question period, I asked him if instead of looking for an answer within contemporary theory and art discourses, he had ever considered craft theory, since all the works in his show made obvious references to craft concepts and craft practices. My question surprised him so much that he remained speechless for long seconds, stunned, with his mouth open and eyes bulging. He then categorically and assertively, loudly said: “No! No! This has nothing to do with “crafts”!”, which he pronounced as if it was a dirty word, something not mentionable in public, in correct company. In his mind, there could not possibly be any connection between these works, made by real artists and obviously part of contemporary art (“conventional” contemporary art), and “crafts”. Meanwhile, the whole assembly was looking at me as if there was a crazy person in their midst. Someone even interjected loudly: “What is craft theory, anyway?” As if there could possibly be such a thing. I thought this was an excellent, highly relevant question, one that had not been answered convincingly before. It set me on my way.

On Pictorial Space in Ceramics:

Images on ceramics, usually on pots, behave in a particular way, peculiar and largely unique to the art. I have already mentioned the depth-box aspect of frames that pierces and penetrates the surface of objects. When a “flat” image is composed over a convex or concave surface, it is distorted by the interior and/or exterior shape of the vessel, somewhat like a photographic lens distorts the photograph. In fact and as an aside, despite the strange habit of linking ceramics to sculpture, the two have precious little in common beyond tri-dimensionality. For the sake of the argument, I am willing to make the case that sculpture and ceramics actually have nothing in common at all, conceptually. Even ceramic sculpture has nothing to do with other types of sculptures and ceramic

sculpture is characterized by distinctive polychromy (something rare in sculpture) which is one of its pre-eminent formal aspects. Contrary to ceramics, sculptures have no distinct surface and even when painted (again, something rather rare), this surface is usually descriptive and serves to reaffirm the form, while with ceramics the pictorial surface is distinct and operates largely separately from the form, visually and conceptually. The distinct differences in the distinctiveness of the form and the surface in ceramics operates on at least three levels: formally (the form of the form is different from the form of the image, in term of shape, color, texture, composition, etc.), esthetically (form and surface are perceived, experienced and appreciated differently) and conceptually (one is volumetric and 3-D while the other is flat and 2-D). Interestingly enough, painted sculpture necessitates two different materials (say, wood and oil paint) while pictorial ceramics implies only one material, silica based clay and silica based glaze(s); while the materials are basically the same, the visual/spatial concepts are distinct. In fact, it could be argued that ceramics has more in common with photography (and with printmaking as well) than with any other art forms, as I have mentioned briefly already previously: both photography and ceramics are mechanical and chemical at the level of process; both imply series, reproduction and multiples; both are archival in nature, one, photography, with a relation to time based in the instant, the other, ceramics, grounded in eternity; and both use the parallax distortion of space in pictorial representation. This parallax distortion of space on convex pottery surfaces is an important characteristic of Greek vase painting for example and is at times used very effectively by the Greek vase painters to accentuate spatial depth. This distortion is quite different on concave surfaces (the interior of bowls, for example), since the single viewpoint afforded by the interior space makes it possible to flatten the space reasonably successfully. This distorted, lens like, spherical surface of pots and other ceramic forms is again rather specific to ceramics pictorial space. This convex space on the exterior of pots or the concave space on certain interiors (bowls, plates and dishes, usually) distorts the representation they hold in ways that are specific and unique to ceramics, to a large degree. It is rarely found in painting, unless it represents mirrors and other reflective surfaces. Leonardo da Vinci, in his writings, mentions his interest in the possibility of painting pictures on curved surfaces. But as far as we know, he never did and never did any ceramics either, although others made ceramics based on his graphic designs. According to da Vinci, these paintings on curved surfaces would have been based on the principle of a special perspective, which would remain true to its deformation and, in the process, freeing painting from its strictly

illusionist goals. Maybe these images on curved surfaces remain to be made, and eventually a potter will take the challenge.

Other relationships between photography and ceramics connect the process of making photographs from a negative to a positive image, while molds (a negative space) in ceramics are used to cast original, positive clay forms. There is also a strong domestic connection to the real life of real people, photography often acting as a repository for the memories of daily events and activities that are themselves often connected to ceramic objects, in various ways. A photograph is also a fragment of a larger whole, and ceramics in its fragility often, if not always, ends as a shard, a fragment. Also, a ceramic object is part of a larger scene –the surrounding context– and, like photography, it is a fragment of a lived space. The photographic image as a fragment is less violent (or is it?), certainly better behaved than the broken fragments of ceramics. Both retain and transmit important information about knowledge and experiences we would not have otherwise. At the same time, ceramic objects in their three-dimensionality and continuous surface showing only one aspect at a time, are very difficult to actually photograph and even more difficult to experience photographically. Other art forms, based on image making, are meant meanwhile, almost by definition, to be experienced in photographs, if they are not themselves photographs to begin with. A photograph of an image loses very little from its source and a photograph of a photograph doesn't lose anything substantial at all, while a photograph of a vessel, or any other object, is almost completely removed from the actuality of the thing. In our evermore mediated society and culture, all images (drawings, paintings, sculptures, which are 3-D images after all) are meant ultimately if not to be photographed, exclusively, at least to be primarily experienced in photographs, in magazines, in catalogues, in art history classes, in books, in the media, on the web.... It is interesting to note that the less an art form needs institutions to operate (photography, for example) the more institutional space it gets, while art forms that require a direct physical and spatial experience (of bodies in relation to things), like ceramics, are not given hardly any space at all in art institutions. But then, as far as I am concerned, the world is completely upside down right now, with the results that we can see (and feel) all around us. This is true in art as well.

In Italian Renaissance maiolica, more specifically on large chargers and shallow dishes and plates, the painter tries to fight this spatial distortion by flattening the perspective lines (perspective was still a relatively new trick then), adapting and shaping

them to the formal accidents of the object, notably at the transition between the large flat rim and the shallow well at the centre of the dish. This is achieved with various degrees of success, depending on the deftness and experience of the painter/decorator. On flatter forms, the concavity of the complex, painterly image on the object can be made to appear flat, from a single viewpoint, at least. This is done with great sophistication on Islamic “Minai” wares from Iran and in Mimbres pots, to the degree that when experienced in photograph, the object, a deep bowl in both cases, appears to be a shallow dish or a flat plate. Italian maiolica platters are also composed with a specific orientation, due to the realism of the narrative scene depicted. They are not to be viewed in the round, or positioned flat on a horizontal surface, but instead standing up vertically in a precise position. Images viewed in the round, from a variety of viewpoints, are also rather specific to ceramics as an art form. “Istoriato” plates from Renaissance Italy were not meant to be functional or used for practical purposes; they were objects for contemplation, for the ostentatious display of sophistication, of wealth, of status and taste. Yet, they do not stand for substitute for paintings, since their circular shape and concave interior space, both used very effectively at times for visual interest in composition, creates a unique esthetic experience that is not found anywhere else to that degree of frequency and sophistication.

A technical aside on maiolica may be necessary here, as the materials, processes and techniques inform the narrative esthetics significantly, maiolica being historically the most common format for this esthetics within ceramics, in Europe, anyway. Maiolica decoration refers to a low-temperature glaze, made opaque and white with tin and applied over red earthenware clay. This glaze by itself would fire to a smooth, shiny white surface, covering the darker, red clay body completely. Since it provides the perfect ground for images of all kinds, it is usually painted with very complex pictures, nonetheless composed with a very limited palette of colors, namely, brown, yellow, green, blue, purple and black, the glaze ground providing white as well. It is important to keep in mind, as is usually the case in ceramics, that these colors are much different before firing, when they are applied over the unfired, dry, dusty glaze, and the potter has to create the image keeping in mind this drastic visual transformation, after firing. The maiolica glaze is particularly stable in the kiln and will not move or run (as we have seen with Tang glazes and other drippy, runny glazes), and the painted image will remain fixed as it was applied. The technique originates in Islamic medieval Spain, to simulate and emulate oriental porcelain at first but becoming it's own original esthetics, quickly, by taking full advantage of the potential for

the materials and processes used, so different in many ways from those used in porcelain manufacturing. From Spain, it then moves to Italy, where it achieves its supreme expression from the early Renaissance on. The most complex examples also use a simple trick to facilitate the painting of very detailed images; after applying the glaze, the pot would be placed in a kiln and fired to a temperature sufficient to sinter the glaze, fixing it to the clay and hardening it, without melting or fluxing it. The colors could then be applied over this much more stable yet still porous surface and corrections and erasure could also be more easily made. Once the painting was completed, a light coating of clear, transparent glaze would be applied over the whole surface and the object would then be re-fired to melt and vitrify the glazes, trapping the colors between a white glaze providing the ground and a shiny clear glaze intensifying the colors. Nonetheless, most maiolica decoration is done directly over the freshly glazed ware, which provides a freshness and directness of application, since retouching cannot really take place, adding to the spontaneity and liveliness of the results. There are many other methods of applying pictorial elements to pottery forms, yet the maiolica technique was the most polyvalent and provided the potential for the most complex depiction of narrative scenes on ceramic surfaces. That remained true until the discovery of over-glaze enamels made with colored ground glass mixed with an oily medium. Such over-glaze colors could be mixed together to achieve a wide variety of tones and shades and then painted over an already vitrified surface to then be themselves fused in a kiln at a rather low temperature. Over-glaze enamel colors being made with an already fired material (glass) remain true between application and firing and can be used, like paints, to create highly illusionist representations. Both maiolica and over-glaze decorations have been eventually largely replaced during the industrial revolution by the application of photographic and printmaking processes to ceramics, which greatly simplify technically, while making more complex visually, pictorial ceramic surfaces.

The pictorial flatness of Italian maiolica is reinforced when these objects are experienced photographically. This flattening effect of photography is even more evident with images in the interior of deep bowls. As I have mentioned before, I have in mind particularly the Mimbres/Anazazi pre-Columbian bowls with intricate abstract patterns (see chapters on “The Decorative Esthetics” as well as the “Death” chapter), early Egyptian as well as Islamic bowls (Seljuk Minai wares), which all read as bearing flat images in photographic reproduction while in actuality, they have a deep, half-spherical interior space where the image is very skillfully composed with great graphic sophistication, an

effect that can only be perceived and appreciated from real objects and that cannot be replicated or communicated photographically, something we tend to forget when we look at photographs of pots, which distorts and prevents a true appreciation. The main dynamic of these deep bowls is actually based on the contradictory aspects between the seemingly flat, visually bi-dimensional surface as it is shaped by the deeply tri-dimensional, concave interior space of the bowl. The best examples make great use of this dynamism. It is the dynamism and energy created by the tension between a two-dimensional image and a three-dimensional form that characterizes the narrative esthetics and its specific ceramic pictorial space potential. This is greatly reinforced when the 2-D image represents a 3-D illusional space and when the 3-D form of the vessel is visually flattened to read as a 2-D surface as well.

The overall, continuous surface:

Things get equally interesting on the tri-dimensional exterior of vase forms where the image is all around the object. Depending on viewpoint, again, the expected flatness of images (we tend to always experience images in flatness, even tri-dimensional sculpture, especially now with the hegemony of photography in art experiences) is greatly contested on pottery forms. Potters have used various strategies to counteract this effect, restricting the image to one side of the vessel or again, articulating the scene within a reserved, framed, bordered area, a cartouche. This reserved area is often rectangular (in spirit, at least, since the edges of the rectangle are actually, usually, four curves meeting at the corners) or circular, oval and in Rococo Europe, a dynamic series of curved, opposite curlicues and arabesques. This rocaille frame, a very dynamic form of framing, while being very common in decorative arts since its inception, never really found its place in representational art which tends to prefer the geometry of the predictable square, and again very rarely as well the circle, also quite common in decorative arts. The European pictorial space on ceramics also tends to favor this conceit of the square frame, creating a distinct, defined, separate depth-box on the face of the pottery form, distinguishing a space for representation while the remaining surface of the vessel is usually reserved for decorative effects, for example, a flat color surface, organized patterns or floral motifs. This depth-box can then be composed more clearly around conventional figure/ground relationships with elements in the foreground, middle ground and background (more often than not, the bare ground of the glazed clay body itself). The exploration of the pictorial depth-box on the surface of ceramic objects will remain the chief aim of glaze

decorators in Europe from the Renaissance to today. The 3-D illusion of the depth-box combined in a dialectic with the 2-D of the overall design surrounding it constitutes the basic problem to be solved. The flatter decoration surrounding the depth-box often suggests a theatrical proscenium with arches, where the represented scene it contains seems to belong more to a literary dream space, an elaborate fiction, than to reality. This tension between the reality of the object and the unreality of the image is another operative tension of the narrative esthetics on pottery forms.

While the main system to organize narrative scenes on pottery forms remains the use of various framing devices, either independent from the form or articulating it in various ways, they always serve to isolate the image from the object itself. A less usual and rarer method consists in covering the whole surface of the form with a continuous picture, without borders, with no perceived beginning and no end (although, more often than not, there is still a preferred side, a privileged viewpoint). The only limits to the image are provided by the top and bottom of the vessel, and by the fact that the image endlessly repeats, in a loop, as we circle the object or rotate it in our hands.

When an image is framed, as we have seen, the implication is that it continues, if only conceptually, beyond the borders of the frame. But when an image is depicted all over a continuous shape like it does on the exterior of a pot, the space defined by the vessel does not extend beyond its borders, provided by the constantly shifting silhouette of the object. This is a very different phenomenological experience than the representation provided by a painting or, more believably and expectedly, by a photograph. The continuous all over image on the exterior of a vessel is a self-contained space different from the self-contained space of other forms of image making. It generates a continuous, panoramic loop that requires, that necessitates a three-dimensional experience, an actual movement of the viewer a full 360 degrees around the object, or, more likely, a tactile experience where the object is rotated for 360 degrees by the hands. When one actually experiences a landscape (for example), one is located at the center of the scene, which surrounds us completely. To see the whole view, one must rotate on the axis of our body by 360 degrees, to return eventually to the point of origin. Our experience is akin to that of the empowered viewer, the guard in the middle of the Panopticon, the 19th Century utopian prison system where one guard, acting as a singular gaze located at the centre could survey the whole population of prisoners, positioned in cells placed in a circular architecture, all around. As analyzed by post-modernist critical

theory, it implies a position of control, of surveillance, an exercise in ownership and of absolute power. The prisoner, knowing to be constantly watched, develops a self-censoring, self-monitoring stance, by internalizing the gaze of the authority and they end up policing themselves by virtue of their fixed position. The Panopticon has one (rotating) viewpoint and all the views it provides are identical and fixed. It is also the viewpoint of images, of painting, of photography and mediated technologies. They all render the viewer a passive subject, engaged in a self-censoring experience, as defined by the imposed viewpoint of the maker or the lens. The object on the other hand invites for an experience that is agentic. We are placed in a subject position where we have influence on our location and perspective, what we take in. Our position remains flexible, in its direction and orientation. Ultimately, we can determine our place in relation to an object. With an image, we know our place and we assume the subject position of a docile body, which is shown what to see, and told what to do, what to think.

The panorama of a continuous landscape represented on the exterior of a vessel operates as a reverse Panopticon, and implies a reversal of viewpoint, a perceptual contradiction. It provides the viewer/user with a visual, physical experience that gives the body, the eye, the impression of looking OUT, when in fact one is looking IN, into the object and into the image, which affects the esthetic and psychological impact of the work. Your eye and your body may be looking IN, into the pot, but your mind processes the information, following preceding experiences, as looking OUT, from our body into the distant landscape. This creates a phenomenological reversal, which is, subtly yet actually disruptive. The perceptual viewpoint is reversed and the subject position is reversed. I think that this visual, esthetic experience is unique and specific to realistic, descriptive representations as presented as continuous on the exterior of vessels and pottery forms. This pictorial device that implies a reversal of the normal, usual visual experience is again specific to the particular relation between surface and form found in ceramics. When experiencing the scene on the vessel, it is as if we remained conceptually fixed when we are in actual movement around the object or the object itself is in movement in our hands. It is as if our viewpoint was constantly changing, mobile and varied, so different from the fixed viewpoint of framed images. In its lack of clearly defined borders it even expands on the pan shot of cinema. Similar to the cinematic experience, the images on the surface of the vase seems to project from the dark interior, as if projected, like a static movie (!) on a continuous, circular wall, all around us. Like in cinema, the darkness inside the vase makes possible the light and brightness, the shape and colors visible on the exterior wall

of the vase, as if on a screen. Such images and visual experiences on massive, solid objects would be unthinkable. While we remain, obviously, located outside the vase, physically, our perception operates as if we were experiencing the image while located inside the vase. It requires an imaginary displacement of viewpoint to operate effectively. This experience may remain instinctive but when it is intellectualized, it becomes disturbingly powerful. Of course and unfortunately, ceramic objects rarely, if ever, live up to this potential fully, so far, anyway. This generosity of the continuously changing surface provides different information from different viewpoints and provides for a variety of experiences, while stressing the three-dimensionality of the object and the 360 degrees nature of the work, with no preferred side or viewpoint, no real beginning and no end. The only “rational” and “realistic” aspects retained in these types of pictorial ceramic spaces, and they most often represent landscapes and even more rarely with figures, is the expected logic of the top and the bottom, the rim and the base of the object, where the sky and the ground keep their respective place. In this respect alone, the vase is more lifelike, closer to a real lived experience, similar to the one created by the renewed vanishing point as we turn our head and body around to scan a scene. The Panopticon viewpoint of static, framed images is convincing and highly effective, yet remains non-critical by directing experience and imposing interpretation. It is the viewpoint of framed images, of mediated technologies, as well as various literary texts like those of journalism, editorials, pamphlets and theory, texts that may be creative but do not require imagination. The single viewpoint implies control and dependency, authority and hierarchy. The reverse Panopticon found on ceramic vessels is ambiguous and mobile, and it leaves interpretation open ended. It remains critical. It is the domain of poetry, of imaginative literature, but also of certain types of objects, of pottery for example, and of practices grounded in the transmission of real experiences in a metaphorical manner. The mundane, familiar, ordinary, domestic context where this happens usually prevents us from this realization. Yet, while lacking the efficiency one expects from “ordinary” images, it does implies agency and freedom in experience. Few unfortunately, makers or users, realize this and take advantage if it. Grayson Perry, whose work will be discussed later, is a potent example of someone who makes use of that potential fully.

The Oriental Pictorial Space:

In his book “Ceramics” (p.183), Philip Rawson is particularly eloquent and perceptive on the subject of the oriental pictorial space. I quote: “The Far Eastern –specifically

Chinese– sense of pictorial space is certainly the most important in the whole history of ceramics. It is based upon assumptions and intuitions, even a metaphysic, which were foreign to the entire Western humanist tradition. This sense of space is apparent whenever the subject matter of the ceramic decoration ceases to be emblematic and becomes representational in the pictorial sense...” creating “a space as an unbroken environment without defined limits. The Far–Eastern ceramic painter has always treated the pot surface as if it were crystallized out of a continuum of space, pre–existing as a kind of provisional segment of endless space in which objects may appear quite naturally. The artist thus has no obligation to define a perspective–box (depth–box), or to make his objects fit into a frame provided according to any formula save their own presence. The picture does not have to describe a complete visual field (as happens in European representation) to be consistent. For even when there is only one feature on it, say a single figure, the picture space is already, as it were, complete and satisfactory in the pot surface”.

“In European decorative arts, one looks “through” the ceramic surface and for the scene to be convincing it must be bodily complete. In 18th Century porcelain, often, on vignettes inserted within framed cartouche, the edges of the image are blurred, giving the viewer the impression of loosing focus or fading reality where the rendering vanishes”, as if the image could not withstand an interruption abruptly unless it meets the clear border of the framing device. Such framing devices are required in order to explain an interruption in the continuity of depicted space. “In a Chinese picture on the other hand, we are quite prepared to accept large gaps of empty space or the vanishing of rock massifs, without reading them as an interruption in the continuity of space... That this can happen has a good deal to do with the way the Chinese brush “realizes” bodies. For it guides our eye along highly varied and changing linear tracks over the surface, each of which offers what one can call a satisfying kinetic “side” to the attention...Space to the Chinese is not composed of defined enclosures as it is in Western perception. It is a real but fluid medium of space and time in which the attention encounters phenomena. And since phenomena are to the Chinese truly “appearances” rather than solid bodies whose space–context indicates an absolute substance, the Chinese artist is not obliged to define complete bodies in order to convince us of the reality of the space his phenomena occupy... An organization of fragmented parts, a flower, a segment of tree, a piece of rock for ground, all provide an arrangement that is believable despite its incompleteness, in a complete system of interconnected volume and void. Variation of scale to define perceptual and physical distance as well as overlap to define in front of and behind are all

that is needed to create believability and completeness.” This is due to the fact that in Chinese art as in oriental philosophy, the void is not absence but an actual space that permits to access knowledge.

On the other hand, the European artists depict all aspects of space in order to define a believable context for the figures, by “looking through their ceramic surface”; they need to provide a detailed, complete image in order for it to be convincing. While the oriental artist uses the emptiness of space surrounding figures to define another spatial context that is nonetheless believable, by considering this empty space within the overall composition and the relationship among various parts, these often large areas of emptiness, gaps of void where “emptiness and whiteness are active ingredients of the image”. These “empty” spaces surrounding figures in Oriental art are nonetheless perceived as real space, while the same formal use of empty space in Western art imitating Oriental art is never believable as actual space but reads as void, empty ground. This is a crucial distinction between two very different and contrasting modes of pictorial space and must be clearly understood, since oriental ceramics has had such a profound influence on European (and world) ceramic traditions as well as other decorative arts. When the sophisticated, very abstract, one could say conceptual, atmospheric space of the Oriental (Chinese, specifically) potter is copied by Europeans, familiar with perspective depiction and a tendency to fill the frame with as much information as possible, with no understanding of the formal characteristics of the Oriental model, we get a rather bastardized version where space feels void and bare, inactive. One can always tell a European copy of a Chinese pot by this simple shift in the depiction of empty ground, the Oriental feeling full and resonant, the Occidental, empty and silent. Of course, a similar cultural misreading happens when Oriental potters copy Occidental models, usually provided in drawing or printed form for reproduction, so that the painter was not working from an original anyway. Each time, the changes provide clear clues as to the origins of the object. In Japan, this particular oriental pictorial space is evident in the elegant, sparse and beautifully sophisticated Kakiemon porcelains of the 17th Century, and still continuing today. Kakiemon is one of the earliest types of porcelain developed in Japan and the beautiful, creamy white clay body is particularly suited to minimal painted decoration, leaving large area of white ground visible; thus the visual quality of the clay material itself is used to great effect, while the painted decoration makes great use of the contemporary discovery of iron red enamels, which gives to Kakiemon wares a very distinctive style and

visual quality, greatly influential in early European porcelain development, notably at Meissen in Germany and Chelsea in England.

In stark contrast, in 1950's and 1960's China, during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, a large number of ceramic objects were produced for propaganda principles. Interestingly enough, these political images on pots have none of the sophistication we would expect to find on Oriental porcelain. Following the rigid principles of Socialist Realism, a Western style coming from European Academism of the worst kind, these Chinese pots are actually stylistically European at the level of surface treatment and their pictorial space, specifically the relationship of the highly defined figures to the bare, empty ground, is totally unconvincing and non oriental. These bastard objects are nonetheless important cultural archives of a specific time in Chinese history and they probably are the most important ceramic objects, historically, produced in China in the 20th Century, despite their stylistic crudeness and kitschyness. This constant, unending dialogue between diverse ceramic cultures, notably along the East/West axis, provides for the endless influences where painters in Europe emulate potters in China and potters in China do the same with European works, usually misreading, misquoting and misappropriating from each other to create hybrids that are at times somewhat monstrous but never boring.

Contemporary Examples:

Philip Rawson, again, makes another very perceptive observation about ceramics pictorial space. I quote: "One interesting incidental point about pictorial decoration in ceramics is that human figures which actually seem to be looking "out of" the pot and addressing themselves to the spectator, are very rare...It seems to have been almost always necessary to avoid any sense of direct human address, so as to preserve, no doubt, the existential identity of the pot body from too gross an encroachment by the illusionist impact of its pictures. For the pot as a whole object to address itself to the beholder with an organic presence represents a radical further step in a transformation process".

Rawson of course is writing this in 1971, way before contemporary ceramics would develop to challenge so many of the principles and criteria he establishes in his book to evaluate "quality" in ceramics and pottery forms. Before someone like Grayson Perry could challenge this very principle of direct human address by an image on a pot, the principal

operative characteristic of Perry's work. In this work, we are directly confronted by the disturbing scene on his vessels, to challenge our relationship with these figures and create a direct, personal identification with them. Many other such prescriptions for good pottery form found in Rawson's book have already been contested and challenged by much recent, contemporary ceramics. Perry's work uses the particular spatial nature of ceramic surfaces in a variety of very interesting ways; the overall organization of the picture (s) all around the vase (and they are almost always vases); the use of layering, sometimes leading to deliberate visual chaos, which positions the images ambiguously in relation to the surface by locating them visually at various perceived distances within the form itself. He also succeeds in disintegrating the very surface of the pot completely at times, by making that surface appear as a ground on which the figures stand, locating their presence "within" the vase form itself as if the exterior limits of the form had ceased to exist, as if it had dematerialized. This was achieved historically by the use of the "depth-box", in which the image was perceived as penetrating the form. Perry does this, unusually, without recourse to the depth-box, by positioning his figures on an ambiguous dark ground where they "float". This is somewhat similar to the vase painting of the "Berlin Painter" in 5th Century BC in Athens, who also, characteristically, used this method of disembodiment, of decontextualization to ambiguously connect his (single) figures with their surroundings, which are, altogether, the surface of the vase and the physical, yet very ambiguous space which the figure itself inhabits. Thus, the ground where the figured stands represents simultaneously two realities, one the pottery surface, the other the physical space around a figure. This visual disintegration of the pottery surface is particular to ceramics pictorial space and interestingly, very rarely used totally effectively. The best example I know, using the depth-box, is a Staffordshire porcelain vase of the 1850's, where a representation of the Crystal Palace in London appears to penetrate the belly of the vase, due to the strong, deep, one point perspective at play in the image. It is a sophisticated use of the potential for ceramic form and surface to engage dynamically and more potters should take advantage of the possibilities it offers. Another effective and unusual example can be found in American Art Pottery (Rockwood, 1885), where portraits (usually of Native American Indians) are realistically, almost photographically painted with under glaze colored clay slips on a very dark brown clay ground, which is then covered with a very shiny, brilliant, clear glaze, giving the illusion that the figure is located "within" the pot and we are looking at it through a lens, as if prisoner behind a window, where they nonetheless project great dignity.

Perry usually dispenses with the use of framing devices that would imprison his images. He instead makes magisterial use of multiple layers and uses the overall, continuous surface of the form to great efficiency. When he does frame an image, it is due to the fact that the reference is photographic and framing becomes essential for the reference to operate.

Another excellent example of a ceramic artist who has exploited the pictorial space of ceramics with particular efficiency would be Michael Frimkess, from Los Angeles. He is, in my opinion, one of the most important and influential artists working in ceramics in the second half on the 20th Century, along with Pablo Picasso. Frimkess influences continues to the present, although those following in his footsteps may actually remain unaware that they are doing so, at times. He was one of the first in the 1960's, with Robert Arneson in ceramic sculpture, to introduce obvious political commentary in his work and the very first as well to use a vocabulary of stereotypical pottery forms from the history of ceramics, which so many others have been doing since, Grayson Perry amongst them. This use of historical forms, instead of inventing new ones, creates a reference to the history of ceramics, obviously, but also to its universality and timelessness, and it remains, probably, his most important contribution to the field. His work operates around the concepts of excess and reversal. The iconography of his vessels combines cultural icons, like Santa Claus as Hitler, Uncle Sam chasing four nude women, representing the four races, white, yellow, red and black, and Buddha as a Jazz musician, etc., within contemporary scenes related to ecology, racial relations, popular culture and music, among others. By appropriating forms and surfaces and reorganizing them in a challenging, yet effective new combination, Frimkess shows us the irrelevancy of authorship and the lack of necessity for a personal style (the obsession with creating new forms, etc.), the unimportance of materials, of techniques and processes as ends in themselves (see "The Material Esthetics" chapter), as well as the uselessness of dates and facts in assessing works of art, by putting instead the emphasis where it needs to be, on concepts and contexts, on experiences and meanings. I have developed these ideas further in an essay on the artist published in *Ceramics: Art and Perception* magazine, "Michael Frimkess, A Reappraisal".

More again on Grayson Perry, whose debt to Michael Frimkess is clear and obvious. Perry sees himself as a traditionalist and talks of himself as an "old-fashioned reactionary". His choice of ceramics and pottery as a vehicle for his ideas is a conscious

and informed strategy to “buck the trend” of much contemporary art which is often mediated, using impermanent, evanescent material, obsessed with newness and new technologies (ceramics as a technology has not fundamentally changed in a thousand years and is itself thousands of years older, even...). He is attracted by the sensuality of ceramic objects themselves, in a fetishistic manner, but he doesn’t consider the sensuality of clay itself as important, or the material itself as particularly meaningful. Ceramics provides him with a system of forms that permits nonetheless “the freedom to create within iconic stereotypes”, the stereotype of the classical pottery shapes he uses, is one example. Like Michael Frimkess, by combining classical, conventional, familiar pottery shapes with disturbing, challenging, confrontational images on their surface, an effective contradiction takes place between the expectations created by the innocent form and the shock created by the difficulty of the images on the surfaces. If these very images were simply drawn on paper or painted on canvas instead of on pottery forms, their efficiency to challenge and confront us would be greatly diminished and the work would not be nearly as interesting or have received such wide critical (and commercial) reception, despite the fact that the pots themselves (as meaningful forms) are usually, if not always, ignored by the art criticism analyzing and contextualizing this work, the same way forms are largely absent from the scholarship on Greek Attic pottery. Nonetheless, it is the pottery forms that create the proper context for the work to operate so efficiently. His avowed interest with this work is to express “what is never said, what is not being said”, since he sees it as a responsibility to be a witness and a mirror to our times, to create an archive of specific events reflecting contemporary culture, mores and habits. He particularly values the irony and contradiction in using domestic, banal objects to comment on the censorship imposed by the public sphere and the other censorship at work, in the art world, toward certain art forms, notably ceramics and, particularly, pottery. An assemblage of words, texts and a collage in layers of images, drawings and transfer decals with other modeled and carved forms, all create a highly psychological world, contesting the domestic familiarity of the pottery forms. This conceptual, visual and formal complexity combined with the lush, seductive, sensually rich surfaces unfolding all over the continuous circular format, makes them difficult if not impossible to appreciate and understand fully in photographic reproduction and this reinforces the necessity for the real experience of real objects, often tactile, in ceramics appreciation. His work brings together the imaginative reality of the painted and graphic figures with the actual reality of the world, which the pots inhabit as objects.

In German artist Daniel Kruger's ceramics, the use of photography is also very interesting. Most if not all of the images he uses come from newspapers and magazines. Some of them are painted directly on pieces, usually within the conventional, historical space for representation on pots (themselves classical in spirit, yet loosely, crudely fashioned, deliberately), a space defined by a border, a frame, a cartouche. At times, the frame is actually the outline of the vessel itself, notably with plates and dishes, a form of framing images specific to vessels (in clay or other materials) and to pottery. On other pieces however, the image is a digitally printed transfer decal combining photography with ceramic materials and processes, giving the image permanency— something not present in the original image, photography being a most fleeting and impermanent medium. These images then become frozen in time, to be transmitted to a hypothetical future, one that will reinterpret them much differently than we do now. Like Perry, his efficient use of media references (photography and printmaking as well as newspapers and magazines) combined with the medium specificity of ceramics and pottery forms, all come together in a subtle yet effective critique of mediation, and the seductions of mediation, in contemporary culture. 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, warm flesh to hard, cold, fragile clay, all serve to immortalize these image of human fleetingness.

Montreal ceramist Richard Milette, whose work has been analyzed with some depth in the classical esthetics, needs to be reassessed here as well. If the narrative esthetics is largely defined as a pictorial approach to narrative in ceramics and pottery surfaces, Milette's work operates around a contestation of narrative in art understanding and appreciation. He has explored this negativity of narratives and our obsession with narratives, in a wide variety of works, as seen already in "The Classical Esthetics" chapter. Here, I want to single out a series of Hydria shapes, exact copies of the Greek originals, on which Milette has copied and painted, within the rectangular cartouche found at the expected, familiar location on the vase, a cropped fragment from a well known European history painting, implying a specific, necessary narrative content. By quoting from existing works and by choosing a small fragment from a much larger work while keeping enough iconic information to permit a possible reading of the image (a finger, a piece of clothing, a detail of an object, etc.), he challenges our incessant need for originality and to create meaning through a logical narrative, the narrative of story telling or the more pernicious narratives of history, particularly here, art history. These pots present us with a new model

for appreciation and understanding, beyond the requirements of conventional discourses around art and art objects. They provide us with a potent example that ceramics has its own specificity and requires to be understood using standards and methodologies that are its very own.

In conclusion:

The narrative esthetics looks more closely at the dynamics found between the pictorial surface in its relation to the form that stands separate from it. This relation form/surface, when it engages with representation, implies a specific “ceramic pictorial space” which manifests itself quite differently from culture to culture yet remains specific to ceramics as an autonomous art form. While I have looked more specifically here at the “painterly” surface where the preferred tool remains the brush, there are other aspects of this “ceramic pictorial space” that relate to a more graphic surface, or again to the printed surface. Those actually will be looked at more closely in “The Industrial Esthetics” chapter. The specific case of commemorative wares, which is again largely the exclusive domain of ceramics (just think of the recent Obama inaugural, with its thousands of ceramic plates and ceramic cups, printed with computer generated photographic transfers and ceramic decals), could also be included here, but because commemorative wares usually introduce the necessity of captioned text, they are best analyzed in the “Text” chapter, later.

Another interesting, fascinating category would be that of images of pots on pots, and pots as images in still-life compositions, when their performative, practical reality is subjugated to their function as image, as representation of themselves, where they become more imaginary than tangible. As we have previously seen, the pot itself in its exterior surface acts as a frame, and when a pot is represented on a pot, two distinct frames come together, the flat frame of the depicted pot on the volumetric frame (its silhouette) of the actual pot. This volume to flat, flat to volume dichotomy is what makes pots on pots (a conceit found all over the world) so effective, and their repeated use so fascinating. Pots imply domesticity and culture, but also a sense of place, of ease, of belonging, which they symbolize so effectively.

I will close with an example from the vast and very important (and not just in sheer, impressive quantity), body of ceramic works made by Pablo Picasso in the 1950's, mostly. I will single out here his oval or circular plates, dishes, platters and bowls primarily,

depicting corridas, as exemplary of the complexity and intelligence of his work, as would one expect. The overall shape of the vessel is used as a space to depict a tauromachy, a particularly Spanish spectacle. In his use of the edge of the object as the edge of the image, he combines the small, familiar, ordinary object with the extraordinary, exceptional, immense arena, in the process reversing the intimate and domestic setting to the expansive and public sphere. By using a very slightly concave form (the plate) and making it appear as deeply concave (the arena), he reaffirms the interior space of pottery forms as very specific and particular spaces for representation. As one would expect from one of the inventor of Cubism, he finds yet a new way to conceptualize the representation of space by conflicting two contradicting spaces as one, in a manner not seen before. In the process, he makes us aware, in a new, direct (obvious...) way of the operative power of simple, unassuming and dismissible things.

When an image, a narrative scene is placed on a pottery form, the image is created in ways that are specific to ceramics, at the level of materials and processes and techniques, but it also behaves differently, in its relation to the form it modifies, than it would in any other context. It is also experienced differently, visually but most importantly conceptually and it engages with signification and meaning in a particular, specific way as well. A descriptive image on a ceramic object has its own logic, its own esthetics and its own relation to reality and representation, different from the operative workings of images in other contexts.

The artists presented here and their works remind us as well that in order for art to be meaningful it must by necessity be critical as well. It is not sufficient anymore to make pretty pictures or beautiful pots, whatever stories they may be telling.

Other artists to consider:

Sing-Ying Ho, Matt Nolen, Ann Krauss, Kathy King, Viola Frey and Pablo Picasso. Also the pueblo artists Virgil Ortiz and Diego Romero, both reworking historical forms, surfaces and stylistic conceits within a contemporary context highly critical of culture today; in Peru and the USA, Kukuli Velarde also uses similar strategies for similar ends.

I also recommend to the curious reader to research further the work of Jane Irish, Hilton Nel (South Africa), Edward S. Eberle and Patrick Siler (Reflections on a Porcelain

Bowl, 1988) who also use narrative, with framing strategies, very effectively in their work. In Australia, Paul Maseyk's vessels are also noteworthy.

Chapter Five

The Simulation Esthetics: Illusion and (L)imitations

Bernard Palissy, potter (1510–1589). He was a true Renaissance man whose fascinating life was largely invented by the Romantics in the 19th Century when his work from the 16th Century was rediscovered and a revival of his distinctive type of pottery took place all over Europe, notably in France and in England, but also in Spain and in Portugal. He is known and celebrated as the inventor of what he called “figulines rustiques” or rustic figures, large platters and other pottery forms filled with believable ceramic impressions in relief of fishes, snakes, crayfish, frogs, salamanders, shells and plants. They create psychological tableaux on the transient nature of life in its constant struggle with degeneration and death. The platters themselves, which provide the “ground” on which the figures are composed, are press-molded using variegated, marbled clays (two or more contrasting colors of clay, lightly mixed together to create a marbling effect) that provide a dynamic surface for the press-molded animals and plants organized strategically within the oval form of the large dish.

Palissy’s experiment with various colors of clay that he marbled together to animate the ground of his composition may have lead him to develop Saint-Porchaire ware, also characterized by a contrast between a light and a darker clay, in a later stage of his career. Saint -Porchaire ware is as distinctive stylistically as anything else Palissy ever made and it is instantly recognizable. Nothing else quite like it exists, before or since in ceramics

history. It has a very particular ceramic surface, intensely busy with intricate decorative patterns yet the forms themselves reference metal wares. In that sense they also refer to another material without imitating it. Saint-Porchaire ware was long thought to have been made in the town of that name but it was never clearly attributed to a maker or a workshop. Recent archeological discoveries at the studio site of Bernard Palissy in the Tuileries garden in Paris (during the construction of the Louvre pyramid), revealed that Palissy may very well have been the originator of this unusual and very distinctive type of decorated pottery, as well, since molds with Saint-Porchaire's distinctive patterns that would have been used to inlay two contrasting clay colors, were found during the dig.

Palissy was very curious about the natural world and, while self taught, he wrote a number of books on biology, botany, mineralogy, geology and fossils. For his pottery work, he would make plaster casts of his subjects collected during his research on natural phenomena, and then transfer their likeness to clay, joining them to his pottery forms. Always the innovator, he may have been the first, I believe, to use plaster to make casts from nature as well as a material to make molds to produce ceramics, although he may have been preceded there by Luca della Robbia, in his Florence, Italy studio, who also made molds from nature in the production of his ceramics. Palissy even made large-scale ceramic grottoes for gardens, a fanciful interest at the time, covered with realistic life forms, but these have not survived the vicissitudes of time and history and only fragments of walls and of the original molds survived. There are countless legends and myths surrounding Palissy's life, largely fictive (i.e. he burned all his furniture to complete a firing in his kiln...), and mostly invented by 19th Century hagiography, when an important revival of his art took place, which led to a renewed interest in the man himself. Since little was known about his actual life, much information was by necessity invented by his biographers. Legend says that he saw either a piece of Chinese porcelain or, more likely, a piece of contemporary Italian maiolica, covered with a white, opaque, glossy glaze, a type of glazed ware not produced in France at the time and whose secret was well guarded by the Italians. Due to his knowledge of glass materials and kiln firing as he had been trained as a painter on stained glass, he experimented for years to find the secret of the white clay (porcelain) or, more likely, white glaze (maiolica), which always eluded him. He would have had to come across the mineral producing tin oxide, the opacifier of choice for white ceramic glazes. He never did. What he developed instead is a wide range of colored transparent lead glazes that were perfectly suited to imitate the wet, humid, fluid environment he created on his "rustic figures". Palissy's work was greatly influential and

he was a pioneer in many ways: his use of molds taken from actual models, his use of plaster (then in its infancy as a casting material for ceramics), his discovery and use of glazes as well as the development of an original, singular esthetics that took full advantage of all these discoveries and developments. His long lasting influence remains stylistically and esthetically potent, to this day in fact. The originality of his work cannot be stressed enough. It all looks very familiar and ordinary to us now, since we can find “Palissy wares” in gift stores everywhere, in all these plates shaped like cabbage, etc., at times dubious in taste if not quite simply kitsch. But when he made his dishes in the 16th Century, this was a totally new, novel approach to naturalism and nothing like that had been done yet on decorative pottery or within ceramics as a distinct art form. His work will also influence naturalism in other arts as well, notably in silver wares. Palissy’s work adds a significant new vocabulary of techniques, of materials, of forms and of concepts to what was then available to the potter and this is still true now. His work provides a rich and varied range of solutions to the problem of mimesis (imitation of reality, in art), and he was one of the first to tackle it in ceramics. His work can be alternatively referring directly to nature, imitating it as truthfully as the material will allow, in a descriptive manner, as our experience expects, but at other times, through the use of color reversals notably, he challenges our preconceived perceptual expectations to achieve exceptional results. Thus a platter will have white shells positioned on a blue, watery ground, in a descriptive, realistic manner while another, in a brilliant visual and conceptual reversal, will present blue shells on a white ground, totally unrealistically yet visually and esthetically believable nonetheless as a credible context for fishes, snakes and other creatures.

His imitators and followers in the 19th Century, notably Jean-Jacques Avisseau and George Pull, will push the literality of this naturalism to a degree that, while exhibiting a technical tour-de-force that is impressive, creates esthetic confusion and chaos. While they push his technique to a heightened level of realism and pursue the esthetic potential of his original style, they do not grasp as well as he did the psychological nature of his work. Palissy’s work, in all its excesses and fantasy, remains at all times balanced and organized, with an intellectual approach that provides a just equilibrium between nature and culture, something that is often lost in more recent work of that type where the naturalism and believability have been pushed too far, leaving no space for our imagination to operate, a weakness never found in Palissy’s superb pots. The mistake his imitators and followers make is to simply imitate his style and his techniques, with no conceptual understanding of his esthetics. The solution consists not in imitation but in an

understanding of the concepts at work and in using them correctly. It maybe that his intent was to imitate nature (I personally doubt that) but if this was his intent then he failed and it is in this failure that the work actually succeeds. Those who actually succeed in imitating nature, ultimately fail. Palissy's main idea is to be inspired by nature with no actual imitation intent but to create a psychological effect that artificially represents nature in its signification. His most profound and direct influence can be found in what the British call "majolica ware", with a "j", not to be confused with "maiolica", with an "i", the white glazed and polychrome painted wares of the Italian Renaissance. This particular name, "majolica" was chosen for marketing reasons by the firm of Minton who originated the type, but the name "Palissy Ware" would have been so much more appropriate. These industrially produced wares have nothing to do with "maiolica" and a lot more to do with Palissy, in form, in materials, in subject matter and overall esthetics. They provide a continuation with the work of the Renaissance potter and they expand on its creative potential in exciting ways, yet they do so without acknowledging the source, an unfortunate oversight, lost on many.

If you go to Paris, where he worked most of his life and make your way to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts across the river from the Louvre, where his studio was originally, in the main hall of the school, the original for all art schools, you will find a frieze of important and famous artists names surrounding the glass covered space. The name of Bernard Palissy is but one of two names included in this prestigious roster (Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, etc.) to represent French art. I doubt if such a list were carved into the building today it would include the name of a potter!

Ceramics terminology is thus often confused and confusing; the same term, or a slight variation (maiolica, majolica) can have distinctly different meanings. Porcelain is a good example. Beyond the possible ambiguity and confusion around hard-paste and soft-paste porcelains, the term is also frequently used to refer to white enamel on cast iron or on metal objects, with which porcelain has strictly nothing in common, in terms of the materials used, the processes and techniques employed or even the esthetics, if we make abstraction of a very superficial relation between two very different white surfaces. Another example is the term "pottery", which is often used in England to refer to earthenware products or even to all and any kind of ceramic products. I always use it here to refer to the art of making pots.

Other historical precedents:

If Bernard Palissy is the father and the most influential figure within the simulation esthetics, it remains a fact that simulating objects and other materials in clay and ceramics has a very long history, going back to the origins of the field itself, certainly as far back as the Egyptian, the Mesopotamians, the early Chinese, all of whom made ceramics replicas (of buildings, of tools, of textiles, of furniture, etc.) to be used as substitutes for the real things in tomb offerings. These are not always, rarely in fact, realistic representations of the originals, yet they retain, in form, in color, in texture, even often in scale (although miniature examples are very common) sufficient aspects of the source to retain the operative power they carry, as implements for the use of the dead in the afterlife. Transferring these objects and diverse materials into ceramics provides them with resilience to time and a permanency they would not have otherwise. Here again, we find a symbiotic relationship between ceramic objects and death in its rituals, connected to transcendent time and eternity. An interesting example, among many, are Chinese Han and Tang dynasties funerary offerings of ceramic vessels imitating bronze containers, bronze being expensive and rare, thus reserved for the wealthy and the powerful, while the green glazed pots based on bronze prototypes, could be used as substitutes for those on the lower echelons of society. It seems that these ceramics imitations not only provided permanency and resilience to time (advantaged for objects meant to be buried in the ground and operate for eternity) but also embodied the potency of the originals, whether it be rare, expensive materials like bronze or a common, cheaper one, like cloth, fabric, wood or flesh. This substitution also detracted tomb robbers who would then be uninterested in the ceramic objects, worthless as commodities, yet potent symbolically for those making these offerings to the deceased. It is only recently actually, when railroads were first built in China in the last 100 years and numerous tombs were unearthed in the process, that archeologists and collectors, private and public, really became interested in the cultural and visual qualities of these objects. This transference of value from the material itself to the idea of the material as symbolic substitute is a characteristic of art's potential for transference of value, something probably first found in ceramics as well. This idea of substituting ceramic materials for other materials, a concept central to the simulation esthetics, finds its origin in tomb offerings and funerary rituals, examples of which can be found all over the world since the beginning of ceramic culture. This historical origin of the simulation esthetics may help to explain its continuous use all the way to this day and into the future as well, despite the fact that our culture has severed

the connection between ceramics and death, a connection we may consider reestablishing again.

A more domestic use of the simulation esthetics in Chinese ceramics can be found in the celadon glazed vessels beginning to be developed during the Song dynasty; these thick, viscous, translucent green glazes are often said to “imitate” jade or, if whiter and thinly applied, ivory. These types of glazes will be subsequently refined and evermore developed by successive generations of Chinese potters, at least until the end of the Ming Dynasty since, after that time, the genius of the Chinese potter is mostly directed toward creating new forms and new types of decoration than inventing new glazes, as had been the case before. These “imitative” glazes never strictly reproduce the quality of jade or ivory or other materials, since they always retain, while referring to other materials in ways that are more metaphorical, poetic than descriptive, aspects and qualities that are unique and specific to ceramics. In the Qing dynasty, the Chinese potter will continue in a more limited way this investigation and develop other glazes fully imitating precious metals, various stones like marble, quartz, lapis lazuli and others. The intent then is very clearly imitative and the best examples would make you believe that these objects are actually made out of these other materials and they retain little, if any ceramic attributes. Even the forms are referential to the other material the glaze imitates and are not specifically ceramic forms either. As such they may be amazing, impressive technical feats but they remain rather insignificant, esthetically.

Chinese potters have always reproduced, very faithfully often, ceramic pots of the past. If at times the intent was to deceive in creating a new object that could be passed for a much older one, thus enhancing its commercial value. Chinese potters also made these convincing reproductions as an homage to the genius of their ancestors and to clearly demonstrate that this genius had not been lost but could still be summoned to reproduce objects as good as the originals. This of course creates a huge problem with attributions in Chinese ceramics where a Song pot may actually have come down to us from the Song dynasty but may also be a convincing example from the Ming dynasty or even much closer to us still. To this day, Chinese potters make very convincing copies of old pots or even create completely original examples simulating old ones that fool even the experts. These are then sold as authentic on the art market, for very high prices, to unsuspecting amateurs.

Another example of the transubstantiation of materials can be found in 19th Century English teapots made with cheap earthenware, whose glaze has been completely covered with a reflective luster surface imitating silver, providing the poorer man with a credible substitute for a fashionable, expensive silver teapot. When a gold luster surface is applied to a ceramic object, it successfully realizes the ambitions of alchemy to achieve the fabled transmutation of a base substance into gold, since the clay object will fully appear to be made of metal. This is nonetheless but a cheap illusion, not anymore efficient than the various tricks of alchemists attempting the feat previously and unsuccessfully, of course. These kinds of “scientific” experiments with materials in their combination and chemical transformation in furnaces did lead nonetheless, and luckily for us, to the development of hard paste porcelain in Europe. The cheap illusion of lustered earthenware imitating precious metals at least provides an esthetic experience of some efficiency. In order for the metal luster to be bright and shiny, the ceramic object must be glazed, since metallic lusters in ceramics take the quality of the surface on which they are applied. The glaze also covers the overall form and softens its surface. Even if the form is a copy of a metal form, the new, glazed and lustered surface will have more attributes of a ceramic appearance than a metal one, which would be sharper and more detailed. Lusters themselves find their origin in 9th Century Persia, due to the forbiddance in the Koran in using metal for tableware. By powdering gold, silver or copper and mixing it with clay, the mixture could be applied to an already vitrified glaze surface and the object refired. In the reductive atmosphere of the kiln (reduction implies that the atmosphere inside the kiln is saturated with carbon instead of oxygen, which would produce an oxidizing atmosphere), the metallic compounds will be transferred to the glaze surface to create a shiny, reflective effect, a luster. Thus, in Islamic countries, the lustered surface “imitated” metal without the object being made of the forbidden material itself.

Some of the most efficient, charming and esthetically resolved ceramic objects imitating other natural objects are the numerous serving dishes, lidded containers and tureens made, particularly in England, but found all over Europe. These 18th Century objects are sometimes still in production today, at times at the very same factories that originated them. Like the work of Palissy, these objects bring the rustic and the domestic together, they safely bring the rural to the city and they combine nature and culture in an aseptic way, that makes them acceptable in their aristocratic context. Here again, we tend to judge these objects shaped like melons, cabbages and other natural forms (birds, hens, roosters and chickens are particularly popular), through the prejudiced and distorted

prism of our experience of more recent objects of that type which are much more cheaply made and which tend to be rather dubious in taste. The originals were on the contrary very well made and painted with great care and skill, and they were elegant, refined and sophisticated in their connection to the realities of use and function in food presentation, in ways that the contemporary giftware examples now found in souvenir shops do not, since their intent is almost purely decorative. They are meant more for display in cabinets, than for use on actual table. This loss of meaning through a cultural change in context is also symptomatic of much contemporary ceramics, and contemporary art, which has lost its significant connection to reality by moving into museums directly. Portugal is now the major source for these kind of vegetable inspired ceramics although China is taking over, as expected. I know of a large ceramic sculpture in the middle of a park there which represents a cabbage that must be two meters tall!

Three types of simulation:

Here again, as elsewhere in these essays, the original thoughts of Leopold L. Foulem permeate this text. See his “Trompe-l’oeil My Eye” and “Surface as Surface as Surface” both published in NCECA Journals.

It is important to distinguish three different approaches to mimetic simulation in ceramics. First we have the REALIST object, which has formal characteristics of another object without being identical, visually, perceptually, to it. Palissy’s work is actually of this type since the “illusion” is never convincing, on purpose, I believe. A realistic ceramic object is in the shape or form of another real object while it does not imitate it faithfully (a teapot in the shape of a shoe, for example, or even a ceramic shoe that only looks like a shoe in form only and has no other attributes of a shoe).

Then we have the HYPER-REAL (or SUPER-REAL) object, which looks exactly like its source but is not meant to deceive or to be perceived as identical to the original model. It may look believable as another material and it may behave in a possibly logical way but that behavior has been modified by the ceramic context. In this category, we are looking at objects that look real but do not behave in a logical, believable manner. The hyper-real object often has a connotation to surrealism in certain contexts. The SURREAL object implies a behavior on the part of the object that cannot possibly be achieved in the actual world. Like it does in a painting, for example, the surreal object in ceramics would have to

behave in an unexpected way and be contextualized so as to contest and challenge familiar experiences. Meret Oppenheim's "Breakfast in Furs" of 1929, a ceramic cup and saucer with a spoon, all covered in fur, is a good example.

And finally, we have the TROMPE-L'OEIL object, which is intended to deceive, to be so true to the original it portrays that one can be mistaken for the other. The trompe-l'oeil object is often humorous, funny, and it represents the lighter aspects of these three different types of simulations. All nonetheless are predicated on a high degree of skill and a technical approach to mimetic realism that is meant to impress, surprise, astonish, and can often be pushed to an impressive tour-de-force of technical savoir-faire. A ceramic object is only a trompe-l'oeil if we are fooled or deceived when we look at the object. Touching it usually, if not always, breaks the spell. Without touching, one may continue to believe in the illusion, uninterruptedly. A bona fide trompe-l'oeil example is a faithful imitation of the prototype. The degree of transferred reality and perceived realism is the operative factor in defining the categories between the realistic, the super-real (or hyper-real) and a fully trompe-l'oeil object.

Some Examples:

The Realist object:

All these cabbages, melons, fruits, vegetables, chickens and hens, rabbits, boar heads, fishes and so many other forms one can think of, all are transformed into ceramic objects that are to be classified under the category of realist objects. The intent here is never to deceive, to make believe, to pretend that a material (ceramics) is actually another one (say, the flesh and skin of a vegetable). If there is a certain mimetic intent, since both the form and the surface of these charming objects imitates the model that inspired them, one is never nonetheless fooled to believe that one is experiencing the real thing. The intent is more metaphorical and poetic, through the associations and memories they make possible, instead of illustrative and prosaic. In many ways, these rather unpretentious and unassuming objects operate at the second degree, they are more evocative than deceptive. Other historical examples of the realist object are the unglazed teapots of the Yi-Xing tradition in China. I have mentioned those previously in the classical esthetics chapter, since they have a bare clay, unglazed surface and their forms tend to be, until recently anyway, part of a limited, repeated repertory of shapes that are found barely altered over

centuries. The Chinese Yi-Xing esthetics comes from literati culture, where scholars, officials, bureaucrats and the literate class of society created a whole mode of living, with its own esthetics and ethics, in order to distinguish and remove themselves from the mass of ordinary people. The contemplation of beautiful, natural things, like gardens and rocks, as well as the culture of tea, its rituals and implements, played an important role in this esthetics, as it also does in Japan, but very differently within the tea ceremony, as we will see in “The Material Esthetics” chapter. Yi-Xing teapots, with their naturalness, their smooth, polished, unadorned surface, their earthy colors, their refinement and elegance, were particularly prized then and they have remained so to this day. Yi-Xing teapots are not always simulating other forms, they can also be geometric in their complex simplicity or again, generically classical, rounded and bloated in shape. Yet when, as they often do, they imitate real things, nuts, fruits, shells, flowers and plants (lotus, bamboo, etc.) or other materials like wood, metal or textiles, the intent is never to deceive or fool the eye, but simply to refer through poetic association, with the reference implied by the source.

This is what American ceramist Richard Notkin still does now. His work references Yi-Xing in form, in technique and in material while his references are contemporary and political and they offer a potent commentary on current issues. They are simulations of simulations, if you wish, imitating Yi-Xing teapots, which themselves imitate real things, another example, as we will see further, of ceramics imitating itself. On the other hand, Taiwanese ceramic artist Ah Leon may have succumbed in his teapots or large-scale sculptural installations to a mimicry that is more obvious, operating at the first degree. His work is blatantly descriptive, directly referential, imitative and, while breathtakingly impressive (at a skill based, technical level), it remains nonetheless facile and superficial, conceptually. They have more to do with context and content, instead. These objects, be they a teapot shaped like a wood log or a full scale, rotting wood bridge, are but simulacra, a reproduction for which an original doesn't exist. It is in that sense that in some way, they redeem themselves, as emblematic of a contemporary culture obsessed with materiality, with consumerism and with a nostalgic relation to history.

There can also be a specifically ceramic realist surfaces, where the ceramic surface imitates another material, wood and wood-grain being a good and common example. My favorite examples are Qing dynasty porcelain bowls imitating bowls made with wood, but never too convincingly, luckily, or even imitating wood implements, like buckets or basins,

in their form and in their surface, objects that would never have been made in ceramics to begin with, in a functional context.

The Hyper-Real or Super-Real object:

The hyper-real object is also realistic and offers a credible imitation of another object or material. Ceramics here again succeeds in imitating another material (wood, leather, metal are favorites) but the idea is not to deceive either. It is interesting to note that before the advent of plastics, ceramics was the best, possibly the only, material who could imitate other materials so readily and successfully. Again this is a characteristic of the material at the physical level and of the art form at the conceptual level that is intrinsic to it and distinguishes it from other materials and other art forms. What is distinctive about the hyper-real object is that it is contextualized in such a way that the deception that could otherwise take place cannot operate. The intent is to question how materials affect our perception in art experiences. The faux leather cups of Marilyn Levine are of this type. They have highly illusionist leather and metal surfaces, an illusion altogether reinforced and contested by the laces and zippers, which are actually real, yet their shape, a cup, equally contests our expectations and make us reassess our relationship to materials, and their hierarchies, in an art context. Since the form is that of a cup and their surface is that of old, weathered leather, these objects are not believable as actual things, since leather is not used to make cups, not cups with zippers and laces, anyway. There is an illusion, since clay is made to look like leather but the illusion is contested by the fact that the object is in the shape of a cup. If Marylin Levine's other ceramic sculptures, suitcases, old boots and shoes and leather jackets, are true trompe-l'oeil and operate in a psychological manner by directing then contesting our expectations as defined by experience, her hyper-real cups are much more conceptual and they question, by using a blatantly ceramic format, the cup, our habitual relation to the art form itself, pottery and by extension, ceramics.

The art installations of Kumiyo Mishima in Japan, where ceramic newspapers and bundles are used for similar ends or the sculptural assemblages of Karen Dahl, in Canada, are of this type. In Dahl's work, the juxtaposition of highly realistic ceramic imitations of books, fruits (cabbages are a favorite here as well), tools and toys in a context that is destabilizing and unreal creates the hyper-reality. Her work at times contextualizes the objects in ways that connects her art to surrealism, as well. The work of Californian David

Furman also belongs in the hyper-real category, for similar reasons. While the realism and confusion of materials is totally deceptive at first, the organization and presentation of the elements composing the tableaux are too unrealistic, on purpose, to be anything but hyper-real, transcending reality in obvious ways, such as when an rubber eraser (for example), in an arrested gesture, is seen drowning into a cup of coffee, all made in ceramics, of course. The scene depicted may appear real but the action, by being stopped, behaves in a hyper-real fashion. With the hyper-real object, the behavior is possibly logical but that behavior has been modified by the ceramic context. His work makes numerous, subtle references to ceramic objects, ceramic materials, techniques and processes, in ways that greatly inform the initiated but is nonetheless accessible to the neophyte who takes the time to observe closely.

The Trompe-l'Oeil object:

This type is, on the other hand, totally deceptive and is meant intentionally to deceive. The now ceramic objects are so believable as made from another material that they literally “fool the eye”. A bona fide trompe-l’oeil specimen needs to be a faithful imitation of the prototype. Yet, this make-believe scenario can only be short lived and, through touch usually, one is quickly brought back to a different assessment of the thing. The firm of Minton in England in the 1850’s, always at the forefront of innovative novelties, made plates and presentation dishes with “fake” nuts, fruits and vegetables that were presented as real to the unsuspecting guest who was then surprised to discover the trick since it was impossible to pick one of the specimen from the dish as they were all fused together to the pottery vessel itself. In these trompe-l’oeil dishes, the most interesting aspect, by far, is the conceptual nature of the dish itself. The ceramic plate here is not a real ceramic plate anymore, since it cannot actually be used as a plate. It is a ceramic plate that imitates a ceramic plate, and the object has now simply (simply!) become a sign for itself. The object has become an image and it operates exactly like the ceramic walnuts it contains, which are but representations. The realism of the plate as plate reinforces the realism of the faked nuts and produces the suspension of disbelief necessary for the object to operate successfully. Much glee and laughter could be generated from such games and many trompe-l’oeil ceramics made today still unfortunately belong to this category where the emphasis is on deferred, contradictory experience in order to astonish with the simple fact that this is actually made with clay and has been painstakingly, laboriously concocted to simply deceive and surprise.

Attempts have been made for a long time, repeatedly, to imitate flowers believably in such a fashion, never totally successfully. Flowers are just too complex, delicate and refined to transfer their elegance and lightness to clay readily. One is always reminded instantly that no flowers actually look or behave in such a fashion in reality. Ceramic flowers could be classified as realistic objects more than strictly *trompe-l'oeil*. Marie-Antoinette had soft paste porcelain flowers, mounted on metal stems, made for her garden at Versailles and even the addition of perfume to their corollas could not operate the magic. They are obviously ceramic flowers. An exception to this can be found in the flower sculptures made by Boehm in the USA. These are the only ceramic flowers I know, hand modeled with very thin, translucent porcelain clay, then realistically painted with enamels over *bisque* (unglazed, vitrified porcelain), that actually fool the eye. Their perfection of form (nature is never that perfect), their somewhat artificial and forced composition and presentation nonetheless quickly breaks the spell. Another interesting example, this one in hand-blown and enameled glass, can be seen in Boston at the Harvard Museum of Natural History. 4000 highly detailed and realistic models of plants, seeds, fruits and notably flowers are reproduced with incredible faithfulness, in glass, where their delicacy and preciousness as been altogether reinforced and arrested for us by the transference in this unusual, beautiful, colorful and luminous material. Yet, even here, one is always aware that one is looking at glass and this artificiality and transference makes the botanical studies shift successfully from nature to culture.

The true *trompe-l'oeil* sculptural object in ceramics too often presents a simple visual game of obvious deception, relying on word-play and facile associations between words and things, as well as the use of clever titles which reinforce the blatant literality. This reliance on one-liner jokes to operate is the main reason for their short-lived interest. The emphasis on sheer skill and technique, while bordering on magic to the uninitiated, relies heavily on “look what I can do, bet you can’t do the same” show-off bravado that, like magic, can reduce the experience to a succession of gimmicks, which we may not understand fully, yet remain nonetheless cheap tricks. The *trompe-l'oeil* in ceramics must be used judiciously in order not to fall into these clever but superficial traps.

The master of the genre remains Richard Shaw. His ceramic sculptures are neither realist objects or even strictly *trompe-l'oeil*, in themselves; they are a combination of the

two instead, assemblages, complex constructions of trompe-l'oeil objects and it is this distinction that makes them unique.

Another quirk of ceramic materials as they relate to simulation is that clay shrinks when fired, by as much as 15 to 20 %. Simulated ceramic objects are most often made from casts taken from plaster molds. These molds are usually, if not always, imprinted from real objects. When these objects are transferred into ceramics, they will be noticeably smaller than the original, and this visible shrinkage can change our reaction to intended verisimilitude present in trompe-l'oeil. The best and most refined artists take this shift in scale into consideration and use it to enhance the work, yet most simply either ignore it or use larger models to begin with (larger pencils, larger tools, larger fruits and vegetables, etc.) in order for shrinkage to be accounted for and retain full believability in the final sculpture.

Illusion and Representation:

The art experience, when dealing with the reality of the actual world, is predicated on the representation of that world. This often creates illusion: one thing, say an image, appearing as another, usually an object. If this is true of bi-dimensional representations, it is all the more true in the case of tri-dimensional representations where the suspension of disbelief is helped by the fact that there is concordance in space between the image (the representation) and the object represented, since both occupy the same actual spatial world of perceived experience. When this happens with actual, physical, yet “faux” nuts on dishes, for example, it combines together the unreal reality of the faked objects with the actual reality of the world, which the plate itself inhabits as a true object. We know the ceramic plate to be real so we expect even more the faux nuts to be as real as well. In this instance, and to stress this important point again, the plate is not real but represents instead the reality of plates, conceptually, as an idea for plate as image instead of plate as object.

Representation in art has been analyzed thoroughly by numerous experts. Mimesis itself plays a large role in esthetics as a particular branch of philosophy, more specifically phenomenology. It is often debated in esthetics whether too much of a mimetic approach does not actually deter from the artistic experience, that in order for imagination to actually operate, one must be aware that the visual material we are contemplating is not

real but a mere representation of something else that is real. Recently, the notion of simulacra (an reproduction for which there is no original) was developed by Jean Baudrillard. Simulacra is related to the simulation esthetics as I define it here. It has made more complex this premise by offering us a real experience that is a substitute for an imaginary one, reversing the classical order of things in art experience, where something unreal (an image) was representing something real, we now have something unreal representing something equally unreal, as a substitute for the real, which conceptually does not exist anymore.

According to the Antique rule and academism in art, art works are supposed to imitate nature faithfully, yet Plato in his perfect, utopian Republic, thought that art was not totally necessary, since it constituted a mere mimicry of appearances, and as such, it had little to do with reality and real experiences. It was inherently deceptive, a lie. This iconophobia of Plato may seem obsessive, possibly pathological (a pathology that will resurface within Modernism with its emphasis on abstraction, for example), but it nonetheless needs to be considered seriously. Its implication for simulated experiences of all kinds, including that of images, is profound, there is a danger that too faithful an imitation may reduce art to a simulacra, and the labor of the artist in an exercise in technical skill. An illusionism that simply imitates nature doesn't reveal anything (or too little). In ceramics, this dilemma may be avoided somewhat in the choice of the things that are imitated so that they operate a psychological narrative, metaphorical and poetic that captures and transmit a moment in time, like a three-dimensional photograph would.

Bag, Boxes, Boots and Books:

A somewhat interesting aspect of the simulation esthetics is the large number of ceramic objects that represent either bags and boxes, or books, or boots (and shoes). These seemingly diverse objects are of all three types of simulation: some are realist objects, referring to the original without being similar, others are hyper-real, perfect imitations contextualized to prevent visual deception, and yet others are trompe-l'oeil, factual imitations of real things, absolutely credible to the eye.

What is this obsession with bags, boxes, books and boots in ceramics means? Vegetables, notably cabbages, and fruits, notably melons, are also very common. Like bags, boxes, books and boots, they have an implied interior, which can be accessed when

the thing is opened, as it can be easily once transferred into a ceramic container. This phenomenon of using these types of objects to make ceramic forms is actually worldwide and we can also find historical precedents that are quite ancient. My theory is that ceramics is an ideal material for volumetric forms and most artists who use clay as a primary material were trained as potters first, and are not just interested intrinsically by these types of form but have an innate, at times intellectual understanding of their conceptual working as well. Ceramists wanting to move away from functional or decorative pottery forms (as a strategy, rarely successful... to be taken more seriously by the art world...), needed a new subject matter that, while being different and while using real objects as a referent for real, familiar, ordinary and possibly even domestic objects, the way actual pots are also real objects, would do so not so much literally but as representations, like painting, sculpture or photography would, for example. These artists nonetheless needed to retain, due to the limitations of the material itself, certain aspects of ceramics to generate specific forms. Bags, boxes, books and boots, and fruits and vegetables, are all (hollow) containers, they store, protect, hide, contain and displace as do pots. Books are also volumes, they contain information and transmit knowledge, as do pots. But beyond a formal connection between volumetric things, the intent of the makers of these bags, boxes, books and boots is actually conceptual, whether knowingly or instinctively. All containers are metaphorical in obvious ways (for bodies, notably), but more importantly, containers are non-hierarchical conceptually, they combine binary oppositions so prevalent in language and in institutional power structures. They reconcile opposites and unite differences, top and bottom, interior and exterior, front and back, image and object, etc. They are very complex and exciting forms to work with. Their potential for operating within various contexts, contents and concepts is great.

An important and under-rated ceramics artist who has made bags as a central subject for her work is Georget Cournoyer. It is important to make a very necessary distinction here since, contrary to the other artists discussed, she never negates the true physical nature of the medium she utilizes in creating her sculptures. The “clayness” of her bags is an intrinsic and essential component of the image. Her sculptures are realistic objects, not trompe-l’oeil. They are interpretation of real things, not imitations or simulations. They may be less clever or theatrical technically than other such objects, but they are all the more efficient and powerful as art, which is by definition about interpretation, over description. Her singular, very original work is related to the other

works under discussion here but remains nonetheless independent and intrinsically different, thus its importance.

The Simulation Surface:

The simulation esthetics also operates at the level of surface in a distinct and at times autonomous (from the form itself, that is) manner in ceramics, as we have seen with luster surfaces emulating metal. Similarly to the Han dynasty vases glazed green to imitate bronzes, British potter Colin Pearson devised a “glaze” containing a very high concentration of metallic oxides, notably manganese and copper, which, when fired produces a surface imitating patinated bronze, with golden highlights. Pearson usually uses such a surface on thrown pottery forms also derived and inspired by ancient Chinese bronzes, to great original effect. Simulated surfaces in ceramics imitating other materials or objects, has its own particularities, different from the simulated form. The simulated surface is rarely a trompe-l’oeil surface, meant to deceive. It is more hyper-real, since it is contextualized within the ceramic objects largely in opposition from it, and this contradiction between the object (who may or may not be itself simulated) in its form and the simulated surface as a distinct image, creates the particular tension found here, a visual tension that is again specific to ceramics as an autonomous art form. Similarly to painting, this simulation of illusionist ceramic surfaces never succeeds (luckily) as deceit. In painting, this perceptual deceit can actually be quite operational at times, due to the powerful mimetic capabilities of oil paint to capture spatial reality and, also, since the format of paintings, bi-dimensional and flat, refers directly to walls and/or windows, making possible a seamless transition between what is outside the frame (the real world) and what is inside (the image). On ceramic objects, the illusionist, simulated surface is most often found on pottery forms that prevent the credibility of the illusion to happen, in part due to the concavity and convexity of the surface over which the image rests and operates. Instead, this juxtaposition of a real object with an unreal yet illusionist image, creates a destabilizing opposition between the actual reality of the pottery form in the real world and the imaginary realism of the depicted surface. Again, this is a formal, esthetic aspect of ceramics that is specific to the art, where contradictory aspects are seamlessly combined to create a dynamic tension that energizes the work, visually and conceptually. This involves an engagement for the viewer to mentally reorganize that three-dimensional surface of the pot to impact and give an actual three-dimensionality to the objects painted on the surface. This represents a significant departure in representation and in esthetic

experience, since it brings intimately together the imaginative reality of the painted image with the physical reality of the world where the pot exists as an object. This is emblematic of the real complexity of ceramics, a complexity rarely understood or even explored by its practitioner, unfortunately.

Thus, we can have realistic, illusionist flowers painted on vases, or again shells or other marine forms (Worcester, Flight Barr and Barr period, notably). With shells painted on porcelain pots, the illusion can often be brought near the level of actual *trompe-l'oeil*, since shells, in their smooth, brilliant, shiny qualities are actually rather identical to the enameled, painted surface of glazed porcelain. The name “porcelain” actually comes from a cowry shell called in Italian a “porcella”, since its shape is somewhat reminiscent of that of a little pig. The material of that particular shell has a smooth, shiny, white and translucent surface like that of porcelain, hence the name given to the ceramics material when it made its way to Europe in the late Middle-Ages.

Another compelling and interesting example of the simulation surface is to be found in 18th Century European dinner wares where the overall surface of the dishes is painted to simulate the grain and color of wood, over which and equally simulated, painted faux print (usually an etching) of a bucolic scene or a landscape appears to be fixed to this wood paneling with a nail, complete with projected shadow and the curled, torn corners of the paper print seemingly sticking out. Nidervillier in France has produced the best, most realistic, accomplished and charming examples. Qing dynasty (mid 18th and 19th Century) porcelain bowls from China are also at times modeled to imitate wooden utensils and their surface is painted in a wood grain pattern to complete, not very successfully, hence their great charm, the illusion. The real wood bowls serving as model for these ceramic objects would have been very cheap, domestic, practical things, probably used for rather abject tasks like cleaning and washing, while their translation into porcelain renders them precious, expensive and highly valued. They have been displaced from the practical to the metaphorical, from nature to culture. The concept of abjection is also useful here. Succinctly, the abject is an element of the theory that defines a particular space between subject and object, in the transition that happens when a subject (say, a body) becomes an object (say, a corpse). In the abject, something can be foreign yet familiar, simultaneously perceived as both alive and not alive, real and unreal, at the same time. Palissy's work, as is much simulation esthetics ceramics, is abject in that sense too.

Ceramics imitating itself:

If ceramics and pottery forms have been imitating other materials and other forms and objects too, for a long time, it is only recently that ceramics has started to imitate itself, if we make abstraction of all the wares imitating previous wares found throughout the history of Chinese ceramics, where subsequent generations of potters would make exact reproductions of older wares, not so much as “fakes” (although they are often passed as such in the art market now) but as tangible proof that older, ancient knowledge had not been lost and to honor and show respect for ancestors whose work was emulated in this manner. We also find imitations of Greek Attic vases in early 19th Century Wedgwood wares and the Palissy revival of the mid 19th Century often created objects that were later thought to be or willfully passed for the originals, to enhance their appeal and market value. Personally, not only do I have no problem with fakes, I approve of them. They are an important aspect of human creativity and since they are often as good if not better even than the originals, they add more exciting material for potential esthetic experiences, and we do need more of these, particularly now, in a world where the esthetic has been removed almost completely from our lives, notably within art experiences.

A great example of ceramic fakes of great esthetic value can be found in the “Sano Kenzan” pottery wares and journals, made in Japan in the 30’s and 40’s, and successfully (for a while) marketed in the 1950’s as Ogata Kenzan (1663–1743) originals. These were then brought to the attention of Bernard Leach, himself part of the Kenzan lineage. Leach went on to authenticate the faked objects and even wrote a rather good book “Kenzan and his Tradition” on them. When the deception was uncovered, Leach was made a fool, unfortunately. It remains that these fake Kenzans are actually very good, very beautiful pots, so believable as originals that in my opinion their esthetic qualities should supersede their young age and their deceitful (commercial) intent.

This phenomenon of ceramics imitating itself, not only at the material or even the visual level but, most importantly for conceptual reasons, finds its first contemporary expression, once again, in the seminal, important and highly influential ceramic work of Michael Frimkess, in Los Angeles. Starting in the early 1960’s, Frimkess has continuously made challenging ceramic objects imitating, at times quite credibly, other historical ceramic objects, not only at the level of forms, as we have already seen in the classical esthetics chapter, or at the level of surface distinct from the form stylistically, as we have

seen with the narrative esthetics chapter, but here, in the simulation esthetics, combining the two, simulating both form and surface, appropriating both aspects for his own purposes. Why do such a thing, if, contrary to historical precedents of such simulations, the intent is not to deceive or to create a marketable fake? The intent here is, quite simply (!), conceptual. In Frimkess's work, a series of important reversals take place; porcelain and earthenware are replaced by stoneware, so the original material is now changed for another, quite different and new; or again, unglazed surface will now be glazed, yet imitate nonetheless the unglazed nature of the model copied; low fired enamels will be substituted for high temperature glazes, to imitate the former credibly just as well. There is also an emphasis on excess at the level of process, with the vessel being potted incredibly thin and then fired extremely rapidly. I have looked at other aspects of this work with more depth in the article "Michael Frimkess: A Reappraisal" published in *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. What is important to remember here is that the intent of the artist is to operate conceptually within a specific ceramics context, by denying the importance of originality, of a personal vision in art, denying as well the necessity for stylistic and esthetic invention, while reaffirming instead the universality and timelessness of ceramics as an art form, where the constancy of form and the iconic nature of surfaces can become stereotypical and provide valid and potent prototypes for new ways of contextualizing and experiencing objects and practices now.

To contrast this sophisticated, political approach of Frimkess, in the recent past, a large number of potters have been engaged in a curious exercise consisting in reproducing, at times as faithfully as possible, Japanese tea-ware related to the tea ceremony and made in Japan during the Momoyama period and all the way to today. I somewhat understand that contemporary Japanese potters would want to do such a thing, to make such objects, but even then, I have reservations. A lot of wood-fired ceramics, a recent obsession of the field, is of this type. Why not make pots that are relevant now instead of recapturing, however well (and many of these examples are incredibly faithful to the originals, not an easy feat), a distant past, evermore so a different culture? When objects of this type were first made, they were deeply meaningful to those who made them and to their community, for which they were made. They reflected closely and efficiently the time and the culture that produced them. They made total sense. They represented the genius of these people in a very creative, inventive, refined and totally new manner. When such objects are produced now, whether it is in Japan, in New Zealand (for example), or anywhere else, what sense do they make? Are they nothing more than imitation,

simulation, possibly even actual illusions? They actually remind me of another strange, disturbingly perverse contemporary phenomenon, which consists in making plastic dinnerware (industrially produced in large quantities), imitating hand-made and even hand painted pottery forms. The Japanese particularly are altogether criminal and victim of this weird, perverse, if somewhat funny practice. It probably originates in industrially produced ceramic utensils that were made to look as if they were hand made and hand painted, with interior faux spirals imitating throwing marks and a faux painted “brushstroky” decoration, actually transfer printed. One has to look at these objects very closely to see the subterfuge. Usually, their identical shape and identical decoration, from object to object, something impossible in a truly hand made objects, gives the trick away. Most sushi restaurants worldwide use these types of “faux” (plastic) handmade ceramic dishes, since they are much cheaper. Who can tell the difference, anyway? Even worse, who really cares? At least with the plastic ones, you know you are not being taken for a fool. But I also know of examples made in Lebanon, where plastic dishes imitate traditional thrown and decorated white on red slipware and also from Guatemala, where traditional, “pre-Columbian” unglazed, terracotta water jars are now made in gaudily colorful striped plastic, as well. Even in China today, one finds water buckets, traditionally hand made in wood in a very specific shape and now faithfully reproduced, wood grain and all, in molded plastic...

Some other contemporary examples:

I called them the children of Palissy. Many contemporary artists working in ceramics are following in his footsteps of excessive, florid, organic assemblages of images and forms that rework in our actual context his seminal and so influential experiments of the 16th Century. I think particularly of Viola Frey in her large, pictorial yet modeled platters, of John de Fazio in his collages of detritus coming from our post-industrial yet highly consumerist culture, and of Annabeth Rosen or even Linda Sormin, among many others, whose work, while remaining usually non-representational, nonetheless exhibits the same organic exuberance and tactile confidence in transformation as the others, including Palissy himself. Their work embodies, in all of its crude yet convincing physicality, another aspect of ceramics, the particular and crucial relationship to time. In the case of DeFazio, by taking discarded, cheap, throw away and impermanent objects from pop culture and translating them into ceramics, their nature is changed from transitoriness to permanency. Our present experience of these objects will then be passed on to others, those who will

follow us. De Fazio's work also incorporates ceramic imitations of ceramic objects, usually tasteless knick-knacks, which exemplify the notion of ceramics imitating itself.

Richard Milette is, once again, an independent case. He has been making for many years, a serious and committed body of work exploring the nature of ceramics and our relation to it in contemporary culture. A wide variety of diverse objects, teapots, jars and vases are assembled from what appears at first glance to be broken ceramic shards coming from various periods of ceramics history. Each one of the shards composing the form has been faked at two levels: First, each fragment is individually made, it is a simulacra, a familiar reproduction for which no actual original exists. Secondly, their recognizable historical surfaces are credible imitations. They too are faked. In his work, if we can accept the pictorial, visual reproduction of leather, wood or fabric made with ceramics as credible trompe-l'oeil, then we must also accept and welcome Faux-Mimbres, Faux-Wedgwood, Faux-Meissen or Faux-Limoges. This is a potent and exemplary use of the potential for ceramics to imitate itself in exploring its own meaning. In Milette's work, the black areas are to be interpreted as leather and the silver and gold additions are supposed to be metal parts. They all allude to fetishism in minority sexual practices as well as to the fetishism related to the preciousness of material within a cultural context (the work is made with earthenware but it simulates porcelain), and the fetishism around artifacts in a museum or collection context. It also critiques the fetishism towards certain types of materials and certain types of objects in art experience and institutional display.

In conclusion:

My first impression, when I first became aware of the works to be considered under the simulation esthetics, many years ago when I was first a student (and I still see myself as one), was basically negative. Personally, I do not like these types of works very much. I am not attracted to their esthetics, it doesn't appeal to my sensibility. I couldn't find a way to explore or integrate it in my own work, for example. The closer I got, eventually, was in the exploration of its potential in "quilted" teapots which refer to soft, textile surfaces in a realist way but are not imitative in intent or in context. Yet, by analyzing its history and its contemporary applications, I have come to appreciate and value its potential. First, the simulation esthetics has a long history and that history is universal, and in many important ways, specific to ceramics. At the same time, it seems to be a particularly recent, contemporary phenomenon, at least in term of frequency and current distribution.

In many ways it could be successfully argued that the simulation esthetics is a specifically ceramics phenomenon and cannot be found to this extent and to this degree of complexity anywhere else, in other art forms. In sculpture, somewhat similar works can be found but they are usually made with resin and, logically, their operative context is that of sculpture, which, as I have said repeatedly before, has basically nothing to do with ceramics...Although each art form has a lot to learn from and teach to the other, something that unfortunately still remains to happen, in most cases. Like all other esthetics specific to ceramics, it also has a very distinct relation to time and to permanency, in the archival potential of ceramics. Its relation to containers as form of experience, to containment as a concept particularly relevant in ceramics as well as to various forms of contents, is also complex and rich in possibilities, which are, unfortunately, not always explored as successfully and as deeply as they could or even should be.

The particular phenomenon of ceramics imitating itself is in my opinion its most interesting and relevant contemporary aspect. The simulation esthetics can embody an esthetic intent that reveals the potential for ceramics to be a particularly efficient art form engaged with a philosophical discourse on the nature of human experiences and situations, in ways that no other art form could possibly do or demonstrate.

Simulation is arresting; it slows, even stops your experience of the work. It does so by making one ask a simple question: "How?", through technical prowess. It also does so in order that another question may be asked: "Why?", which engages meaning.

If the simulation esthetics too often falls into the easy trap of facile visual tricks or flashy display of skills and techniques, it remains nonetheless a valid and polyvalent format as it serves to fix in a ceramic material, other materials that are much more fickle and impermanent, rendering timeless and eternal what would otherwise disappear. By holding at bay the ravages of time, these ceramic objects capture, more permanently than photography or other forms of archives, a record of a specific time, place, people, events, and transmit that experience into the future. Esthetically as well as conceptually, simulation in ceramics has a unique and specific role to play in the potential for this art form to act on culture in ways that are unique and distinct from any other art form.

Other artists to consider:

Julie Bartholomew, in Australia, Bertozzi and Casoni in Italy, Christine Viennet at Chateau de Raissac in France, and her Palissy inspired platters, not nearly as efficient as the originals, though. Jenny Stlozenberg, in Canada, whose recreations of single shoes in ceramics serve as a memorial for the countless victims of the Holocaust; in Montreal, Michel Harvey has been making ceramic paper bags, rocks, branches and logs, and various other objects and materials transformed into ceramic vases which are marketed very widely. In the USA, Martha Holt, Victor Spinsky and Nan Smith and her still-life tableaux, Paul A. Dresang's faux leather bags for teapots, Sylvia Heyman trompe-l'oeil assemblages of baskets, letters and paper rolls, Alice Mara's digital prints of a sink on a dinner plate. Many ceramists use plant forms with various degrees of realism in their work, among them Kate Malone, Kiesuke Mizuno, Bonnie Sleeman and Ying Yueh Chuang. Noteworthy are the exceptional works of Jason Briggs with references to flesh, skin, body orifices but also rubber and leather and incorporating actual pubic hair. Also Maryam Webster's "Monsanto Pond" which revisits Palissy through social commentary and the deformation found in wildlife due to PCB pollution. Within a design sensibility, the Jellyfish lamp of Colgwaito, the gourmet collection of Tin Cans by Lorena Banezueta, and the vessels based on rocks by Swiss artist Philippe Barde. Similarly, Jennifer Holt's "Metaphor for Memory" funnels and buckets. Farther back in time, the Brothers Kirkpatrick jugs with snakes (and Georger Ohr's teapots with snakes) or grotesque faces with broken porcelain shards for teeth.

Chapter Six

The Industrial Esthetics: Purity and Perfection

In most people's mind, there might be a tendency to think that the industrial esthetics in ceramics is a product of the industrial revolution that swept England, Europe and America in the 19th Century. Nothing could be farther from the truth. If the industrial esthetics is largely informed by industrial processes, where mechanization of production, multiple reproduction and perfection of product are the norm, industrial modes of making in ceramics, or elsewhere, have existed for a long time prior to the 19th Century and have had a profound influence on the development of an esthetics informed by mechanical processes, by multiples, by ideal forms as well as the division of labor. Such an esthetic has specific aspects within ceramics. In fact what is usually understood as an industrial esthetics is more a construct of 20th Century Modernism, with its emphasis on a reductive approach to form and a minimalist relation to decoration, than to the industrial revolution of the 19th Century.

Industrial modes of production based on a division of labor and worker specialization have actually been a landmark of ceramics manufacturing for a long time. Since the beginning of sedentary living and agriculture in the Middle East and in Asia, around 8000 years ago, pottery villages were established near larger urban centers. In these villages were located specialized production, be it metal work or pottery making, and the two are actually often linked and will develop in close proximity, since they both

imply similar technologies and equipments (kilns, furnaces) and the use of the same materials (clay, wood, other combustibles). In these villages, from the Neolithic on, all the different tasks involved in production would have been the exclusive domain of a specialized labor force and each object would necessitate the collaboration between multiple experts. From as early as 1900 B.C.E. in Egypt, a Middle Kingdom painting shows a pottery workshop complete with kiln, potter working at the wheel, as an assistant wedges clay. Many more people were also certainly involved. This is where industrialization really began.

Historically, here again it is the Chinese culture that deserves credit for leading the way. In China, since the Bronze Age in fact (5000 years ago) can be found the earliest examples of the use of fired clay molds to cast identical objects made of metal. These multiple part molds were made with clay, which would be dried then fired, and they could be reused repeatedly to cast identical new objects, notably arms and weapons. Such complex fired clay molds were also used to cast ritual vessels for political, religious and funerary purposes. Ordinary, domestic, usual and functional containers were made of more ordinary and much cheaper fired clay. Ceramic molds were thus first used not to produce other ceramic objects but to cast metal, a function for which fired clay is ideally suited. The making of ceramic objects using molds, at the production level the central characteristic of the industrial esthetics, comes later. Molds will be used in Mesopotamia for making votive figurines; then the Greeks will also use clay molds to model Tanagra figures (as we will see in the chapter on “The Figure and the Figurine”), and then for certain type of pots as well, those whose shape could not be made easily by hand or on the wheel, the favored tool for making pots. For example, molds were needed to make drinking vessels called rhytons, shaped with zoomorphic or anthropomorphic attributes, usually the head, although hands and feet and other body parts also exists. This use of molds will continue in Roman times as well as in pre-Columbian America, in the various classic periods of the different cultures. Fired clay molds were used in all these periods and cultures for their efficiency and to repeat identical forms (an aspect of the classical and industrial esthetics) but also to produce shapes that could not be easily and readily produced otherwise, often figurative and representational. The intent of using molds was not exclusively economical or practical and most of the forms thus produced take advantage of the added complexity molds permit, at the level of form as well as surface (with intricate carved and modeled decoration imbedded within the mold, as often found in Roman terra-sigillata wares or Chinese Song bowls, made from fired clay molds to be

efficiently generated in multiples, for examples). This complexity and richness found in historical ceramics made from molds is in stark contrast with 20th Century wares whose simplicity of form and paucity of ornamentation is basically given by economical pressures of efficiency to reduce cost and augment productivity and also by the utopian, ideological hegemony of Modernism and Modern design in its abhorrence of decoration, in order to maintain its distinctiveness from the past and its current claim to universal legitimacy.

Molds themselves are very interesting objects. They imply a number of reversals and, as I mention often, reversals are one of the central operative mode of ceramics and pottery. To make a mold, it is necessary to first model or use a positive form, which is usually a solid mass. From that model, whether made or appropriated, an imprint is made from another material, usually plaster, but historically and until the early Renaissance, this material was also clay. If clay is used to make the mold, the material is pressed against an aspect of the model and this will generate one of the parts of the mold (molds are usually constituted of multiple, individual parts that are reassembled and fitted together to serve as a matrix to make new forms). After firming up for a while, the clay imprint is removed from the model, then dried and fired in order to make it stronger but also, most importantly, porous, so that the mold will then readily absorb moisture when fresh plastic clay is pressed inside its interior cavity. The porosity of the mold will rapidly stiffen the new clay object, which can then be released from the mold so that a new identical object can be made. Molds can thus be reused, often hundreds of times. Plaster molds, on the other hand, are made somewhat differently, by pouring liquid plaster over a defined section of the model, and this process is repeated for each part of the mold. The plaster will quickly set and harden and then the molded part can be removed from the original form. After it dries, plaster doesn't require to be fired (like a clay mold would) but can be used right away (although it is better to dry it first to remove the moisture content) to make multiple new forms. Plaster is thus easier, quicker and cheaper to use than clay to make molds and as soon as these properties were discovered, plaster will be used universally to make molds and to cast and produce ceramic objects.

This idea of reversal implied by molds needs to be expanded. The original model from which a mold needs to be made is basically a form as a solid mass. Yet, the similar object coming out of the mold will be a hollow volume. The process implies a transformation from a positive (the solid mass of the original model) to a negative (the concave space within the mold), to a new positive again (the new ceramic object), which is

nonetheless not a solid but a volume. Thus, a solid becomes hollow, a void becomes a physical presence, a concave space becomes a convex form; these reversals of binary opposites presented in continuity are all characteristic of molds as tools to create objects that are identical multiples. Ceramics and pottery making are at the origin of these technological and conceptual developments. These imply an expanded way to relate to reality and the physical world and as such they are central to the development of abstract thinking and spatial conceptualization by humans. It is important to note that the first molds were actually made by potters (for metal casting) and the discovery of molds is a ceramics invention.

Most molds now used in the industrial process to make ceramic objects are made of plasters. I have never been able to find out when exactly plaster was introduced to produce molds for ceramics. I believe it is sometime in the 16th Century and Bernard Palissy, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, was probably one of the first, possibly the originator as well, to use plaster molds to cast his live forms and make his wares. Luca della Robbia, who also made casts from life, fruits and vegetables, may also have been using plaster to make his molds, as early as the beginning of the 15th Century. Prior to that time, although plaster has been known as a building material since at least Roman times, all molds to make ceramics were made of fired clay themselves. Plaster being a cheaper and easier material to use, it will replace fired clay as soon as it is introduced and it has been in constant use since. Since porosity is a central requirement for molds to cast ceramic objects, this will probably be the case until a new, more efficient material is found. The use of plaster to make molds is certainly European in origin and from there it dispersed all over the world. Plaster molds are now everywhere the preferred mode of transformation of clay to make ceramic objects.

Casting slip probably has a similar European origin. A casting slip is a liquid form of clay where the clay particles behave in a liquid form not so much through the addition of water to the mix, as one would expect, but through a chemical process called defloculation, where an alkaline salt (also called an electrolyte) is added to the clay mixture in order to reverse the natural electrical, magnetic attraction between the clay particles, so that they now repel each other, instead. This transform an otherwise plastic clay mass into a liquid form that can then be easily poured into a mold where the casting slip will rapidly build as a shell against the plaster wall of the mold, since very little water is present in the clay itself. The excess liquid clay is then poured out of the mold and the

new, hollow clay object is left inside, where after setting for a short while, it can be removed. Plaster molds, slip casting and defloculation were seminal technological advances in ceramics and I would be very curious to find out where, when and by whom they were (simultaneously, possibly) developed. I have never come across a clear answer to this question, anywhere, before.

Molds are also fascinating and particular in other ways. They actually imply an esthetic loss. When an original is translated into a mold and then reproduced in another material, be it clay or any other one, the new objects are not exactly identical to the original. First, the new clay object will shrink as it dries and then shrink again as it is fired so that it will be substantially smaller (up to 20%) than the original model. In this process, not only the size but also the actual physical presence of the original is altered, reduced even, by its transference through casting. It is as if a diminution of life, a minor death had taken place. The forms coming out of molds are but remnants of the original, ghost forms really, and if they reproduce certain aspects of the original, they nonetheless imply a loss, a reduction of the qualities of the original form. This effect is not major, it is rather subtle in most cases, but nonetheless real and there is a notable esthetic difference between the original model and the reproduced form given by the mold. Actually, this is also one of the operative aspect of the simulation esthetics, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, and one of the main emotional response the simulation esthetics triggers implies such a discomfort coming from this morbid aspect of cast forms. Again, this implies an abject reaction as well, when something can be simultaneously foreign yet familiar, perceived as both alive and dead, at the same time. This effect is particularly evident with casts made from life, for example a face-mask taken from a living subject. Any impression taken from such a mold will always appear lifeless, dead even, although the model was very much alive when the cast was made. It is something to be aware of when casts are made from live models and a danger, a trap where many have fallen by ignoring this aspect of incomplete transference. The artist Ah Xian who often works with cast porcelain figures, evades this problem to a degree by painting the surface of his figures, heads and torsos, cast from life, with an overall surface decoration that imply an inner life for the subjects, as if in a dream. Bernard Palissy, who made plaster casts from dead animals to make his magnificent ceramic plates never makes that mistake when casting forms from life since his intent is never faithful imitation and believability. His work always remains highly artificial and the "illusion" operates above all psychologically and is never believable as a perception. His platters are studies in the contrast between nature and artifice, between

naturalism and artificiality, in a deep relation between life and death. His imitators in the 19th Century (and today) largely fail by using the same process while going too far into faithful reproduction, imitation and simulation, without an understanding of this potential pitfall. This is also often the case within contemporary uses of the simulation esthetics, as stated before.

A few more notes on a brief genealogy here. It is usually accepted that the forming of clay objects to make fired pottery is closely related to prior developments in basketry and weaving. The earliest fired clay objects may have been made by lining with clay the interior of a gourd or another natural, organic form, a woven basket or a leather pouch, possibly; when the result was placed on a heat source, a bonfire for example, the organic material caught fire and the clay lining remained as a fired form, now strong and permanent. Yet, many early ceramic vessels (the earliest were long believed to come from the Jomon culture of Japan, 12,000 years ago, but recent discoveries have pushed that date to 18,000 years ago in fired clay vessels found in fragments in Neolithic caves, in China) bear imprints of woven baskets and ropes or cords, due to the particular properties of clay to readily take impressions from any and all surfaces it comes into direct contact, the fingers and hand prints of the potter for example (providing us with an instantaneous connection with another human individual over millennia at times) and with the environment of tools and utensils in the surroundings. It is most certainly possible to deduct that the first pots were made by women, since they were in charge of the hearth, but also of gathering and cooking food and their proximity to fire and the need to use fire in domestic tasks must have given them the necessary knowledge to discover that clay can be fired and when it is, it acquires very important properties.

The genealogy of the ancestral family tree of ceramics and pottery reads as follow, with the subsequent discoveries of fire, then clay, then modeled figurines and fired figurines, followed by pots and fired pots, raw clay bricks then fired bricks and kilns, crucibles (high fired clay pots used for casting metal), fired clay molds and finally the possibility to cast bronze and other metals in multiples. Ceramics technology was for the longest time at the forefront of material discoveries, of scientific and technical developments and this is still true to this day. Ceramics technology is also at the origin of metal technology, as we have seen, and it precedes it. Metal and glass technologies were developed through the influence of pottery since potters had thousands of years of

experience working with fire. These technologies nonetheless flourished in tandem over time, ceramics being at the core of both since their beginning.

The production of cast bronze in China also necessitated the use of a highly skilled, specialized work force and the division of labor, as it did for pottery, for example. Many different processes were involved, from mining and processing the raw materials, making original clay and/or wax models, making and firing clay molds, fabricating and firing ceramic kilns and metal furnaces, pouring the melted metal, grinding and finishing the object, etc. Making implements out of cast metal was specialized and each worker involved in the intricate, complex processes mastered each independent aspect completely. Depending on the product being manufactured, ceramics, bronze, silk or others, a large number of highly skilled, specialized workers could be used. When French Jesuit Father d'Entrecolles makes his way to Jingdezhen, China, in the 17th Century, he will define 72 distinct processes thus 72 different hands necessary to produce a porcelain object from start to finish. This industrial application on a large production scale is first found to such degree of systematization in China, centuries if not millennia before it makes its way to the Western world during the 19th Century industrial revolution. Although Greek and Roman pottery was also manufactured on an industrial scale it did not actually use industrial processes and the extreme, highly specialized division of labor found in China, since Greek and Roman pottery are technologically simpler and require less different processes and expertise, from start to finish, than Chinese ceramics does. The same is true of pre-Columbian ceramics as well, which are also not glazed, for example, and this simplifies the process and reduces the necessary steps to complete a piece.

All over the world since the origins of ceramics probably, pottery making has been a collective, collaborative enterprise by whole villages of potters sharing resources, materials, kilns and labor, generally making wares that were undistinguishable from maker to maker, workshop to workshop, village to village and even within whole countries and cultures over vast expanses of time. This way of making identical things in large quantities will also create supply and demand that will generate exchange among and between communities, sometimes far away, and foster trade and commerce, and the development of complex economies and eventually, of capitalism. Ceramic objects coming from far and wide are very often found in archeological digs all over the world and their presence in this context is very useful in assessing trade and commerce for this particular

culture at that time, as well as its economic development. Theories abound around the expeditions, travels and explorations of people (the Chinese, for example, most recently), but it is important to remember that objects travel with more ease than people and the fact that Chinese pots (for example) are found somewhere doesn't necessarily mean that Chinese people were themselves actually there. The presence of an object somewhere is not sufficient evidence for the actual presence of the maker or even the trader from that culture on the site. Similarly, to imply that a culture has been somewhere when there is no evidence of objects from that culture to be found, implies the working of imagination and arbitrary speculation more than actual fact. As seen with the examples of commerce and trade, developments in ceramics technology, materials and processes as well as esthetics changes are at the core of important cultural, social and economic developments that will have significant importance in historical events and the progress of humanity. One of these will be at the level of warfare.

Ceramics in war and in life:

Today, when hunters want to practice their skill with firearms, they do so by shooting fired clay disks (called "birds") projected in the air. Ceramic objects are thus used in various ways in relation to hunting and killing, in peace as in war.

We have already seen the importance of ceramics technology in the production of cast metals and the making of arms and weapons. Archeologists have recently discovered the remnants of a 5,000 years old city in Syria whose unfired clay brick walls were brought down by projectiles probably propelled by large slings. These large bullets and balls were found in large number during the excavations of the destroyed city and they are all made of clay, probably dug and shaped on site and then thrown at the walls to bring them down, while the clay still contained moisture, since they all have a flat side, at the point of impact. This early use of clay in warfare will quickly develop. When the raw clay bricks of the walls are eventually fired and made stronger to resist attacks (possibly a major reason for firing them in the first place), then the clay projectiles will be fired too. In AD 199, the Romans attacking a city in Irak (!) lobbed pottery vessels filled with scorpions inside the walls of the city under siege. Hannibal had his sailors do the same 400 years earlier when he attempted to conquer Rome, by filling his ceramic pots with venomous snakes and throwing them unto the boat decks of the defending Roman fleet. The simple fact that pottery vessels are strong enough to be projected yet weak enough to be broken on

impact is crucial to their use here. It is believed that in Neolithic times, plugged beehives may have been tossed into caves to clear them of wildlife or enemies hidden therein.

When the Chinese first invented explosives, they found military applications quickly. Their advanced knowledge of ceramics also serves them well. They make large fired clay hollow bombs shaped into balls with spikes and they fill them with powder and an early version of shrapnel (broken pots and porcelain shards, sharp and cutting). The explosive devices can then be projected at a target, after setting a fuse on fire. The explosive powder would not have been powerful enough to break apart a metal bomb, but could do so readily with a ceramic one that could inflict great damage. Here again, ceramics and death are closely related through war. During wartime in many diverse cultures, pottery making would be deemed an essential service and potters were thus exempt from going to war. Their services were nonetheless required for warfare anyway.

There are many examples of contemporary uses of ceramics in war as in life. Here are a few:

Closer to us, many types of bodily armor worn by soldiers now are composed of numerous high fired ceramic plaques inserted into special vests. Due to the fact that the specially devised ceramic material has the strength of steel yet is much lighter and will not retain heat readily (both obvious disadvantages of metal), it will stop bullets from penetrating further into the target.

The CIA has now developed a ceramic gun with ceramic bullets that, while as strong as steel, cannot be detected by metal detectors and can be secretly introduced into secure areas. Needless to say, the secret of their fabrication and location is kept secret, lest they fall into the hands of terrorists. Recently developed new ceramics are the only non-metallic materials able to withstand the necessary internal pressure caused by the explosion within the gun, and necessary to expulse the projectile. Ceramics will certainly find other military uses again and its specific material properties will find new applications. Ceramic knives could also be more easily brought into secure areas as they remain undetectable by magnetic screeners, unlike metal.

The space shuttle while returning to earth encounters the friction of the atmosphere, which produces very high heat. It is protected underneath with heat resistant ceramic tiles

that protect the shuttle from melting and disintegrating completely on re-entry. This unfortunately happened recently to space shuttle Columbia when some of its tiles fell off during lift-off, which caused the unsuspected destruction of the shuttle and its cargo during its return to earth.

Recently we have seen ads for high tech, expensive watches promoting the advantages of their ceramic components. Computer chips are also silicon based and rely on ceramic materials for their working and their memory, until developments in carbon based (organic) computers, similar to the brain, are perfected and come to replace them. Solar panels also rely on the properties of silicon crystals to be effective. Ceramics are also essential components of CD players, of the electronic ignition in cars, of transistors radios, of televisions, of satellite communication systems. Spark plugs in a car internal combustion engines have an insulating part made of porcelain and the earliest example of spark plugs were actually thrown on the potter's wheel. Farther back in time, we find fired clay lamps, filled with oil and used for millennia to light rooms. The Baghdad battery dates from 200 B.C.E. It consists of a small earthenware jar (an insulating material, which explains why electrical insulators are also made of porcelain), enclosing a copper sheet rolled into a tube, while the base is a copper disk held in place with asphalt as the top is also sealed with the same material. It can produce an electrical charge between 1.5 and 2 volts and may have been used, in combination with others all connected together to apply metal to metal through electrolysis.

Cloaking structures made of meta-materials, including ceramics, can now channel microwaves around an object and hid it from view, rendering it invisible. Such a "cloak of invisibility" works by reducing, even eliminating the light reflected from the object it covers while simultaneously eliminating its shadow as well, either of which would enable the detection of the hidden object.

At the University of Toronto, researchers are growing organic like, porous silica structures of great beauty, through crystalline shapes that self assemble themselves on the surface of organic molecules, in a way similar to how shells, bones and other inorganic materials take shape in living organisms.

The Japanese ceramic manufacturer Kyocera now produces ceramic knives for cooking and scalpels for surgery whose cutting edge hold their sharpness indefinitely.

They never rust nor stain and they never requires sharpening. They can also be easily sterilized in a microwave oven (contrary to metal). They are made with specially formulated alumina/zirconium clay that is not easily breakable since the silica crystal, which makes fired clay so fragile and brittle, has been removed from the composition. It has so far received limited application due to its high cost of production and the need to fire it at excessively high temperature to bound and fuse the silica free material, since a higher alumina content may add strength but also requires a higher temperature to process. The blades of these ceramic knives and scalpels are polished and sharpened with diamond abrasives, the only material hard enough for the job. They can be dropped on cement without breaking yet they remain relatively easy to chip or to snap, if used as a lever.

New types of objects highly resistant to shock and breakage yet made with ceramics technology will be developed and continue to appear on the market. Corundum is such a material with such properties; it is incredibly smooth, highly vitrified, highly translucent, very light and thin yet incredibly strong and resistant to high heat, contrary to plastics, which it resembles aesthetically. A ceramic object made with this new material can also be dropped on a cement floor without breaking.

It is interesting to note that the collections of plastic objects in modern design museums are progressively deteriorating to eventually, and sooner than later, lose their colors first then their physical integrity to finally destroy completely as they progressively crumble. This will also happen to computer disks made of plastics and so many other recording devices we now consider archival. If humanity had discovered plastics during the Neolithic instead of ceramics, our knowledge of history would be greatly diminished and archeology as a science greatly diminished too. What then of the archeology of the future?

Ceramic materials and ceramic technologies are finding new applications everywhere, even if some of them are quite ludicrous: ceramic hair straighteners, massage beds with radiant infra-red heat transmitted through ceramic components, etc. Laundry detergents can now be replaced with ceramic balls contained in a plastic sphere, which clean clothes without adding pollutants to the water. A new paint for cars is also being developed which has the property to change color depending on weather or temperature. This “nanotech” paint contains cheap silicon spheres decorated with gold dots that act like glue to snap the tiny spheres together into tiny controllable clusters that behave to reflect

light like the surface of pearls, or opals, or butterfly wings. These clusters then cling together and will expand or contract depending on the ambient temperature. This will change the color of the paint. Going from Alaska to Mexico, your car's color would then progressively and dramatically change as the temperature rises or cools. Why not develop ceramic glazes that would also change color depending on temperature?...A recently devised paint for coating ocean-going metal boats also contains a high proportion of micro ceramic spheres which makes the paint 20 times more resistant to wear which saves on cost as well as on environmental contamination.

Researchers and engineers in science laboratories collaborating all over the world have recently manufactured a perfect sphere in order to refine with absolute precision the weight of a kilogram. This object is 10 cm. in diameter. It is the world's roundest sphere, basically perfect in shape. It is made with isotopes of silicon 28 and took five years to make and cost \$3.2 million dollars to produce. By making such a perfect sphere with 99.99% silicon (and silica is the basis of all ceramics), they can now calculate how many atoms are in the sphere and define exactly the weight of a kilogram. Silicon is ideal for the task as it is a stable element, that will not fall victim to moisture, corrosion or contamination and this will ensure its stability for future times. The previous kilogram standard, known as the International Prototype was an object susceptible to damage from earthquakes or environmental changes and it would lose mass over time. This new, perfect silicon sphere weighing exactly one kilogram is in a spherical form so as not to lose atoms over time, something that would eventually happen to an irregular form.

Prosthetics in medicine and surgery are often ceramics. They are used to repair bones, as joint implants, ear implants as well as artificial hearts. Ceramics is inert and non-corrosive, distinct advantages when inserted in bodies. The obvious esthetic qualities of porcelain are evident in dental implants as well. The first real (!) cyborg will probably be as much ceramics as metal or any other materials.

Many more such examples will be added, eventually.

Towards a standard; a critique of perfection and of authenticity.

In "A Potter's Book", Bernard Leach makes the case for a specific standard under which functional pottery should be made and appreciated. Much of this standard is

articulated around a reaction to industrial wares and the developing industrial esthetics informed by Modernism in ceramics. His thinking was also informed by socialism and humanism and the writings of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement as well as the “mingei” esthetics of Japanese folk arts. Leach uses as an ideal model the pottery made during the Song dynasty in China as well as the folk potteries of the world, notably those of Japan, as well as medieval wares from England. He reserves his most scathing comments for the British ceramic industries of Stoke-on-Trent and for the “lifeless” and “too perfect” Greek Attic pottery of antiquity, both made on a large industrial scale using the division of labor and a specialized work force of underpaid workers in one case, slaves in the other. He largely misunderstands both, through the distorted lens of his ideological prejudices and utopian ideals. Interestingly enough, Leach seems to ignore the fact that Chinese Song pottery (one of his ideal standard) was also made on an industrial scale by specialized workers, often using molds and under harsh working and living conditions that he would not wish on anyone, first of all himself. In this case, he simply happens to approve of the esthetic impact that mode of production had on the final product and he forgets the oppressive political and social contexts that produced them. The Leach standard, what has come to be known as the Leach aesthetics (as the word is commonly spelled in England) is in many ways an anti-industrial esthetics. It stands in opposition and implies a contestation of industrialization and its impoverishing effects on products affecting the quality of life, and made in a context that also dehumanizes the workers. This Leach aesthetics is predicated on the notion of authenticity, that implies little or no space for personal expression and ego, through a connection with local materials and communities, yet it also implies a certain contradictory cult of personality that Leach himself entertained his whole life. The possibility for individual originality as it remains closely related to tradition is also an important contradictory aspect of the Leach aesthetics. Of course, the industrial esthetics is positioned at the opposite, polar end of that romantic standard, since mechanization and exact repetition, with little intervention from the hand and no visible traces of making, all forbid a personal expression of gesture, an important part of the Leach standard. In the industrial esthetics, the total erasure of the individuality and ego of the worker also implies, if to a lesser degree, a certain disappearance of the industrial designer as well, with few exceptions. Yet since both the Leach aesthetics and the industrial esthetics had tremendous impact on the ceramics of the last 100 years, comparing the two, so different yet so complementary, is a necessary exercise.

Another British writer, the art critic Peter Fuller complains in a text that contemporary crafts rarely if ever attain the standard of historical crafts. In essence, he is probably true. What is missing is an understanding of context, since the standards and criteria he uses to make this critical assessment do not transfer from one context to the other, a mistake writers on art so often make. Historical crafts were made, as we have seen, by a highly skilled, specialized work force collaborating in tightly knit, politically and socially oppressive communities. In contemporary crafts, the maker is most often an independent individual, working alone, at times in a highly experimental context. The historical context was geared toward control and success, the contemporary one toward discovery and also failure, to a large extent. It is difficult to impossible to maintain similar, even less identical standards under such diverse, divergent and opposite, physical and conceptual conditions. To compare them is to do injustice to both, like Leach does by comparing industrially produced ceramics with hand-made pottery. Each have their own valid and specific esthetics and each can only be judged, evaluated and appreciated according to their own, divergent, standards. This is another example of the cultural collision between art (the personal and expressive), crafts (the individual and handmade) and design (the mechanical multiple). I doubt very much that Peter Fuller, as a Marxist critic, would have wanted to live and work at the time and under the conditions that produced historical crafts.

Art, craft and design are complementary aspects of human creativity. Although distinct and with each a specific, somewhat autonomous nature, they are intrinsically complementary and the unnecessary divisions between them are the product of the hegemonic ideologies of 20th Century Modernism. I recently saw an exhibition of North-West Coast aboriginal Haida art, and I realized that what makes this art so profoundly efficient is the simple fact that in these superb and magisterial works from the Haida culture, there is no division (conceptual or ideological) between art, craft and design and each object represents the apex of potential expression of each of these aspects of human creativity. These absolutely beautiful works are altogether art, craft and design and it is impossible to make a distinction between the three. The contemporary Haida work included in the show alongside the historical material is more problematic, as it absorbs for marketing reasons the conventions of display found in modern and contemporary art, and in doing so, like modern and contemporary art, it loses touch with its source. It may be more acceptable as art, and its commercial and institutional success is evident proof, but it is now only art, with hardly any trace left of craft or design, except in a romantic,

nostalgic quoting of historical forms. May all makers, artists, craft people, designers, absorb the lessons of historical Haida art (an example among many I could use) and may we rethink our relationship to art, craft and design, in the future and realize that it is when all three come together seamlessly that they all operate fully. Art by itself, or design by itself, without craft, are but pale versions and incomplete manifestations of their promise. Each separately imply an abdication of responsibility (something endemic in contemporary culture, which has a lot of its ambition focused on making works that are relevant only in the limited, fickle present, the “contemporary”) and it is only when reunited that great work happens.

The industrial esthetics, by using mechanical means of production through endless repetition of identical processes yielding identical products, creates a standard of perfection, an ideal that cannot be easily met and means little in an handmade context. Due to constant exposure and the preponderance of these kinds of products in our lives, we nonetheless tend to judge contemporary crafts using such a standard of perfection and few handmade objects can meet its rigorous, demanding rules of exactitude and absolute control. In a handmade context, the industrial esthetics is oppressive and constricting, and actually misplaced. It tends to be used by makers who, while celebrating in their work the perfection it embodies, do not have to compose with the limitations and demands of the industrial designer. The maker of hand made objects has to compete, impossibly, with the perfection of industrial objects and with the implied perfection of historical objects as experienced through photography, which provides the false appearance of perfection in objects that are actually greatly imperfect, thus their charm. These two oppressive perfections (the industrial and the photographic) have imposed a standard on contemporary crafts that yields the production of objects that may aim for such perfection and quite often achieve it actually, yet in the process lose much of their soul and character. We are left with hand made things whose main quality is to be technically perfect, yet otherwise remain largely irrelevant and insignificant, mere products.

Another problem in our biased and distorted appreciation of the hand-made object stems from the fact that in our overly mediated culture, we experience such objects primarily through photography and rarely through the actual, physical experience of real objects. When we see real hand-made objects, it is more often than not in museums and art galleries and other institutional places where handling and touching is forbidden, where touch is an absolute taboo, preventing us to fully experience their qualities in a

direct, tactile fashion that would reveal these qualities as well as the “imperfections” of the work, in a way that the eye, especially through a printed, photographic image, cannot possibly do. If the eye is the most magical of all the senses, then according to Roland Barthes, touch is the most demystifying. Many historical hand made objects who may appear perfect and symmetrical in a photograph would be revealed to be quite distorted and warped, their surface pitted with marks and holes, their form even cracked, chipped or like wise damaged during the process of fabrication, all aspects imperceptible on the flat, deceptive image of the photograph. Yet, we judge all objects in our environment through these kinds of false, mediated experiences. We expect real objects made by hand to meet such standards established by societies in which we would not want to live, or made industrially under conditions we would not want to share and we expect the same ideals of perfection from those experienced only through photography. Most objects made by hand found in museums or books would not actually survive such a judgment and be labeled as “museum quality pieces” by these inappropriate means. The idea that an object made by hand by an individual must be as perfect as those made by a large group of specialists, or again by machine or look as perfect in reality as it does in a photograph is ludicrous yet pervasive in our esthetic appreciation of handmade objects as it also informs, sadly, our making of them. We need to stop using these inappropriate standards that are now universally accepted through the pressure and example set by industrially produced objects and by the experience provided by mediated technologies. Their effect has been stifling and they have imposed a set of restrictions on the making and marketing of handmade things that has been rather detrimental to the development and appreciation of contemporary crafts, which has produced incredibly well made, often very beautiful things with no other quality and relevancy than their exquisite perfection. Beyond their marketability as arbiter of taste and status, they remain otherwise meaningless, yet they receive undeserved praise, recognition and reception due to their conventional and acceptable approach to a standard of perfection, which is only appropriate to industry and mechanical production.

The Industrial Form:

The esthetics of form in the industrial process is greatly limited by this process itself. This usually, if not always, implies a form of making using molds. That process puts limits on the shapes these forms can take, making difficult to impossible the use of undercuts for example, that it to say that all aspects of the form has to be completely

visible from a given viewpoint. That area of the form is then generated by one part of the mold and likewise for all the other distinct areas of the form, each necessitating its own individual mold part until the whole object is rendered as a negative, usually concave form, within the mold. Plastic clay can then be pressed or poured in liquid form (a casting slip) into that mold to produce a clay object. The process is simply repeated to produce identical replicas in large number, a mold being used up to a hundred times, on average, before being replaced by a new one. Characteristics of these industrial forms are simplicity, a streamlined contour, evenness of thickness of the clay shell making the object, all of which are advantages in facilitating efficient production. Such a minimalist, reductive approach to form is rather necessary in an industrial context yet it has now become a form of absolutist fundamentalism not only within modernist design, but in most other forms of making now. This minimalist approach to design, now basically universal, produces highly stylistic results, which usually imply (to simplify greatly myself), the formal organization of a few points on an outline, connected by continuous curves, at times changing direction more or less arbitrarily. The results of such a “streamlined” form are usually highly predictable and boring, yet they are found in most industrially produced objects still being made now. The Vancouver 2010 Olympic torch is such an example, among countless millions, of this tired and limited form of minimalist, streamlined design. Minimalism, nonetheless, could be said to be a ceramic concept and, if we are to give any credit to precedence, minimalism as a stylistic concept happens in crafts and in ceramics before it does anywhere else. The purity and perfection of Modern design operates another form of kitsch, which implies according to novelist and essayist Milan Kundera, the denial of shit, of imperfection, of what ultimately makes us human. Modern design is obviously not kitsch stylistically, in most instances anyway, as it positions itself in opposition to kitsch through an acetic ideal, but it nonetheless is kitsch conceptually and psychologically by denying through purity and perfection the humanity of hand-made things. The first bowl ever made, simple and basic, with its half spherical geometric form, was certainly the result of a reductive activity as much as it was the result of a transformative one, and it also implied an intellectual approach to reduction and abstraction, based on a reworking of a more complex physical experience of space provided by nature. There is a seminal shift in conceptualization from a hollow dried fruit gourd given by nature, to the actual transformation of a formless material (clay) into a shape that, while referencing nature, is distinctly different, and independent from nature and now instead, truly cultural. A woman was most certainly responsible for this highly conceptual and scientific activity, which consisted in making the first pot.

Today, this particular esthetics of forming found in the industrial esthetics has also been greatly influential in the development of new form of making for individual hand made objects and this minimalist, reductive approach to form where simple yet perfect, ideal, almost utopian forms at times are realized as single, unique artifacts, has now become one of the prevalent visual aspects of much contemporary ceramic art. Despite the fact that these objects are hand made often, or thrown on the wheel in parts to be assembled or again, and more logically, cast in plaster molds and even if only a single, unique example may ever be made, they nonetheless embody the industrial ethos and esthetics and are best analyzed and understood by this categorization, as I do here.

Why is most ceramics design white? Of course the hegemonic pressure of a style that is premised on purity and perfection implies that white would be the perfect color choice. The negative prescription of Modernist dogma concerning decoration also plays a significant role here. Yet, why white, almost exclusively? Totally white and undecorated ceramics is basically a creation of industrial processes. It makes fabrication easier, thus cheaper. If at all decorated, a white ground takes color more readily as well. If left blank and bare, a white object will present its content, for example food, without interference. White also makes the form primary by bringing attention to outline and silhouette instead than on the distraction of surface and/or decoration. It is also less dependent on fashionable changes and will remain useful even if the style of the surrounding décor, in furnishings, in fabrics, eventually changes. But why not black? Well black in our culture still carries a somewhat negative funeral baggage. Also, black in ceramics is an expensive color to produce since it requires a high proportion of metallic oxides, which would greatly augment production costs. Also, matt black glazes are susceptible to scratching and staining and shiny black glazes are easily disrupted by finger marks and cannot be touched without appearing dirty and skuzzy. There are few examples of all black ceramic objects that are industrially made, for these reasons. The exceptions are the high prestige luxury wares made by Wedgwood in unglazed, highly vitrified black basalt clay. Recently, American light artist James Turrell revisited the esthetic potential of black basalt, silky smooth and dense, in his functional ceramic wares, which are luxury items by virtue of the material used but most importantly by the prestige of the designer himself. I would nonetheless make the claim that if designers could use expensive black instead of much cheaper white, many more, if not the majority of ceramic designs would be black. I look

forward to the passing of white as the hegemonic color in ceramic designs. It always work but it does so simply since it actually doesn't do anything...

Recently we have seen in both design and crafts, that is to say in industrially produced objects and in hand made objects, a return to a maximalist approach to form, much more baroque and excessive than the purist, minimalist esthetics of modernism. This maximalism even often takes the form of a terrorist stance, where objects are deliberately broken, reassembled, with contradictory juxtapositions. These various methods are essential to the generation of new forms. Likewise, the new phenomenon of "free design" also combines aspects of both design and crafts as well as art. Within free design, a single, unique object may be produced by master technicians under the supervision of the designer whose idea is materialized. These "post-industrial" and "post-studio" ways of making are all part of a contemporary expansion of design and its relation to crafts and to art. The use of new digital technologies permitting ever more complex forms in both design and in fabrication through rapid prototyping will also create an expanded market for individually customized wares addressing the taste of each consumer. This will create a return to highly decorated and excessive objects the like of which have not been seen since Victorian times.

The Industrial Surface:

There is also a specific industrial ceramic surface. Using industrial printmaking processes, usually silk-screening but also lithography and intaglio, graphic or photo images can be transferred to ceramic forms to alter the surface significantly. These technological developments within ceramics have followed closely the developments of both printmaking techniques and photographic processes, again all of European origins, basically as soon as they were invented. These industrial surfaces are often narrative in content and as such are better included under the narrative esthetics category. Other may include or be composed exclusively of text and are based on language and literal narratives and they will be looked at in the chapter "Text: Speaking Volumes, ceramics and language". Other printed and transferred surfaces are more purely decorative in style, most often either floral or blue and white (by far the most common decorative styles in industrial ceramics) and have been included in the decorative esthetics chapter, notably with the example of the "Willow Pattern", the most successful ceramic pattern ever. But when the industrial surface engages esthetics at the level of concept, using by necessity

the industrial process to directly inform meaning, using the industrial qualities of the image in a conceptual way, then its esthetics is purely industrial, as is the process of generating the image. Contemporary examples include the work of Marek Cecula, where he printed full-scale carpets or famous paintings over a grid of standard dinner plates, with images printed as ceramic decals from computer generated images. In this appropriation and use of found images, he is following in the footsteps of Seattle ceramic artist Howard Kottler who was a pioneer, in the 1960's and 70's of these kinds of industrial appropriations to make original and unique art works. Kottler was, if not the first, certainly the one to have investigated this potential to its full extent, notably in a seminal, important and highly influential series of works made with commercially available, industrially made plates that he transformed with commercially available ceramic decals. The use of factory blanks and printed decals of familiar icons used by hobbyists was at the time a highly controversial, unusual and innovative practice that permitted for the focus of interpretation to be shifted from the usual emphasis on individual personality and original expression to that of the intrinsic nature and potential meaning of the objects themselves and their context, beyond individuality, as had been the case for hand-made, artistic objects until then. This anonymous, industrial connection is also a situation familiar to many craft objects, be they historical or contemporary, sometimes simply because we do not know who made them, or again because it is often perceived as irrelevant to know who made them (except to enhance their market value). It could be argued that anonymity is a concept peculiar to (historical) craft practices and now also found in industrially designed and produced things. Crafts objects, it often seem, simply embody the transformative actions of an idealized, utopian and anthropological human being, usually asexualized. This blankness of anonymity, shaded in the obscurity of a more or less distant past, coming out of loss, void and absence, is also known in psychology as the state preceding existence. It is in my opinion a very important and un-assumed aspect of crafts, to be realized, reaffirmed and embraced for its positive potential, as it is embraced and realized in industrially made products as well, where, if we make abstraction of a few known designer stars, anonymity of design and anonymity of making are the norm.

One of the most extreme example of the photographic, printed industrial surface can be found in a Japanese museum where the Ohni Otsuka factory of Shigaraki is reproducing on true scale ceramic tiles major art works of Western art, notably the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci and the Last Judgment by Michelangelo, as well as a full-

scale reproduction of the whole interior of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel, originally in Padua, Italy and many other artworks, including Impressionists and modern masterpieces. By transferring these famous paintings to ceramic surfaces they have now gained a permanency they did not really have before. Esthetically, they remain so close to the real thing as to be confused with the originals, if it was not for the necessary grid made by the nonetheless very large ceramic tiles composing the even larger images. The Leonardo and the Michelangelo are even installed OUTSIDE the museum, on the exterior walls of the building, where they can withstand rain and snow and where they will probably exist unaffected, to eventually survive the originals after their future yet inevitable destruction. All things must pass, even priceless masterpieces yet ceramics passes more slowly.

Marek Cecula is a New-York based artist, designer, educator and his very diverse works in ceramics exemplify the coming together of art, crafts and design in an exemplary fashion. His practice is actually global and he is a nomad, travelling to various contexts and responding to them to create new work. It is not work based on a geographical location or on personal expression; its aim and reach are universal. His work often implies a contestation of contemporary life and the expected role usually played by art, design, crafts and ceramics within it. Recent works include design products in ceramics informed in a classical manner by the industrial esthetics; they present stacks of industrial plates, cups and saucers, teapots and other containers, appropriated from a factory context yet fired in a wood kiln, in a very extreme process, to fuse them together and cover them with thick deposits of ashes that brings to mind an accelerated passage of time and some post-apocalyptic future event, freezing the familiar, ordinary, practical objects into metaphors for the human condition as it is experienced in history. The series of works is titled "In Dust Real", and are based on emotions stirred by 9-11. They remind me of a famous 9-11 photograph showing the interior of a lower Manhattan apartment, totally covered in thick grey dust, including a silver teaset, on a table. This image, in its calm yet greatly disrupted domesticity, conveys for me the events of that day in a more efficient manner than more descriptive and sensational images. The stacked and fused dishes of Marek Cecula operate on a similar level.

The Industrial Esthetics and Computer Technologies:

In Topology, the science of mapping spaces, there are four main possibilities for space to take: a plane (a 2D surface, say a square), a volume (a 3D form), a collapsed

volume (a bowl) or again, a volume with a hole in it (a doughnut, or a tube, or a cup where the hole is the handle, for example). Everything and anything in the universe can be described by one or a combination of these possibilities. When the first computer software was conceived to design virtual 3D objects in 1975 at the University of Utah, the first object to be designed by computer scientist Martin Newell and using the new software, was a teapot! This choice was not arbitrary, on the contrary. A teapot has aspects of the plane, at the level of surface and of the collapsed volume and of the donut (a volume with a hole in it) at the level of form (the spout and the handle). It is a familiar, common form, ideal as a problem to illustrate all the complexities of form in virtual renderings. Newell's virtual teapot has recently been produced as an actual ceramic object by designer Dries Verbruggen. His Utanalog (a combination of Utah and analog) teapot, fully functional is an exact copy of the 1975 virtual concept. Newell's teapot has already enjoyed a certain degree of fame, having appeared in Pixar's Toy Story and in an episode of the Simpson's as well. Not in exist for real as well.

A few years ago there was a general invitation to attend a meeting at my school to look into possible applications for computer technologies within the Visual Arts curriculum. I showed up. At the beginning of the meeting, the chair thanked everyone for showing up (we were 6 or 7) and then, he singled me out by saying how surprised he was to see me at such a meeting since, obviously, ceramics couldn't possible have a need for computer technologies and for computer applications in its curriculum! I had to explain to him that, on the contrary, all ceramic techniques and processes could easily and readily use computers, from their conception, their design, to final realization both at the levels of form and surface, since computer generated and printed ceramic decals were already available, as an example. I informs him that the use for computers within ceramics was already endemic in many ways and would develop further rapidly in fact. We just needed to catch up. He was quite surprised, actually. Since then, the ceramics program has been at the forefront of this development in art education at our school, without the necessity to break with our traditions and our past.

Recently we have seen the introduction of computer technologies for the design (CAD or Computer Assisted Design) and fabrication (CAM or Computer Assisted Modeling) of new ceramic objects. Some artists use the virtual world of the computer screen and the Internet to create utopian, non-realistic objects that defy gravity or whose shape and surfaces are of a complexity not yet possible to materialize. Jeroen Bechtold from the

Netherlands and Steven Goldate from Australia, have both explored these possibilities. Progress in rapid prototyping and computer generated ceramic prints and transfers are now making possible the making of ever more complex ceramic forms and products. John Balistreri at Bowling Green University in Ohio, with the help of the engineering department, has modified a digital 3D printer so it can be used with ceramic material to “print” 3D ceramic objects that can then be fired in a kiln. Similar research has also been conducted at MIT in Boston and the University of Washington in Seattle and in other places, I am sure. From these developments, I predict that if the industrial epoch of the last 100 years has been the privileged domain of pure, simple and ideally perfect form produced identically in large number, due to the pressure to standardize mass production, this irreconcilable contradiction with the need for unmistakable expression of the self will be soon resolved by coming technological developments in computer hardware and software that will permit the creation of individually customized objects using industrial robots, objects whose unique forms and complex surfaces will be adapted to the particular needs and taste of each individual. In this post-industrial epoch, consumerism and consumption will now reflect ever more obvious personal aspects and deviation will become the norm and individual expression the sign of the masses. It is important to note here that many recent experimental research on the use of computer technologies to design and manufacture ceramics do not take full advantage of the specific potential of virtual technology to generate original forms that are specific to that technology and could not possibly be achieved otherwise. I believe that ceramics is at its best when it does what only ceramics can do. Otherwise why bother? The same applies to computer technologies, which are at their best when they do what only they can do. If the material used and the processes used are not appropriate to the task or do not take full advantage of their inherent potential, then the results remain a futile exercise, possibly even wasteful and irrelevant, something that is too often forgotten, or not sufficiently considered, anyway. Nonetheless, research on these recent developments on the use of computers in ceramics are being conducted all over the world and some of the results can be found at my website www.paulmathieu.ca

The Great Industrialist:

Josiah Wedgwood (1730–1795) came from a family of potters. His grandfather and his father were both potters and the young Josiah was also apprenticed as a potter from a young age, in the family business. While a young man he partnered for a while with

another Staffordshire potter, Thomas Whieldon, and the work they did together is among my favorite ceramics, ever. Eventually, Josiah Wedgwood started his own pottery manufacturing in Etruria, near Stoke-on-Trent, England. His work is actually best analyzed within the classical esthetics, as we have already seen. It is there that his seminal influence on the development of ceramics, in a continuous trajectory beginning in the mid 18th Century all the way to today, can be most felt. Yet, Josiah Wedgwood remains, irrelevant of material, and with the possible exception of Henry Ford for the manufacturing of automobiles, the greatest industrialist. If his influence was immense stylistically, since he was during his times at the forefront of neo-classical developments in design, it is often forgotten that he was also a great inventor of new technologies (the pyrometer, to accurately assess and measure the temperature inside a kiln, the lateral lathe for the carving of intricate surfaces on ceramic vessels, etc.). He also developed new materials, new clays and glazes (jasper ware, the variously colored and vitrified clay bodies that do not require glazing, and basalt ware, similar to jasper ware but of a deep, dense black, with a very smooth and shiny surface, and also Queen's ware, a warm, ivory beige clay body, ideal for domestic wares and easily decorated with transfer printed patterns and narrative scenes, etc.). What is lesser known still about him is the important contribution he made to social improvements for his workers and for society in general. He was at the forefront of the developments of an extensive network of canals throughout the British Midlands, connecting his factories to the markets of London, and from there, to the rest of the world. Canals and transportation by water are all ideal for ceramic wares, as they provide a smooth ride for the movement of heavy, fragile and highly breakable objects. He also built social housing for his workers, provided them and their family with free health care and education for their children, as well as pensions after retirement. Here again, he was a pioneer and way ahead of his times.

Above all, Josiah Wedgwood was a great, progressive reformer, very engaged politically in social progress and human rights issues. He was an early and ardent abolitionist. His opposition to slavery, along with that of his great friend Erasmus Darwin, served as a model for both of their grandson's Charles Darwin theory of evolution, found in his book on "The Origins of Species". Charles Darwin's abolitionist beliefs and his hatred of slavery greatly shaped his views on human evolution, for these were based on the idea of kinship between all humans. If it had not been for the exemplary model of both his grandfathers, Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood, Charles Darwin may not have found the inspiration for his important and influential theories on evolution, still debated

today. Beyond this liberal, political influence, it is the fortune of Josiah Wedgwood, the great pottery manufacturer and very successful industrialist, that permitted Charles Darwin the necessary independent means to pursue his research and his writing, as well as the necessary independence of mind to free his thinking from the prevalent consensus of the time concerning creation and evolution.

Not everyone agrees with Charles Darwin, to this day, and not everyone agrees with Josiah Wedgwood either. In 1792, Lord Macartney went to the Chinese court in Beijing to present gifts from the British crown to the Chinese Emperor Quianlong. Among the gifts were examples of pottery created by Josiah Wedgwood's factory. By accepting the gifts, the Emperor would have implied that they were equal to those produced by Chinese potters and that would have implied a loss of face for all the potters of China. Emperor Quianlong reply was: "We possess all things... We have no use for your country's manufacture." Ironically, today, Wedgwood ceramics is mostly made in China, while many of the methods, equipments, technologies and processes used by Chinese potters are those developed and used by Josiah Wedgwood and other European manufacturers and, typically, today, English Bone China is now preferred in China by "nouveau riche" consumers to the familiar, common porcelain, which is perceived a too proletarian and vulgar, for these young Chinese urbanites.

Other artists to consider:

Lorena Barrezuata's porcelain TV dinner trays are molded from pressed aluminum classics and recycle the object by taking it from trash to stylishness; Jean Boggio's porcelain creations incorporate molded ceramic tiles and furniture; Tristan Zimmerman's Phonophone II permits to connect iPod earbuds to the retro ceramic shape based on the trumpet shape of old gramophones in order to enhance the sound; Cor Unum Design, a collective founded in 1953 in Holland and specializing in ceramics design; Industreal Design in Italy whose work takes advantage of the potential of virtual technologies to create complex new forms based on geometry or organic systems; Mats Brobey and Johan Ridderstale in Sweden designed sound enriching ceramic speakers; James Burgess double-walled, insulated porcelain "I am not a paper cup" design, with its silicone fitted lid; Andrew Jones "Cup Light" transforms an ordinary cup into a lamp shade. The Dutch collective Freedom of Creation is the first to use 3D printing rapid prototyping to create consumer objects, notably the lamps of Janne Kytanen, but not yet in ceramics (they use

laser sintered polyamide, which looks uncannily like translucent porcelain). Another collective, Front, designed the Blow Away Vase, by creating a typical yet virtual Delft blue and white vase, morphing it as if blown and distorted by the wind and 3D printing the result, both surface and form simultaneously. Many other designers are revisiting familiar object by re-contextualizing them in a ceramics context, like Studio Lama's ceramic encased radio, Mathieu Mercier's telephone or his lamp made with light socket extensions. In Australia, Daniel Weisz, James Robson and Prue Venables are also reorienting their ceramic production toward manufacturing.

Also Jennifer Woodland, Indre Ror, Jen Woodin and Systema Somatica, Jeroen Bechtold, Steven Goldate, Damon Moor, Justin Marshall, Jonathan Keep, Marcel Wanders, Droog Design, Barnaby Barford, Daniel Kruger: in France, Stephane Galerneau designs computer generated forms based on water wave patterns for Porcelaine de Sologne, Paris.

In the 20th Century, Clarice Cliff, Susie Cooper and Eva Zeisel as well as Russell Wright, were all influential and important industrial designers. In the 19th Century, the most interesting ceramics designer by far is Christopher Dresser (1834–1904), whose highly original and prophetic work precedes by decade subsequent concerns of Modernism and modern design. Certain aspects of his work, around appropriation of historical forms, for example, even announce post-modernism.....

New materials are constantly appearing on the marketplace as well. Kerafol is a ceramic tape while Keraflex is a plastified ceramic material, produced in various sizes and thicknesses, that can be cut like plastic, assembled with Kerafol and then fired to become hard, translucent porcelain. Janet Fieldhouse has made successful experiments with such new materials and processes.

War as a subject matter for ceramics has found various and diverse applications all over the world since time immemorial. An interesting example within industrial ware are the pots produced by Grimwades Pottery in England in mid 20th Century and decorated with the comical war cartoons of graphic artist Bruce Bairnsfather.

Chapter Seven

The Material Esthetics: Physicality and Process

Clay has been used in a wide variety of ways throughout its history, in various cultures, at various times and for various reasons as well. Yet, when clay is made into something and fired to become ceramics, interestingly enough, the same forms appear more or less unchanged all over the world, at times so closely related as to be confused with each other, since they were created for the same purposes, with the same practical or even esthetic intents and, obviously, with the same material as well, clay. This universality is part of what I call the classical esthetics. Technological discoveries or specific materials (porcelain in China, for example) will create local esthetic variations not found elsewhere until that technology travels to new places where it will find local expression, due to the particular needs and sensibilities of these new makers and users. In our global world of instantaneous communication and universal information, we now can have complete knowledge of what is being made anywhere at anytime, not only now but in the past as well. This wealth of accessibility to historical precedents and contemporary developments provides us with a range of possibilities and new material, technical, esthetic and conceptual possibilities that were not available before to the maker of ceramic objects who could only trade locally and work for a limited market, geographically. Yet as soon as exchange and commerce became possible, ceramics traveled far and wide and stylistic exchange between distant places became current and commonplace. All the esthetics so far examined, the classical esthetics with its emphasis on form, the flux esthetics and

glaze surfaces, the narrative esthetics with representation and story-telling and with pictorial spaces specific to ceramics, the decorative esthetics with a focus on surface and ornamentation, often within abstraction, the simulation esthetics and the industrial esthetics, all of them can be found basically all over the world throughout history and soon after a local discovery (say, glazing) could be exported to a new market and taken up by new makers. This is true of all of them, except for the last one under discussion here, the material esthetics, and this particularity is in itself interesting.

The material esthetics is the newer, the most recent esthetics in the ceramic arts. It is also the most prevalent right now and most handmade contemporary ceramics made by individuals today is of that type. It even informs certain aspects of the Industrial Esthetics, but this influence remains marginal there. One may expect that the newer aesthetics in ceramics would be the industrial esthetics and, if we understand that esthetics as a product of industrialization and modernism then that may be true but, as we have seen previously, the industrial esthetics, while giving rise to modernism in many ways, has a much longer and older history. Ceramic objects informed esthetically by industrial processes and methods (mold-making and slip casting, for example) have been made for a long time too. All other esthetics in ceramics have very long, ancient histories, sometimes to the very origins of the art form. Yet the material esthetics is quite recent a phenomenon in ceramics, considering the ancient age of the art form itself. It also was for the longest time and until quite recently, specific to one place, Japan, and in a much more understated and subtle way, so indicative of the particular refinement of that culture, Korea, as well. The material esthetics as a specific ceramic concept is not found in China, historically, at all. In Japan itself, it was the stylistic expression of a specific historical time in Japanese history, the Momoyama period (1573–1615), a time that saw the emergence of the material esthetics around the development and codification of the Tea Ceremony. The Momoyama period in Japan was a period of intense warfare, political strife and social reorganization that greatly altered the cultural landscape, since the aristocratic class was replaced by the warrior class (the shogun and the samurai) in the power structure of society. The aristocrats had favored a culture of luxury and ostentation and their art was highly refined, elegant, conspicuous, ornate and elaborate, with much use of gold surfaces. The samurais on the other hand, and in reaction to the aristocracy and in reaction to their ostentatious lifestyle, favored natural materials in a direct connection with nature and a very different form of sophistication in an emphasis on simplicity, directness, even crudeness in their art, of which ceramics play a very important role as

provider of utensils for the recently codified Tea Ceremony. The Japanese Tea Ceremony takes place among a few intimates (rarely more than four, in addition to the tea master conducting the event, preparing tea and serving the guests) in a small unimposing building, a garden hut really, the tea house, built with simple, natural materials, undecorated, with the only visual element being provided by an example of calligraphy or a painted landscape of monochrome black ink on paper, shown in an alcove, along with a single flower arrangement, often consisting of a single flower, in a pottery or bamboo vase, as well as the tea utensils themselves and various serving dishes for the simple meal of fresh, seasonal food that accompany the serving of tea. This ritual is highly codified and becomes quite rigid from its inception. The pottery utensils were at first ordinary objects coming from folk potteries, yet individually and carefully chosen by the tea master, of a type that may have been made for a long time by peasants for their own basic needs (the mountain village of Shigaraki, near Tokyo, is a good example, as are Bizen, Tamba and Iga, among others). Historically, the Tea masters would also make regular trips to Korea, often with invading armies, to visit farming communities, pottery villages and peasant homes there, in order to search among thousands of examples for the simple, ordinary bowl, at times worn down by use, even chipped or cracked, that somehow embodies nonetheless a particular feeling of completeness, of transcendent anonymity and humility. These cheap, ordinary and common yet singled-out bowls are brought back to Japan to be highly praised and prized, some eventually becoming important, priceless cultural treasures, with an assigned name defining them as unique. The invading Japanese army will also bring back, forcibly at times, Korean potters who will then start in Japan important potteries under the patronage of the samurais and the tea masters and greatly influence the esthetic development of Japanese ceramics, so often characterized by an emphasis on the physical properties of material in their transformation through natural (as much as possible) and cultural process.

Under these conditions, special wares are made, often under the supervision and to the specifications of important tea masters. The first tea master, who was responsible for codifying the basic rules and rituals of the tea ceremony, was Sen No Rikyu (1522–1591). I recommend the excellent 1989 movie “Rikyu” by Hiroshi Teshigahara, which fictionalizes his life and philosophy. One of his first student and follower was Furuta Oribe (1544–1615). Oribe gives his name to a very distinctive type of pottery, a type of earthenware, characterized by a freely applied transparent green glaze to a limited area of the ware, while the remaining surface receives a spontaneous, freely brushed decorative pattern,

usually abstract, and painted in brown with iron oxide over a clear glaze. It looks like the work of a somewhat messy, demented child, and this “naïve” sophistication is part of its great charm. Oribe wares and other tea wares, despite their codified artificiality, nonetheless succeed in retaining the simplicity, directness, earthiness of the original models made unselfconsciously by simple folks in direct contact with nature, making the most of the materials and conditions of transformation with no pretension to artistic expression whatsoever. The main religion of Japan, Shintoism, with its cult of ancestors in relation to the natural world, as well as influences coming from Zen Buddhism imported from India and China, constitute other important sources for the making of these wares. Numerous pottery centers will each produce distinctive wares for the tea ceremony and this production is still continuing today, at the same places, with the same materials and processes, and often by direct descendants of the original founders, but not under the same conditions, since tea ware is still highly prized and accordingly expensive and the maker of tea wares in Japan are not peasants anymore but very wealthy, successful business people, some of them considered national treasures. The main types of tea wares are Oribe, with its distinctive green glaze, as well as Raku, made by a family based in Kyoto, a type of tea bowl made with a heavy, rugged, textured clay and fired very quickly in a small kiln from which it is removed while glowing hot to cool very quickly, an extreme process that gives it its characteristic visual and tactile aspects and imbues the ware with a mystical aura that reaffirms its spiritual connection to nature and to human experiences, through natural processes of transformation. Raku ware is still made today in Kyoto by descendants of the same family that invented the type. Extreme process, as exemplified by raku wares for example, is another important aspect of the material esthetics. Other important centers for tea ware is found in Shigaraki, with its natural wood ash deposits that provide localized glazing on the wares. Shigaraki pots are made with a distinctive local clay containing feldspar fragments that melt as raised, rough yet white glossy beads over the clay surface. Bizen is another variety of wares which include Shino, a thick, “spermy” milky glaze that has a tendency to crawl, a behavior that is encouraged and much prized, again for its esthetic effect that is given by the properties of the materials used and the processes, and not made deliberately by intention alone. This use of process in synch with the natural, at times quite extreme properties of materials (warping, cracking, bloating, collapsing, crawling, etc.), are intrinsic to Japanese ceramics specifically made for the Tea Ceremony and constitute an esthetic that is specific and unique to Japan and cannot be found, to that extent, anywhere else before, except of course, and to a lesser degree, and much less self consciously, in the folk potteries of the

countryside (one can actually trace the origins of the material esthetics in Japan all the way back to the Neolithic Jomon pottery, actually one of the oldest, earliest form of fired pottery ever made, 12,000 years ago). This “natural” approach to making specific to so many types of Japanese ceramics is actually quite contrived. It is highly codified and can be quite mannered at times, especially in the work of more recent followers in Japan itself and all over the world, and it remains, since the mid 19th century, the most influential ceramic esthetics for hand made functional pottery as well as expressive vessels and sculptures.

One of the most interesting, extreme, emblematic and best examples can be found in Iga ware, the most significant and characteristic type of the material esthetics in Japanese pottery, historically. Iga ware is potted very quickly, loosely, fluidly with clear, graphic markings coming from shaping the clay with an emphasis on gesture while enhancing or retaining the traces left by tools, hands and the making process. It uses a rough, crude, textured stoneware clay that is left unglazed, then fired at very high temperature in kilns using wood as a combustible, which creates large quantities of ashes that then deposit on the ware to create a natural glaze on the sensitive surfaces. This high temperature and slow, long firing process often causes the ware to crack, to bloat, to deform and even collapse partly. All of these “accidents” are welcomed and they give the wares their very distinctive, extreme aspect. When first encountering Iga ware, or other Japanese tea wares for that matter, one often perceives incredible ugliness and forms with surfaces that border on the grotesque, the abject, even the scatological, the excremental at times. As if the ware had been made by demented children. It takes time and multiple exposures to absorb and comprehend their great if unusual beauty and sophistication, hidden to us at first by our prejudices concerning flaws, defects, imperfections and what would be unacceptable mistakes in another context (the industrial esthetics, for example) that would make us reject the objects as irretrievably faulty. In Iga ware, if a flower vase cracks in the kiln and would not hold water anymore, the crack will be deliberately and visibly filled with clay again and the vase re-fired to seal the gap in order to make the pot useful and practical again. This re-firing may very likely improve the pot stylistically and esthetically as well, by accentuating and reaffirming its intrinsic character and personality. The same object can thus be fired repeatedly, as many times as necessary to achieve the “natural” look desired by the potter and by the esthete and connoisseur of tea who will appreciate its qualities. As another example of excess in process, if a bowl comes to break during use, it will be repaired very visibly with gold, to create a strong, highly pronounced

contrast between two materials, one ordinary, common and cheap, clay, the other expensive and rare, gold. This extreme, excessive approach to making, to process and to contrast in materiality are inherent and essential aspects of much Japanese ceramics, the ceramic tradition with the broadest and widest range of stylistic approaches in the world. This esthetics has had a tremendous influence on ceramics in the 20th Century, notably as a polar reaction to the industrial esthetics focused on ideal perfection through cold, impersonal forms and surfaces, mechanically produced. Find me another art form than ceramics that exhibits such extremes, from crudeness to perfection, simultaneously!

There is more variety of forms and diverse decorative surfaces to be found in Japanese ceramics throughout its history than in any other ceramic tradition in the world. The inventive imagination of the Japanese potter and ceramist, all the way to today, is one of the most fertile anywhere and if the pre-Columbian Mimbres potters are the greatest graphic designers in ceramics, in their use of black and white decoration, the Japanese, in all of their arts and crafts, are the greatest decorators, in the variety and breath of their decorations. The influence of Japanese ceramics will come to Europe and the Western world after the reopening of Japan by Commodore Perry in the mid 19th Century. Prior to that time, Japan was closed to the outside world by Imperial decree and this isolation created the conditions for the development and refinement of the esthetics particular to its culture in all aspects of the visual arts. In the 19th Century, with the opening of Japan to trade, the country exports large quantities of wares, notably pottery and wood block engravings and prints. These imports to Europe will have a tremendous impact on esthetic developments in all the arts and notably the decorative arts, in what has come to be known as “Japonisme”, influencing the Arts and Crafts movement as well as Art Nouveau, notably in the late 19th Century French ceramics of Ernest Chaplet (1835–1909), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Auguste Delaherche (1857–1940) and Emile Decoeur (1876–1953). The Japonisme movement of the 19th Century is similar, in a very different way stylistically, to the “Chinoiserie” phenomenon of the 18th Century.

The material esthetics appears first in Japan, where a specific social context of culture and religion permitted its emergence in the 16th Century. From, Japan, it will make its way to the rest of the world. Yet, its impact on other esthetics of ceramics was limited until experiments in Modernism in the visual and decorative arts, many in reaction to the industrial context developing at the time, really explode at the beginning of the 20th Century. This polar, opposite reaction to mechanization and industrial production finds a

perfect model to emulate and to follow in the ceramics of Japan produced for the sophisticated city dwellers enjoying the tea ceremony, as well as the folk potteries made for simpler needs of the daily life of rural folks engaged in survival, and encountered by visitors to Japan at the times. One of these will be Bernard Leach, and the writings of the British potter, notably in "A Potter's Book", will play a major role in the distribution of the material esthetics all over the world, to the point where it has become a central esthetics in contemporary ceramic art, despite the fact that Leach himself was more of a classicist and his main source of inspiration, at the level of form anyway, are the pots of Sung dynasty China, especially T'su-chou wares, freely painted in calligraphic brushstrokes.

To complete somehow this brief genealogy of the material esthetics, a persistent myth of precedence, a double myth actually, needs to be debunked first. It is firmly believed and constantly reaffirmed by misleading historians of art and historians of ceramics as well, that what has come to be known as Abstract Expressionism first happened in painting in the USA, in New-York, in the 1940's and 50's. Both these "facts" are erroneous, as is so often the case in matter of precedence and originality in the hegemonic art historical discourse, in its obsession with images as the source for all things. Abstract Expressionism, a stylistic approach to form that combines non-representation with an emphasis on dynamic gesture. Following precedents found in Japanese art informed by Shintoism and Zen philosophy, expressionism is first found in the ceramic sculpture (not in painting) of a loose group of Italian ceramic artists (not American) working in the 1930's and 1940's. These artists were influential in subsequent developments in Modern Art and many achieved international careers of great significance, notably Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) among many others, like Guido Gambone (1909–1969), Leoncillo Leonardi (1915–1968) and Franco Garelli (1909–1973). Although it may be true that what is called Abstract Expressionism in American Art may have happened independently and in isolation from what happened in Italy in ceramics in the 1930's, it remains a historical fact that the Italian ceramic artists were exploring the potential for gestural expression within abstraction in ceramics before the Americans did. The Japanese artists of the Shiko-kai (1947) and Sodeisha (1948) groups were also doing this type of work at the same time as the Americans, in the 1950's, probably independently of each other. The groundbreaking work of Kazuo Yagi in Japan in the 1950's and of the Cobra group in the Netherlands, notably in Ager Jorn's ceramics, are potent examples. We find in these Japanese, Dutch and Italian ceramics the same descriptive analysis, the same emphasis on gesture, the obvious physicality of the medium

itself, be it clay or paint, to materialize the esthetic experience of the maker and the viewer. Another myth to debunk is the oft repeated fallacy that American ceramic sculpture follows in the footsteps of American Abstract Expressionism in painting, a strange strategy used to establish legitimacy by association with another, more important, art form. This is again not factual. Abstract Expressionism in the visual arts first happened in Italy and an important exhibition of that work toured the USA (Brooklyn and Oakland, California) in the early 1950's and it was the source of much inspiration for much American Abstract Expressionism in painting and in ceramic sculpture. The fallacy that 1950's American ceramics found its inspiration in painting when it is actually the reverse that is true is one of the persistent yet false myths of American Art.

It seems important here to correct one more time this widespread attitude in art history to establish precedence in the visual arts as if nothing worthy of consideration had happened anywhere else before, as we have seen with the issue of abstraction in the decorative arts, when in fact the precedence lies exactly there. Most stylistic, formal and even conceptual developments in abstract art, and in Modernism as well as in modern design (even in post-Modernism), happened in the decorative arts, in crafts and in design at times much earlier than they happened within Modernism as an art style and within Modern Art itself. For example, the work that was produced at the Wiener Werkstatte (Vienna workshop), funded by Joseph Hoffman and Koloman Moser in 1903, prefigures stylistic developments in geometric abstraction, notably, that will not be found in painting and sculpture for a few decades, some of them not before Minimalism in the early 1960! The decorative arts, and specifically here ceramics, need to re-appropriate their ownership of these precedents. This needs to be done for multiple reasons, not the least being that importance, value and even meaning in Modernism is largely predicated on precedence (on who did what first), since it implies originality and reaffirms individuality, both important normative aspects of Modernism and Modern Art. Yet, I do not perceive redress and reassessment to happen anytime soon. The stakes are too high within academia and institutional bureaucracies and to do so would imply a complete rewriting of art history as it presently stands, in order to account for the oversight if not bare lies it contains and promotes. Since Abstract Expressionism as a style plays such an obvious and important role in the material esthetics in ceramics, it seems essential to clarify this need for redress here.

The Material Form:

Clay is a supremely tactile material and touch is central to its transformation and can be essential for the experience of the work as well. Very often with an object made with clay, unless it is handled one cannot comprehend fully its specificity. The same restriction is often true when that experience is purely visual, in a display context for example, and one must then try to retrace mentally the tactile activity of making, vicariously, in order to “make” the work in one’s head and “feel” the work in one’s hands, and come to understand its implied meaning. With the material esthetics, that meaning is informed by the materiality of the material itself, obviously. At the level of form, clay plays a critical and central role and it is its properties and qualities that are foremost in defining the esthetics. It is nonetheless essential to be reminded here that there is no “clay” in ceramics, anymore that there is “wood” in paper, or “paper” in photography. Clay is a material like any other material, and the objects made with clay need to be understood through the specific concepts, contents and contexts that are made possible by the transformation of such a material. Like in any other art, the material is just a support for ideas. In a ceramic object, once clay has been fired, that clay has been totally transformed, physically, chemically, conceptually and most often than not esthetically as well since the final product doesn’t even look like clay anymore. Yet, within the material esthetics, more often than not, the “clayness” of the clay material is greatly retained by the ceramic object, despite the fact that we are experiencing has nothing to do with clay anymore, per se, it just was made with clay and now it may still look like clay, an illusionist effect often enhanced by the glazing and firing processes themselves. This illusion is similar to what happens in “The Simulation Esthetics” chapter. In fact, if a fired clay object still looks like the original material used to make it, clay, then it needs to be understood and analyzed as part of the simulation esthetics more than the material esthetics, which is now inappropriate for the task. In this case, the visual and even tactile “clayness” of the thing only represents clay, since it in actuality it is not clay anymore. Clay is operating now at the level of representation, it has become an image of itself, and it is that transformation, from clay to ceramics, from material to image that is at the core of the esthetic experience on offer.

When a contemporary potter from anywhere makes Japanese influenced tea wares which are at the origin of and integral to the material esthetics as I define it here, their work is nonetheless separate from such an esthetics and it needs to be understood and

analyzed through the simulation esthetics instead, since their work actually imitates and simulates another esthetics (the material) stylistically, while being part of another one (the simulation) conceptually. It is an example of clay imitating clay and ceramics imitating ceramics (not the same thing), as analyzed in the simulation esthetics chapter.

Ceramics now is particularly obsessed with three things, unfortunately. These obsessions are largely responsible for the little respect it gets presently. The first is the material itself, clay, as an end in itself, as the answer to everything. In this process, clay is confused with ceramics and, in ceramics, I will repeat it again, there is no clay; clay has been totally and irretrievably transformed and it is this transformation, and not the process of this transformation per se, that is interesting and relevant, conceptually. The second obsession is technique and process, which manifests itself everywhere in most of the literature on ceramics. It is evident as well in the phenomenon of pottery “workshops” and demonstrations. Stylistically, this obsession is present in the current rage for wood firing, a phenomenon which is to today, what “raku” was to the 70’s and 80’s. This obsession is also manifest in an emphasis on specific materials (what is so special about porcelain, anyway...), with glaze recipes, with tricks and gadgets of all kinds. The third and most pernicious obsession places the focus on the artist, on the special personality of an individual, on biography even hagiography at times, as if it explained anything (this is made by so and so...). This obsession would have you believe that the work absolutely needs to be individualized and ego based (the pot is the man, as per the prescription of Bernard Leach), that the work must be original, something learned from the modernist avant-gardes of the 20th Century. We still need to free ourselves from this erroneous aspect of art. These three obsessions with materials, with techniques and with personality force makers to identify with a particular material, a particular technique (to be a master of porcelain, a master of throwing, etc.) and with a particular style as well, in order to develop a recognizable type of work throughout their career. These obsessions are ultimately market driven, since collectors collect “names” above all else and can only recognize iconic objects as valid. They can only understand, like curators, what they already know. This creates the stasis of careerism so prevalent now, where we see artists making the same thing again and again, repeatedly and endlessly. If we use to have production pottery as a model for making things (a model I still find valid, personally), we then moved by the mid 20th Century to the “concept” of the non-functional vessel, the unique and personalized container. It is often stated that the non-functional vessel is a modernist construct, when in fact non-functional vessels have always existed historically

(minus the ego of the maker). What we have today is an unhealthy hybrid of the two, the production vessel, people who have been making the same “original” statement for the last thirty years.

The material and processes are the endgame of the material esthetics. Clay as a material always wins. There may be a remnant of function and of decoration left to explore in contemporary ceramics, yet it remains that today the historical necessity for handmade objects doesn't exist anymore in the developed world, as it is now. Ceramic objects have to work, to operate at other levels instead. The material esthetics operates at the level of esthetics and esthetics alone. It is solely stylistic, and fundamentally concerned with perception and with the formal characteristics of materials, with color, texture, form and surface qualities and with transformative processes. Such a limited focus is a tall order, and this explains why so much of this type of work remains so limited and ultimately fails. The relevancy of works based on the material esthetics is absolutely and completely based on materiality and physicality alone and hardly anywhere else, really. In a world where art has moved away, almost completely, from materials, these type of works present as such an alternative of some value, yet it remains difficult for such work to be taken seriously, unfortunately, in an environment that encourages and supports practices based on immateriality and dematerialization, on mediation and impermanence, on the purely virtual, even, over real, actual, direct sensual experiences.

Mass versus volume:

Another characteristic of works produced within the material esthetics sets them apart, in opposition really, from other ceramic and pottery forms. Instead of being generated by volume, as a hollow form, the work is often first constructed as a (large) solid mass of clay, as a pile. The pile is an accumulation, which implies constant change; it has no perceptible beginning and no implied end; it is fundamentally chaotic and entropic, open to all possibilities. In ceramic works of this type, the pile may or may not be hollowed out, subsequently. Hollowing a mass in ceramics is the least used method in forming ceramic objects. It is also the slowest and the more time consuming and for these reasons alone it is very rarely used and only when absolutely necessary. In such mass based work produced now, the process of hollowing the form is often bypassed. Instead, the clay body is modified by the addition of a substantial proportion of coarse aggregates (grog, which is more or less finely ground fired clay, or sand, or cement, or even

combustible materials like saw dust or styrofoam, etc.). These additives will open the body, speed the drying of the form and reduce shrinkage, but often also generate cracks within the form, while retaining the integrity of the object, nonetheless. In fact, such cracks are welcomed usually and are even essential to the desired results. The additives also make it possible to fire the form as a solid mass, often quite thick. It is important to be aware of these material and structural differences, since they impart special qualities to the work. These qualities are quite different from what our experience of historical ceramics provide, and they often challenge our expectations around the familiar behavior and visual aspect of ceramic materials. In fact, much work informed by the material esthetics operates in opposition to conventional, traditional ceramics and it is in this contestation of the conventions of ceramics that they find their full meaning and ultimate justification. They nonetheless more often than not remain much more interesting as “experiments” than potent artworks.

Some examples:

A contemporary example would be Claudi Casanovas in Spain, who makes ceramic vessels with a clear emphasis on the properties of materials and the working processes of plastic clays, transformed by touching, layering, stretching, bending, folding, drying, cracking, firing and even breaking. These pieces with geological references based on sedimentation look like nothing more than clumps of volcanic rocks or weathered wood, and also contain expected sexual references within human bodies, themselves created by similar processes of fusing, joining, dividing and growing.

Another group of examples could be made with all the contemporary artists working with the principle of the pile, a frequent formal conceit in sculpture now. Many contemporary artists, notably within ceramics sculpture, are using the pile, yet not always very successfully, unfortunately, and notably as a facile strategy in installations, where the most common conceit consists of scattering stuff all over the floor.... These artists simply follow a convention (installation art) without clearly understanding its implications. The pile is nonetheless an interesting formal device. It is organized chaos, the symbol of a unifying will, where each element is pressed next to the other in a relation of gregarious dependence. The pile/stack/mound is essentially unstable, in a constant state of flux, of change and thus in a constant rapport with time. It is constructed by entropy, implying a system that is ever more complex as it evolves. Entropy is another central aspect of the

material esthetics as well. These type of works, the pile, the stack, the mound, bring together the full and the void, the negative and the positive, the limited and the unlimited and, again, the hard and the soft, all aspects inherent to clay both as a material and its transformation as well as in the products it generates. The reconciliation of binary oppositions is central to the operative nature of containers also. The only absolute binary system is the computer code, entirely composed of 0 and 1. Nothing otherwise finds itself at one of these extremes or ever meets perfectly in the middle. Most experiences and phenomena position themselves in either one direction or the other, toward one extreme (0) or the other (1), to use the numerical, computer binary as an example. If you have more of one, you then have less of the other, in various proportions. But as a general rule, if not an absolute law, ceramics does prefers extremes over the middle ground. In that sense, the material esthetics, which operates around extremes, is rather ideal for ceramics as a specific art form, in many ways.

A potent example of such efficient, entropic extreme can be found in the work of Takeshi Yasuda, again. He will throw a porcelain form to such thinness that it collapses on the wheel; then, he will reverse the “mess” in space and re-stretch back the form by shaking the bat on which the collapsed clay form remains attached. This new form is then dried upside down to firm it up and fix its shape. It can then be returned to its original, logical orientation and be fired in a kiln. The final result is a soft, fluid, organic vase form, that remains nonetheless visually unstable, thus its amazing contained dynamism and retained energy. These vases of Takeshi Yasuda present a physical and visual aspect and quality not found before in the long history of ceramics, in itself something exceedingly rare for the art form, where classical, familiar forms tend to be found and repeated, almost identical, over millennia, everywhere. Takeshi Yasuda also uses another aspect of gravity to shape his works. Pyroplasticity causes the deformation of clay in the kiln as it softens up while it vitrifies. Porcelain, a highly vitrified clay, which explains its translucency, is particularly sensitive to this effect, usually perceived as a defect. Yasuda, with his particular sensibility and intelligence, conceives works that will deliberately be deformed in the kiln by pyroplasticity, to achieve their ultimate, desired form. To do so successfully requires an innate, embodied yet intellectual understanding of materials and processes that can only come from experience informed by a lifetime of intelligent work. Yasuda’s work is informed by reversals and by fluidity. We have seen how he uses the fluidity of glazes in the “Flux” chapter already. Hi use of the fluidity of form and the fluidity of clay is much more unusual, very original and until his recent contributions to

the pottery canon, basically unheard of. In his work, the clay is handled as if it was fluid, as if it was a liquid, in a permanent state of immanence. This remains true even after firing, where the solidification of the plastic mass appears as if such a transformation had not actually taken place and the object could still change shape under the pressure of touch. His creamware works retain the quality of whipped cream (reiterating the name Wedgwood gave to the clay he formulated, in reference to its warm creamy tone). A recent group of porcelain forms, glazed with a very thick, oozing blue green celadon, stressing even more the watery wetness of the forms, are made by throwing a rather thick form on the wheel, then thinning the wall at mid-point by stretching it. The bat on which the form is thrown is then removed from the wheel-head, and while held with both hands above the head, the form is violently projected between the legs of the potter, severing the vase at the weakened, stretched mid-way point. This unusual, very inventive process gives the upper edge of the vase a torn, thin and irregular line that will break the moving glaze in the kiln while it will collect at the wider base provided all around the form. The final result implies fluidity of form with fluidity of surface in the masterful control of excessive and extreme processes.

The Material Process:

Process is the other essential part of the material esthetics and how the materials themselves, clay and/or glazes have been transformed is of great critical importance. In most cases, this transformation implies a direct, spontaneous, unpremeditated approach to making where the material is shaped with intuition instead of rationalization, with the body instead of the mind, using the forces of nature, plasticity, gravity, evaporation, shrinkage, warping and the actions of the firing itself, often quite violent and extreme, in the case of wood-firing and raku for example, at least with the best examples of these types of works. This lack of deliberate, intellectual, rational import from the maker, the artist, doesn't imply a total removal of conceptualization or a denial of responsibility. In this kinesthetic, tactile manipulation of materials, the intelligence at work here is primarily the intelligence of materials, and materials have an intelligence of their own that informs and directs what form or shape they want or need to take, yet it remains evident that this intelligence of materials will only take the work so far and it is when both forms of intelligence, the intelligence of materials and the intelligence of the maker, come together that the best work is produced. Too often, lesser artists will rely too heavily on this great potential for the material itself, the process itself, to solve all the problems of the work

and the results, while potentially beautiful and technically competent, remain dumb and meaningless since the work is not transcending technique and process to speak of something more than mere process, mere skill and know-how. The sensibility of the maker alone, however acute, is never enough and intelligence alone, just as well, will also yield insufficient, cold and calculated results. It is in a dialogue with the materials in symbiosis with process, in an exchange of force between collaborating partners, that the maker can conduct the transformation of mute matter into eloquent work. This reliance on process over understanding, intuitively or intellectually (and both are valid), produces the best results when they come together in a balance appropriate to the sensibility and contribution of each. It can also produce so much of the banal raku work of the 1970's and 1980's and now the equally predictable wood-fired work of the last twenty years, which both rely on fashionable acceptance of trendy tricks under the market pressures of either the gift economy or the peer pressure of ideological communities. If there are art victims as there are fashion victims, and we know of many examples of both, there are also crafts victims, people who are blind followers of the popular trends. What we need are creators and leaders, people you can remain critical in a world where acquiescence is the norm, in ceramics or anywhere else.

A few notes on "Raku":

American raku, a much different version from the Raku made in Japan for tea wares, was a discovery of Paul Soldner in the 1950's. Following the prescription in Bernard Leach "A Potter's Book", the American potter experimented with firing his work that way and realized that if you placed the red hot pieces coming out of the kiln in combustible materials, leaves, straw, newspapers, it would catch fire and the smoke would produce a reduction atmosphere that would greatly affect the glaze and turn all exposed clay areas black. These effects of a "post-firing reduction" could be enhanced and controlled by conducting the process within the closed confines of a metal garbage can, for example. Post-firing reduction is actually a much better term than raku to correctly describe this type of process, yet raku is much more romantic and in the world of ceramics, romanticism always wins. Paul Soldner really understood the esthetic potential of the technique and he was sensible enough and intelligent enough to use it to create seminal and important work, in themselves, irrelevant of the technique or process used, in itself a significant discovery and an important stylistic and esthetic improvement on Japanese Raku. The problem is that it tempted lesser artists to stray and raku became a fashionable

gimmick that probably produced more bad work than any other firing method until the present craze for wood-firing which is basically producing the same “spectacular” yet ultimately predictable and boring results.

A few notes on “Glass”:

Glass as a material is quite different from ceramics, although they are part of the same chemical family. With glass, and contrary to ceramics, form and surface are NOT distinct, in most cases and if not for all practical purposes, all cases. In glass works, form and surface are combined, seamlessly, as one. Also, in glass making, fabrication and “firing” are simultaneous activities, so that the process of making is generally much quicker than with ceramics where they are distinct and independent from each other. It remains that it is almost impossible for glass to transcend its intrinsic materiality. One is always deeply aware that one is looking at glass. The most obvious esthetic effect of glass objects stems from the simple, essential fact that they are made of glass, in its amazing qualities of transparency as it captures and holds light and color(s). Glass is inherently beautiful and this represents simultaneously its gift and its curse. It is impossible, basically, to make something ugly out of glass. The material itself is too beautiful. This is in itself greatly limiting in term of expressive potential. Except in very rare cases, glass is the material for people you are relying almost exclusively on theatrical skills and phenomenal technique to make works that seduce effortlessly. This seductive quality of glass may be great but it remains easy, too easy, too often. Glass is also appreciated by people who want to be seduced, effortlessly; thus its great success. On the other hand, ceramics is almost by definition inherently ugly and can only transcend its physicality with difficulty. As a material for creative expression and the materialization of diverse, complex emotions, it is more rich in possibilities, something the histories of the two materials, and art forms, demonstrates clearly. Ceramics has accomplished results that glass couldn’t even begin to consider, despite its great beauty.

A few notes on Salt firing:

Salt firing is a glazing process where stoneware clay objects are placed in a kiln with no glaze applied to their surface. The ware is then fired to its ultimate temperature and at this point, wet salt is introduced into the kiln chamber where it vaporizes and bounds with the silica in the clay to create a mottled, orange peel like, glaze surface. Salt glazed wares

are very typical in their visual effects and they also produce very strong and resistant surfaces since the glaze is very tightly, chemically bound to the clay material underneath and it is also very resistant to acids which makes it an ideal glaze surface for wares intended for storage. It was first developed in Germany in the late Middle-Age and the early Renaissance and this knowledge of high fired clay materials and kilns gave the Germans the edge when experiments were made all over Europe to discover the secret of porcelain, a type of high fired ware, at the beginning of the 18th Century. Salt glazing brings out the subtleties of process by making even more visible all traces of touching, with the hands, with tools; it is best used on bloated, rounded, stretched, feminine forms or again with tight, cut, athletic shapes: the Rubens Venus or the bodybuilder with 1% body fat. This is another efficient example on how important excess and extremes are in ceramics in order to achieve satisfactory results. Again I repeat, ceramics and pottery do not operate well in the middle ground, the in-between, the wishy-washy. They prefer, necessitate and demand to be pushed to extremes, to the very edge of their potential, either way: crude, coarse Iga ware or the delicate, fragile Meissen porcelain cup, macho Peter Voulkos or ambiguous Adrian Saxe (who will actually often mix two or more forms of extreme in his challenging work), the virgin nun or the dissolute prostitute. This is one of the reasons why ceramics is such a difficult art form and good pottery one of the most difficult thing to do. It doesn't tolerate any indecision, insecurity, doubt or change of mind but needs to be done with assurance, sureness, confidence and a deep, absorbed and instinctive knowledge that takes years to acquire and is the reserved privilege of very few. Anyway, salt glazing should not be attempted by anyone who cannot master qualities of skin, flabby or taught since the surface is not covered or hidden with a glaze (glazes can cover up an awful lot of mistakes...) since the "glaze" surface achieved with salt firing reveals instead with acute sharpness and sensibility all the subtleties of the form and the surface.

The Material Surface:

If the material esthetics is primarily a function of form and of process, there is nonetheless an equally specific material surface in ceramics, which manifests itself mostly at the level of glazes and glazing. The particular esthetics of glazes has been analyzed within the flux esthetics, yet glazing within the material esthetics achieves visual and tactile effects that have not been present before in ceramics history, not even within the Chinese ceramic history, despite the fact that this culture gave us most of our glaze

surfaces, colors and effects. Even the sumptuous, thick and crackled celadon glazes developed in China, glazes that rely so much on extreme application, on the qualities of specific materials as informed by process, do not quite achieve enough intrinsic materiality to be included here. As another example of extreme process, in order to achieve an excess of thickness necessary for celadon glazes, when applied on thin wares, the potter would apply one coat of glaze, then sinter the glaze in a kiln to fix it to the clay body and render both clay and glaze porous again, so another coat of glaze could be applied, then sintered again and another coat applied, this process repeated until a sufficient thickness of celadon glaze was achieved. Only then would the piece be fired to a high enough temperature to melt the glaze.

The material surface given by a certain esthetic approach to glazes and glazing is also a recent development within ceramics history and its best examples are very late within the 19th Century (George Ohr, always the precursor) or well within the 20th Century (as well as the experiments and unusual applications found in the work of Gertrude and Otto Natzler, Lucie Rie, Brother Thomas Bezanson, Beatrice Wood and her luster glazes, Laura Andersson and Glenn Lukens). All these artists works are characterized by a physical, material approach to glazes and glazing, with thick applications that reaffirm the tactile, oozy, runny, bubbly, pitted or even cratered qualities of the skin, stretched over forms that usually remain simple to showcase the surface of the glaze itself as the main esthetic aspect. Experiments will continue to be made in the future with new glaze materials and new colors in order to develop new effects, new textures in glaze surfaces that are not readily or even possibly functional but whose main intent is purely visual, tactile, totally and exclusively esthetic. It is important to remember that there is no such thing as a bad glaze, there is only a glaze badly used. These types of extreme, excessive, intense glazes are best applied on simple, forms that bring out the quality of the glaze over any other aspect of the work. This is especially true for crystalline glazes that will only develop successfully over smooth, simple form and will create their distinctive decorative surface with slick, glossy glazes seeded with irregular and circular crystals, often of a contrasting color from the ground. The effect is quite spectacular and showy, yet it remains limited, in my opinion, in its expressive or esthetic potential and can only surpass with difficulties the first crystalline glaze ever fired (in France, in the 19th Century, although proto-crystalline glazes were also developed in China, in the “oil spot” glazes of the Tang and Sung dynasties). Crystalline glazes never fully fulfill their potential totally and no new object of any more interest or originality has been made since they were first

discovered, as far as I can tell anyway, and I may need to be proven wrong on this one. The exercise usually consists now simply in replicating with slight, inconsequent variations, an effect that has already been achieved before, more often than not more successfully than the current attempt. Crystalline glazes are a clear symptom of the syndrome too often present in ceramics, where easy, facile effects (despite the myth of their inherent difficulty), as we have seen with raku, replace relevancy as a driving force behind the work. The crystalline glaze work of Jop Cock in the Netherlands is a rare, exceptional example since he has achieved work of particular interest, of great sophistication and refinement (by remaining subtle), by dedicating all of his focus to its development. Usually and in most other cases, the necessity for smooth, simple, uninterrupted forms in order for the glaze effects, the crystals, to develop, limits the formal potential of the technique and creates works that are repetitive and too similar to be worth all the fuss and trouble. To compensate this drawback, the practitioners of crystalline glazes go to great, ridiculous length to have everyone believe that the technique is exceedingly difficult, when in fact it can be mastered quite quickly and readily with the average amount of patience and dedication necessary to achieve any results in ceramics. But creating and sustaining myths of all kinds is also part and parcel of the ceramics world, for some reason.

Another specifically material surface in ceramics consist in altering the skin of the object with cuts, gashes, grooves and punctures. While inherently violent, such gesture can only be successful if the final result is integrated with the form through a certain continuity of making, spontaneous and direct, between form and surface. It can easily be gauche and awkward under less deft handling, unfortunately quite common. Efficient examples include the notorious work of Peter Voulkos and the monumental pierced vessels of Layson Oyekam. Bad examples are too numerous to list here....

Conceptual Ceramics:

I considered for a while to have a separate esthetics (#8) for conceptual work in ceramics. I finally decided against it for a number of reasons. The first is that conceptual ceramic works are best analyzed as the counterpoint to the current obsession with materials found everywhere in contemporary ceramics. Also because there are very few practitioners engaged with the exploration of concepts specific to ceramics, and who do so from a conceptual premise, primarily. This is especially true compared to those

engaged with the material esthetics, by far the more numerous right now. And then, conceptual ceramics is almost exclusively, so far, a Canadian phenomenon (and practiced by very few here as well), although it has been ignored almost completely by Canadian art institutions of all types, including those concerned by ceramics in one way or other, and I do not want here to make distinctions based on geography, exclusively.

A criticism that could be laid against much, in fact most of the work made under the material aesthetics is that beyond a deft handling of material and process, the work doesn't convey much challenging or even familiar meaning. One characteristic of material esthetics work is that the objects tend to be non functional or not practical in a useful way. This is particularly true today, since historically, at its source, the material esthetics was manifested mostly in Tea Ceremony wares, whose function was as much symbolic and hierarchical than practical, anyway. It remains that at its core, the esthetics is seductive in a primal way, through the formal characteristics of materials, their color, texture and the shape they take through the process of handling and transformation at times under extreme conditions that have more to do with romanticism and ideology than necessity. This material approach to the esthetic experience is rather new and quite recent in the field of ceramics and it is situated in clear contrast and opposition to much that is happening elsewhere in the art world, where ideas are more important than materials and where materials are relevant or even essential only so far as they serve ideas and are necessary in order to materialize ideas that need physicality to communicate.

In The 1970's and 1980's primarily, although it is continuing now, much was made around non-functional pottery forms in what was termed then and is still used as a defining term now, "The Vessel Esthetics". This expression is erroneous and a misnomer. There is no clear esthetics within the Vessel "Esthetics", since the objects that compose that group are stylistically and esthetically different from one another. What these objects share in common is politics, economics and ideology, and these work are based primarily on ideology and politics (their intent, largely unmet, was to be taken seriously as art). They are made around the false premise that anything non-functional is superior to functional objects and that individual vision and expression is superior to tradition and work informed by history. One of the problems that became evident right away is that the makers of non-functional vessels ended up making the same "original" statements again and again, since they got caught in their own stylistic limitations and could only repeat themselves, with slight, inconsequential variations endlessly. If it is conceptually logical

for functional, practical objects to be made in repetition, it makes little sense for an original statement to be endlessly repeated. Yet, that is often what we see with non-functional vessels, in a contradiction that is too obvious for its own good. When work is made from a stylistic position, one can paint oneself in a corner rapidly. To momentarily avoid such a (unavoidable) conclusion, makers of stylistic works use, as another common strategy to affect a modicum of change, the making of larger and larger works, to monstrous proportions at times, no easy task in a material that resist scale so readily, or works that are ever more complex, fussy and eventually mannered, presenting endless boring variations on the same, lame idea. Or again, they shift material (usually, to porcelain) or they shift technique (from throwing to casting, from glazing to wood-firing, for example), while continuing to repeat the same exhausted idea. The non-functional vessel is a utopian construct that pretends to be superior to functional objects and certainly succeeds in that regard as far as pricing and marketability are concerned. As a strategy to give a new relevancy to ceramics within late Modernism, it has largely failed. The non-functional vessel (presented, erroneously, as more “conceptual” than functional and practical pottery) was also proposed as a new form, as a new strategy for ceramics within contemporary culture, as an advancement, an improvement on functional ceramics, while in actuality, non-functional vessels, in a practical sense, have always been made historically yet they were the efficient reflection of a culture instead of the expression of an individual.

If stylistic work leads irrevocably to repetition, eventually ending up imitating itself, conceptual work is endlessly capable of generating new forms and constantly able to materialize ideas in new, original ways. There are very few possible answers to a stylistic problem while there are an infinite number of answers to a conceptual query. If forms are inherently limited, ideas are endlessly fertile to generate more ideas. Stylistic work can only find validity if it is the product of an extreme sensibility combined with exceptional skill and technique, and that is very rare.

In the ceramics world, there has been another recent development that is conceptual instead of material in nature. This conceptual movement cannot be termed an “esthetics” either, since one of its characteristics is that it is not formal or even less stylistic in nature and can take many forms and visual qualities depending on intent and content, and the resulting work does not share a visual, esthetic aspect that could be defined within shared parameters. A non-stylistic approach is actually a central aspect of conceptual ceramics

and sets it apart from other ceramic forms that rely on style and esthetics, on formal aspects, to a much larger degree. Conceptual ceramics is not based on individual sensibility or expression, either. It is important to make clear once again that a conceptual approach in ceramics has always been present, since the origin in fact. I repeat again, ceramics is articulated around two main concepts, function and decoration. Any functional or decorative object is thus inherently conceptual as well. Yet more recent ceramic work has addressed conceptual issues around function and decoration more directly, in order to deconstruct the nature of ceramics as a distinct, autonomous art form, and reveal with clarity what makes it distinct from other art forms and how it can contribute in unique ways to culture. If ceramics and pottery are inherently material practices, deeply connected to the materials that inform them, they also imply conceptual aspects, a fact that is too easily and conveniently forgotten. There has been a huge amount of confusing, obfuscating rhetoric around conceptual art and, succinctly, I would argue that very little conceptual art is anymore conceptual than any other type or form of art. It would be better labeled as “Immaterial Art”, or even better “Contextual Art”, since it tends to be specific to a certain context, namely the particular context of institutional display. This is even true for temporary installations, for performance art and site specific manifestations of “conceptual” art taking place outside or even in contestation of institutions, who have now nonetheless found their way within the context of institutions in the form of documentation, most of it photographic or mediated.

In conceptual ceramics, the emphasis is never on form alone (the classical esthetics), or on the material surface of glazes (the flux esthetics), or on decoration or even less on narrative. In fact a main characteristic of conceptual ceramics, is their non-narrative nature, and in that sense they contest the necessity for history, for theory, for narrative found in representational and mediated art forms. Conceptual ceramics are not concerned with imitation; and process, industrial or otherwise, is but a mean to materialize ideas. If in the material esthetics clay always wins, in conceptual ceramics, it is the idea that wins. Every other aspect of the work matters only as long as it serves the idea.

In ceramics, a conceptual approach often implies a denial of function but contrary to the denial of function found in the non-functional vessel, a denial that was ideological and political, the denial of function is here conceptual, and necessary in order for the idea to be communicated with clarity. In many instances, the denial of function serves to question the role and meaning of function in ceramics and the role and meaning of function in the

experience we have of certain types of objects. When contemporary ceramics denies function, for whatever reason, the work usually refers, nonetheless, directly to pottery form, since pottery in that context is used as a sign for ceramics as a whole, as the preferred form ceramics has taken, historically. The reference to function, through the emphasis on non-function, refers to function as a concept, and not the performative, potential aspects of function and of functional containers.

For argument's sake, I will argue that very few, if any (to be a bit of an absolutist here) contemporary pots are actually "functional" at all, since the historical necessity for pots, for handmade pots anyway, to be functional, in a practical way, doesn't exist anymore. This performative nature of ceramic pots has been delegated to other materials (plastic, etc.), the way the making of pots by hand has largely, almost completely actually, been replaced by pots made mechanically and industrially. Most pots made now, even minimally functional ones, play no practical role in our culture, as tools, and they are basically never used; their "function" is to serve as status symbols of taste in a display context, be it a home or a museum.

Examples of Conceptual Ceramics:

Leopold L. Foulem is a Canadian artist who has investigated the conceptual potential of ceramics for close to 40 years now. He is in fact at the origin of this "movement" and his influence on others within Canada or worldwide makes it possible to argue that conceptual ceramics is a Canadian phenomenon. In Leopold Foulem's work, it greatly matters that the materials appears as ceramics, but the clay material itself, as a material, is irrelevant. As such, the work clearly embodies tactile ideas but not tactility, contrary to so much contemporary ceramics that are based on tactility itself, as an end in itself, as is so evident in most of the work found in the material esthetics. In Foulem's work, it is also crucial that we understand the object as a pot, although the pot as a form is now just an image, a representation, and the form of the pot can even be represented by complete absence, as a void. Function and practicality are completely impossible and irrelevant in a tangible way. Foulem, by decidedly and decisively denying function, shifts the emphasis to the forms themselves, as well as to the surfaces, as abstractions, as ideas. The form now simply represents the concreteness of the volume intrinsic to vessels and to pottery forms as well as to ceramics as a specific, distinct and autonomous art form. This denial of function is not political (only), as is so often the case with what we have come to call

the non-functional vessel, in order to change the status of the thing and elevates its market value. Here, the denial of function is basically conceptual, in order to make us think of function and the implication of its absence in experience. The work is not “original” either. These works are reworkings of historical forms and historical surfaces. We also learn nothing of significance about the maker, about his sensibility (or lack of), his abilities (or lack of), his talent (or lack of). Material, technique, personality, all these aspects are irrelevant. Such irrelevancy is revolutionary. In Foulem’s work, the pictorial component of the surfaces are a synthesis of various types (historical) and these objects appropriate shamelessly pictorial signs distinctive to ceramics. They remain recognizable yet there is a complete absence of narrative intent and the surface remains totally abstract, as a representation of a type. This surface is purely descriptive; it creates an effect of memory in an erudite dialogue with history, in an investigation of the position and role of ceramics within culture.

His work operates a series of reversals, from function to non-function, from object to image, from materiality to immateriality. Like the work of British sculptor Rachel Whiteread, the work materializes absence and void. Yet, while Rachel Whiteread removes the actual object from the final work and presents its ghost, its mirror image as a negative, Leopold Foulem retains it and the presence of the thing as a thing remains actual, essential and positive. Quiddity is maintained.

As another example of a conceptual ceramics, I will again single out a work by Swiss artist Philippe Barde. Two bowl forms, one smooth, elegant and refined, the other rough, crude and vulgar are presented as a pair, presented together in opposition and contrast. One object was made under his specifications by Chinese experts in Jingdezhen, the other is a found object, also discovered in China. His intent is to confront and relate two extremes always found in China, and in ceramics as well, shit and flowers, the abject and the sublime. By placing together the two polar aspects of ceramics, the ideal and perfect form of the thin, light, elegant and beautiful white porcelain bowl with the dark, crude, rough, abject and ugly saggar, an ordinary tool that exists in order to hold the white bowl in the kiln during the firing and protect it from the elements and the violent process, absorbing in its materials and retaining in its surfaces all the traces of this process, leaving the bowl pure, clean and innocent. The saggar appears crude yet feels alive while the bowl remains dead and still, in its perfection. The artist made one intervention on the bowl. He pierced its wall with two sets of holes, one placed too high, closed to the rim and

the other too low, closed to the foot, to create an awkwardness and imbalance that makes it tumble back to the side of liveliness. The saggar is just a found object, made by the millions, all identical and with no esthetic intent, a simple tool to do a simple job. As an example of the material esthetics and as an embodiment of the romanticism so commonly found in the ideological and stylistic aspects of the esthetics, it would be more valuable on the art market, somewhat like the humble Korean bowl elevated by the tea masters to the level of a National Treasure in Japan, more valuable and prized than the manufactured porcelain bowl, perfect yet banal and predictable.

British sculptor Anish Kapoor, whose work constantly makes use of the container format in various ways, as do so many other sculptors today, notably in England (Rachel Whiteread, Andy Goldsworthy, Bill Woodrow, Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon and in Vancouver, Liz Magor, Brian Jungen, Myfanwy Mcleod, Damian Moppett among many others; more on this in my essay “Vancouver Sculpture: Craft Concepts”, at www.paumathieu.ca). Kapoor’s work offers another example of a conceptual/perceptual approach to the experience of a bowl form. By encasing a semi-spherical, deeply concave bowl form into a wall, flush at the rim with the flat wall, the volume is repositioned from the horizontal to the vertical (bowls are experienced as operating on the horizontal), which creates a shift in expectation already. Since our brains and minds are trained to perceive according to familiar expectations, the circular form on the wall will absolutely read as a flat disk and it is only after a significant while that a discomfort will manifest itself, and prompt us as viewer to physically, interactively engage with the work and attempt to touch it, touch the perceived surface to test its actual presence in space. It is only then that one realizes that what was at first glance a flat circle on the wall is actually a deep, concave space, like the spherical interior of a bowl, as our finger, then our whole hand “penetrates” the wall. Void as fullness, emptiness as solid.

The reason why I stress repeatedly the difference between clay (the material) and ceramics (the material and the art form) is to demonstrate to all these makers whose work is almost absolutely based on clay as a material in its transformation through process (something that I find totally legitimate, if done effectively), that what they do would be greatly improved if their understanding of what they do, of ceramics, was greater; and so that makers can think, act upon and talk about what they do with more intelligence; and so that writers and critics also have a clearer theoretical structure to do their work; and so that teachers can teach better and students can learn better as well. So far, the emphasis

in ceramics to focus on materials and processes is getting everything backward. What is important is to understand first what ceramics is, how it works and is experienced, and above all what it means, what is its intrinsic, autonomous and specific contribution to art and to the world (of course, inseparately from each other).

In Conclusion:

As we have seen with the pile, other models of transformation than accumulation are possible, yet all ceramic processes tend to refer to the human body or human activities as well. When working with materials, any materials, but more specifically with clay which is a material of such tactility, so readily responsive to transformation and change, always imply a relation to body movements, which are not a mere superficial aspect of the work but actually its more powerful element. The kinesthetic manipulation of clay may give abstract forms, but these readily become heart and vagina, penis, uterus and belly, or again imitate other organs, ovaries, eggs and sperm. The use of ceramic processes, the oozing and running of fluid glazes for example, reinforces the connotations between bodies and clay, between ceramic objects and bodily activities, all potentially messy affairs, where abjection even is an ever present possibility.

Psychologist Donald Winnicott has defined a famous theory around the concept of the transitional object, a type of object belonging to the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived, for example the breast in relation to the baby and the mother. Similarly, the purely esthetic object operates differently from objects in nature (rocks, trees, etc.) or objects like tools (bowls, vases, etc.). The purely esthetic object has a symbolic function rather than a ritual or blatantly practical one. Among the characteristics of ceramic objects, and other craft objects for that matter, is that they have a tendency to blur these types of distinctions, since they tend to combine and fuse various aspects often perceived, unnecessarily, as distinct, like the esthetic and the functional, the symbolic and the ritualistic. In their operative as well as conceptual aspects, craft objects are at their most basic not only containers but also transitional objects.

Similarly, if we are to believe Sigmund Freud's theory, the first stage of a child's development is concerned with primal creation and expression, with the basic needs of absorption and excretion, with making at its most basic, through bodily processes. This first stage of development is called by Freud, the anal stage. According to Freud, shit is

also part of the same cycle as gold, both based on retention and expenditure. And according to novel writer Milan Kundera, kitch is the absolute denial of shit. Clay, Shit, Gold and Kitsch are all interrelated in ceramics and in the material esthetics. The material esthetics is not chronologically the first stage of development of ceramics, since it is quite recent. Maybe it represents a transitional, critical and necessary stage of crisis between a past that is not possible anymore and a future that remain undefined. I have great hope that the anal stage of ceramics, embodied by much of the work emblematic of the material esthetics will soon be over. The obsession of the field of ceramics for the primary qualities of materials (this is clay), for their sheer basic transformation (pushing, shoving), for masterful process (look how good I am) and above all, this obsession with the personality and sensibility of the maker (this is me) and for individual expression (I made this), need to be put to rest. It is time to grow up.

It remains that the material esthetics is one of the most popular esthetics in recent contemporary ceramics and this phenomenon can be found worldwide. When it succeeds in transcending the sheer seduction of the materials and the trappings of an over-reliance on processes imbued with the romanticism of particular lifestyles and fashions, it can engage critically with an extreme expression of sensibility to present a counter argument to contemporary life, where conformity and sameness seems to be the norm. Then, the material esthetics can achieve its most potent results, too rarely seen unfortunately. Too often though, it tends to produce works that look the same whether it is made here or there, by this or that maker; works that may have a lot of character but little to no individuality, contradictorily, work that is anonymous in a negative sense. At times one isn't even sure if the work was recently made or hundreds of years ago, and in a different culture and for very different reasons, now invalid and meaningless. This anonymity and timelessness could be potent factors in the work, as they reaffirm and exploit very important aspects of ceramics in its relation to history and to culture, but it can also serve only to make obvious the schizophrenic nature of much contemporary art (and ceramics), dissociated from its context and rendered irrelevant.

Like any other objects made in ceramics, the material esthetics objects capture a moment in time and freeze it for the future. This moment can either be the wrong one, as it is unfortunately in most cases, referring to the past instead of the present, and thus, irrelevant and meaningless. This moment can also be a neutral one, less bothersome but nonetheless insignificant. At best, it is the right moment that is captured, one transmitting

within its materiality an aspect of the times we live in that would be irretrievably lost otherwise. The danger remains that by focusing on the present, on immediacy, on the “now”, as does so much contemporary art, we end up with an experience that may be meaningful in the instant but that has no meaningful permanency, physical or otherwise. What is the point to make art that is absolutely meaningful while the experience takes place, while the social event happens, while one is entertained, yet art that is quickly meaningless once the instant has passed?

Other artists to consider:

Lawson Oyekam, Kathy Butterly, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, Sterling Ruby, Arlene Shechet, Rudolf Staffel; Yohei Nishimura’s “A Cup Covered in Stone”, where the Japanese artist has fired a rock over an industrial porcelain cup, until the rock melted and overwhelmed the object; In Hungary, Imre Schrammel’s experiments with firing bullets with a gun at a large chunk of clay (Bull’s Eye, 1985) and then firing the result; Nina Hole’s wood fired kiln/sculptures which combine community building, collaboration, performance and theatricality while leaving behind a partially fired ceramics sculpture that slowly disintegrates; Thomas Jan König’s wheel thrown and torso like, room size installations. The flexible ceramics of Bas Kolls, which expands on a singular and original process for casting new forms. Also John Chalke, Barbara Tipton, Taizo Kuroda, Yikyung Kim, Trevor Fry and his very scatological ceramic sculptures, David Binns, Alistair Bremner, Annabeth Rosen, the recent work of Tsehai Johnson, Neil Brownsword, Kim Goldsmith, Piet Stockmans, Heather May Erickson; in Australia, the folded vessels of Merran Esson and the glaze work of Greg Daly. Working with unfired clay, Rebecca Warren and the sculptural cars of Kristen Morgin. DFC ‘s “Explosion Dinnerware, 2005”; Peter Fischl and David Wise’s Jug, 2007. In a conceptual vein, dematerializing space, the teapots of Sarine Chan “Nothing is Everything, Everything is Nothing”, 2008; Ron Nagle’s faux drips, analyzed within the Flux Esthetics and the Simulation Esthetics could be included here as well. Ken Price’s work of the last twenty years is also very much influenced by the tactility of clay, its transformation through carving and other excessive, obsessive and deliberate processes, notably at the level of surfaces, which are painted with multiple layers of car enamels that are then sanded down to reveal the rich chromatic effects of the layering. Price is not using ceramic colors for his ‘fetish finish” surfaces yet the final visual quality is nonetheless greatly informed by the esthetics of ceramic surfaces in their decorative

polychromy in relation to a volumetric form, often referencing vessels and other containers with openings.

Paul Mathieu, *The Art of the Future: 14 essays on ceramics*

Chapter Eight

FOOD: The Necessities of Containment

Archeologists have recently unearthed a 4000 years old noodle dish in North Western China, definite proof that the Chinese, not the Italian, first invented noodles. Prior to this discovery, the earliest written record of noodles dates back to about 1,900 years ago, in a book written during the Han dynasty (AD 25–220) that contains the first description of the origins and production of noodles in China. But text can be misleading and open to so much interpretation. Nothing beats actual, physical evidence. The 4000 years old Chinese noodles were preserved to this day by being covered in sediment inside a well-preserved earthenware bowl, when an earthquake, followed by flooding, occurred. These noodles were probably the last meal of some unfortunate person. The earthenware bowl was found upside down and covering the noodles and this served to protect them and helped in their preservation. Right after this bowl with noodles was discovered by archeologists, the noodles themselves quickly turned to dust as soon as they were exposed to air. Fortunately, using today's preferred medium of archiving, a photograph was taken before the noodles were completely turned to dust, after having spent 4000 years underground. The bowl is doing fine.

Closer to us, right now actually, photographs from Darfur in the Sudan show destroyed villages, burned to the ground by the militias terrorizing agricultural communities in that part of Africa. All that remains visible and recognizable on the news photographs are the remnant of granaries, built from unfired clay as well as a few ceramic pots lying about, that survived the destruction of the huts and the houses, by fire. When the inhabitants of these destroyed villages make their way back to their land, they are able to retrieve some grain from the bottom of the clay granaries and then cook a simple meal on the pottery vessels they can scavenge from the remains of their villages. Thus, a progressive return to life can begin, in no mean part due to the properties of clay as a material, to be transformed into useful tools that, because they are themselves fired (a positive act) can now withstand another type of firing (the destructive act of the militias) and they can still be used to contain and preserve perishable materials and to provide utensils for preparing, cooking and serving food. Everything of value in these villages is either destroyed or scavenged, yet fired pots having little intrinsic value and being basically worthless in themselves, as things, are left lying around, not worth destroying or stealing.

Ceramics and pottery relationship to food is very old, very intimate and ongoing. Pottery and bodies, both in relation to food specifically, are intimately connected. Pottery is part of the cycle of life (and death) sustained by food and pottery functions are closely related to bodily functions: pottery contains, preserves, transforms and then excretes solid and liquids, and then it receives the unwanted residues the body rejects. This performative dimension of pots that combines with the domestic dimension of bodies coming in intimate and direct contact with ceramic objects, with pots specifically here, is still central to ceramic practices today. But it also has a long history.

Historical overview:

The origins of ceramics and pottery making are closely connected to the beginning of what we call culture and civilization. In China, very ancient tombs and burial chambers are lined with bricks and tiles that are often embossed with scenes of hunting and gathering, providing important information about the life and practices of the people buried therein. With the progressive end of hunting and gathering societies and the abandonment of a nomadic life, where small groups of humans scoured the land in the constant search for food and sustenance, new developments became possible. Humans

started to live in a more sedentary manner, around the husbandry of animals and the beginning of agriculture, which led to a rapid population expansion that created the first communities living in large settlements that eventually developed into cities. All of these phenomena start simultaneously, if at different times, all over the world. All of these events are linked together and led to great technological progress, particularly in metallurgy and in ceramics, both intimately connected, as we have seen in “The Industrial Esthetics” chapter. The first pots may have been unfired (and thus recycled back to earth eventually; we will never know) but it was quickly discovered that firing clay gave the material and the object itself new, very interesting properties; it made the ware stronger and resistant to heat and this permitted the cooking of food as well as the storage of grains and other food products. Cooking food greatly helps in digestion and permits the absorption by the body of more nutrients. In fact, firing and cooking is what distinguishes us from animals, along with complex language. With cooking, bodies grow bigger, stronger and the brain grows bigger too. The invention of cooking food, closely connected to the invention of fired clay pottery, was greatly influential in all kinds of human progress. With the development of agriculture, in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, in the Indus valley and in China, grains began to be produced in large quantities and needed to be stored in jars made of fired clay or in clay granaries to protect them from the elements and from rodents, providing food until the next harvest and keeping the necessary grain for the next planting. These surpluses of food needed to be controlled and redistributed. This led in turn to the rise of a specialized class within society, a bureaucracy to supervise the process. These accountants eventually developed mathematics and writing, both closely connected to clay as a material and ceramics as a technology, as we will see in the “Text” chapter. Eventually, trade, commerce and exchange (the starting points of capitalism) were developed in order to use any surplus not needed locally and this created the political structure and class system with farmers, workers and craftspeople, merchants, accountants, civil servants, soldiers, politicians, kings, queens and presidents. This political, hierarchical structure is still largely with us to this day. Basically and simply put, economic developments yielded technological advances as well, and ceramics was at the core of this social and political progression.

Fired clay technology also made possible larger structures and buildings, which led to the development of formalized religion and, with the invention of the brick (as we will see in the “Shelter” chapter) and of drains, pipes and cisterns to great improvement in sanitation and hygiene (as we will see in that chapter too). This fostered the growth of

population, all of which permitted the development of ever more complex, sophisticated and powerful civilizations. All this reaffirms again the crucial importance of ceramics as a physical material that is above all a cultural material. All cultures made fired clay pots in a wide variety of forms and shapes, to store, to prepare, to cook and to serve food of all types. Most culinary traditions have specific dishes that require a particular ceramic implement, unique to that culture. I am thinking of the “tanjine” dish of North Africa, as an example. The base of the tanjine is a round shallow dish, the lid is conical, like an upside down funnel; set over a brazier or in an oven, tanjines are used for slow cooking stews and their particular form condenses vapor and helps in circulating and condensing the juices produced by cooking. A whole study could be made of these culture specific vessels. Nonetheless, the basic, standard, necessary shapes are basically the same all over the world and this is true to this day. When humans have similar needs and create things for similar uses, they tend to come up with similar solutions and make forms that are essentially similar as well. We have seen this at work within “The Classical Esthetics” chapter. At the level of form, there is very little difference between a common pot made in China or Mesopotamia, in Africa or pre-Columbian America. Even at the level of surface, of decoration and ornamentation, there is often more similarity than difference, with similar motifs, symbols, signs and other designs reappearing all over the world. Ordinary, common pots, which are by far the more numerous, are not altogether the kind of objects we usually consider when we think of ceramics history. Their esthetic interest is limited and they concern more the archeologist and the anthropologist than the art historian, the connoisseur or even the artist making ceramic objects now.

We tend to be more engaged with the particular, idiosyncratic and characteristic productions of each culture (usually the decorated objects and, today, the “personal”, expressive objects), and in the aspects that makes them distinct and different, in what separates them and permits categorization, than in those aspects they may share, in what unifies them. And these types of ceramic objects are usually not the type made for the domestic, daily, ordinary needs of the common individual. We prefer to consider these objects made for religious or political rituals and (more often than not in ceramics history) these objects made for funerary purposes, since they tend to be loaded with symbolism in both their form and their surface, which makes them esthetically more complex and more appealing. Funerary objects are also better preserved and can be found in excellent condition after being buried in the ground with the dead, while ordinary pots in daily use were eventually broken and tossed away on the refuse pile. It is the porosity of clay

utensils that makes them more dangerous than metal; archeological finds of huge deposits of ceramic sherds in refuse dumps at Indus Valley sites suggest that from very early on, inhabitants of India would use such vessels only once and ceremoniously smash them afterwards. Such a practice of smashing pots after only a single use is actually found quite commonly, all over the world and to this day. If shards and fragments of pots and other ceramic objects can still contain and transmit much information, as to the shape of the original object, its fabrication, its use, etc., they are nonetheless much less interesting than complete objects that transmit their meaning more fully and readily, and not only to the expert but to all of us curious enough to wonder about them. All of these pots can help greatly in reconstructing life at the time of their fabrication and use. Very often, pots made for funerary purposes depict various aspects of the life of the deceased or expected life in the beyond. They serve as substitutes for real things, to accompany the buried body in the afterlife and provide the necessities for survival after death. Many funerary ceramic objects are directly connected to food for these reasons. In pre-Columbian America for example, the vast majority of Moche pots found in present day Peru, thousands and thousands of them now dispersed in museums and collections all over the world, were made using molds, which meant that many themes, shapes and images were reworked and repeated in various forms. They depict not only funerary rituals but other aspects of Moche life as well, crafts like weaving (never pottery making, unfortunately), religious, social and political rituals and sacrifices, military expeditions and more prosaic activities like fishing and agriculture. We find pots, who are meant to act as substitute for the real things, shaped like fruits, vegetables and other edible plant forms (corn, squashes, peppers, peanuts and potatoes, all gifts of the Americas to the world, along with tomatoes, tobacco, chocolate, rubber and many others), all kind of animals, dogs, lamas, parrots, turkeys and other birds, frogs, mice, fishes, lobster, crab, shellfish, whales, sharks, snakes and many other forms of land and marine life that were all important food sources. Other like the jaguar, the bat or the condor were more symbolic and religious in meaning as they represented transitional forms as messengers between the connected world of the living and the dead, through their shared spiritual beliefs. These funerary or domestic ceramic vessels carry much information on the Moche culture, a pre-literate culture, information we would not have otherwise.

Again as with the Moche, most Greek Attic pottery was preserved in relatively good condition, since it was used by the Etruscans of Central Italy, who collected vast quantities of it to serve as offerings in their tombs. The Greek themselves also had funerary pottery

but they buried their dead directly in the ground and their funerary material was deposited visibly outside the tombs, from where it would be ditched, literally, subsequently. The Etruscans on the other hand, purposely built their tombs out of stone and in these permanent, elaborate structures, the Greek pots were preserved, at times intact, instead of being broken and the fragments dispersed, as they would have been in Greece. For the Greek, these objects, before they shifted role and meaning for the Etruscans, were part of everyday life, to be used at gathering around food and drink (the symposium), or again as prizes for athletes at the Olympic Games. Then, the vessel was presented filled with the best olive oil, which was actually the really valuable part of the prize! The pot, which would be worth a huge amount of money now, was just a container for the much more precious and appreciated oil. Greek Attic pottery is characterized by its glossy, black, shiny surface, which is not an actual glaze, but a very refined clay slip which gives a tight, smooth surface under the right firing conditions and seals the surface of the ware, reducing its porosity and permeability. For open vessels, it was normal practice to cover the interior and exterior walls with the black slip surface, in order to make the vessel more pleasant esthetically and functionally as well. For closed vessels like amphora, hydrias and other storage containers for liquids, the interior wall was left uncovered with the black slip, if evaporation was desired, as is the case for water, for example, which will get cooler and remain cold as energy is lost in the evaporation process, a characteristic of porous pottery. This potential of porous ceramic vessels to cool water is used all over the world, especially in warm climates. In India, a certain type of pottery vessels is still made today for the simple reason that such vessels play an important social role when entertaining guests. A porous pottery vessel filled with water is kept near the door, and when guests arrive, they are served a glass of water, kept cool through evaporation, a process facilitated by the porosity of low-fired clay vessels. In Attic pottery, for more precious liquids like wine or oil, where evaporation is undesirable, the black slip surface is also applied to the interior of the vessel, to seal it better. According to textual records, the Greeks would also impregnate their wine cups with spices, in order to make them more fragrant and agreeable to use. Here again, the porosity of earthenware clay vessels would have been ideal for that purpose, to absorb and retain various substances and smells, good and bad. This is why unglazed earthenware vessels are still used extensively in Latin countries, notably, to cook and serve food.

For drinking alcoholic beverages like wine, most cultures at times use drinking horns with pointy ends, called rhytons. Once filled with drink, such pots are meant to be emptied

or again handed on to others, but never put down till all the drink is gone, since their particular and peculiar form prevents to set them down except upside down, on their rim. Inventive variations are found just about everywhere. The invention of pottery vessels led not only to delicious and healthy diets, but also to the brewing and consumption of alcohol. If you leave cooked grain in a pot, it will ferment and if you add water to the fermented mix, you will get ale, or beer. The same is true for the sweet juice of fruits or vegetables, which will give wine.

Recently, a wine-making family in Italy has been producing wines similar to those of the ancient Romans, by following the methods indicated by the archeological discoveries in Pompeii. The archeologists found that the fired clay jars, called “dolii”, discovered in the wine-making quarters of the city were buried to the lip and were in perfect condition of preservation. The intent of the Romans in burying these jars was not in preserving them for us to find now. By burying the jars in the ground, their content could be kept cool, creating perfect conditions for the fermentation of wine. In Pompei, wine bars were also lining the streets and the lidded wine jars were likewise buried to the lip into the counters. In Korea, similarly, kimchee jars are also buried into the ground to the lip in order to keep the content cool and help with preservation and fermentation, a necessary condition for kimchee, which is spiced, fermented cabbage.

This is the first essay based on a theme, “Food”. It will be followed by others, on Shelter, Hygiene, Text, The Figure, Sex and Death. As demonstrated with the various esthetics previously defined, these themes are not separate and discreet but on the contrary often complementary and the same object can operate under many themes, simultaneously. Here is an example of the permeability of themes: Recently, near Venice, Italy, a skeleton has been unearthed from a mass grave, where victims of the plague of 1576 had been buried. The skeleton has a brick in its mouth. So, that brick could be analyzed under Food, since it is in the mouth of the skeleton; as a brick, it could be placed under the Shelter chapter; and the skeleton connects this object to Death, just as well. There is also a connection to Hygiene, and to the Figure, but these are more tenuous. The body of this victim of the plague was buried with a brick in its mouth since the undertakers were worried that the corpse was that of a vampire, which would come back to life after the burial and eat the other bodies in the mass grave. The brick firmly placed in the open jaw would make that impossible. It was long speculated from texts that this was a current practice, a practice that actually gave rise to the myth of vampires, but no

proof had ever been found until this skeleton, with a brick in its mouth was recently found. A proof that may not have been possible, if it was not for a ceramic object, a simple brick fragment, again.

Glazes and Food:

Ceramic glazes also have a specific and quite interesting relation to food. The origins and developments of glazes were looked at more closely in “The Flux Esthetics” chapter. Suffice to say here that glazes came relatively late in ceramics history, the earliest examples being found in Egypt and in Mesopotamia and their “secret” did not spread very quickly and in actuality it took a rather long time for their general use to be more or less universal, as it basically is now, certainly as far as cooking and serving utensils are concerned. Certain culinary traditions nonetheless retain unglazed cooking vessels to this day, in Mexico and Latin America for example, since the repeatedly used vessel absorb flavors and enhance the qualities of the dish as it cooks, but these uses are disappearing as less and less dishes are actually made by hand anymore, anywhere. Even the Romans, who knew of glazes, didn’t use them for their domestic wares and dishes until the 4th Century C.E., and continued to prefer to use unglazed wares, through tradition, possibly, but also for their absorptive qualities that contributes to the flavor of food. Roman glazes would also have been lead-based which are rather poisonous over time with repeated use of the vessel, so it may have been better to continue to use unglazed wares, anyway. In the post-industrial age, our excessive paranoia around germs and bacteria would prevent such use of unglazed containers, although the container is also sterilized anyway, each time it is used for cooking.

Glazes do not come in general use in China until the Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.) and in the Middle East only since the beginning of the Islamic period, in the 7th and 8th centuries C.E.. In Europe, this happens at a much later date, during the Middle Age. Greek pottery is unglazed, as is most Roman pottery, so is African ceramics and the potteries of pre-Columbian America until the conquest, if we make exception for some pots from Columbia, decorated with lead based vitrified decoration that do not cover and seal the surface completely but is purely ornamental instead. This late and very slow use of glazes is surprising considering the esthetic potential of glazes and their obvious practical advantages and it is puzzling why it took so long for them to become widely and generally used. When glazed dishes were finally introduced in Europe, during the Middle Age, great progress in hygiene could be made. By eating on shiny, glazed plated and dishes, people

could keep them much cleaner than the older pots made of wood or unglazed earthenware and this development in sanitation helped banish dysentery and other bacterial diseases. Pots could also then be used for a much longer time.

Ritual breakage and throwaway pots:

Prior to glazed pottery, it was often the tradition to destroy or break all used pots on a yearly basis, during specific rituals and celebrations, many still held today in different parts of the world, but now using unglazed dishes specially made for the occasion. In Oaxaca, in Mexico, on Christmas day, a special sugary pastry is baked in the town square and served in an unglazed, wheel thrown earthenware bowl. After eating the sweet pastry, the bowl must be thrown against the church wall in order to break it, and this breakage of the bowl is as central to the ritual as is the cooking and eating of the pastry, which happens only once a year on that special day. It is a ritual of social catharsis, signifying the death of the old and the renewal promised by the birth of Christ. Such breakage and renewal of household pots served multiple purposes: eliminating old, cracked, dirty and crusty, unsanitary used wares, foster community celebration around a cathartic activity of renewal (these events are usually connected to New Year celebrations, in Naples, Italy, for example, where old dishes are thrown out the window on New Year's Eve), and also most importantly provide economic opportunities for the potters, who were important contributors to the economy by creating jobs for the community, and who may have ran out of work periodically otherwise. There is something very healing, therapeutic and celebratory about breaking dishes and this ritual is still found, sometimes observed since time immemorial, all over the world. In a movie, for example, if a pot is prominently displayed in a scene, you can bet that it will get broken at some point in the action. Many pots in many parts of the world are made to be used only once and are then discarded. Such laboriously made pots are nonetheless, by necessity, very cheap, and are the equivalent of a paper cup we do not consider twice before discarding. In India, yogurt can be purchased from street stalls and it is served in a fired clay bowl that is thrown away after a single use. In Mexico City, I have bought lemonade in the city centre, which was served in a very well and sensitively made wheel-thrown, unglazed tumbler that had also been carefully trimmed (that is to say that the excess of clay at the base was removed with a sharp tool as it spins, upside down, on the wheel; this lightens the form and shape the foot of the object, a process that requires time and skill and adds significantly to the cost of production as well as to the esthetics of the object). These pots were obviously made far from the city centre and they had to be brought to the lemonade seller from a great

distance, everyday. Since the lemonade itself costs 10 cents, you can imagine how much this carefully and skillfully hand crafted pot was worth. A potter would need to make many hundreds if not thousands of these cups everyday in order to make a basic income to subsist at the lowest echelons of society and the economic scale. Potters are often the poorest members of any community and their work has little intrinsic value despite the high level of skill and the huge amount of hard, difficult labor involved. In Bernardo Bertolucci's movie "Little Buddha", a scene shows Kaenu Reeves as Siddhartha, leaving his father's palace in an elaborate procession, in order to be shown the world. He quickly realizes that he is being duped and that the whole thing has been orchestrated by his father, in order to protect his son, Siddhartha, the future Buddha, from the hardship and misery of life. Sensing such a theatrical set-up, Siddhartha decides to flee the procession and escape from his guardians. As he runs away through the city's back lanes, he quickly stumbles across the area most emblematic of the worst, most horrid conditions and dirtiest environment imaginable as a metaphor for human misery, for sweaty labor, for sickness and death: the potter's quarter! It is there that he realizes that hardship, misery, pain and suffering are inescapable aspects of consciousness, which will lead him to become the Buddha.

Other uses of pots in relation to food:

This breaking of all these pots and dishes produced large quantities of shards that may have been reclaimed by the potters themselves. They could have served as temper, after further grinding, as additive to natural clay to adjust its plasticity, and help in the drying and firing of the wares, in an endless cycle of use and reuse. Most pots ever made that are not part of the archeological, historical record (either already found or remaining to be found) were probably recycled in such a fashion, to become part of a new clay body used to make new pots.

It is universally believed that the Amazon rain forest of South America is a natural environment largely untouched in a substantial way by humans. Recent archeology has now proven that this is not the case at all. The Amazon rain forest is to a large degree selectively planted and this gardening on a vast scale has been going on for thousands of years. The ceramic connection here is very peculiar, most interesting and, as far as I know, unique in the history of the world. The tribes of the Amazon have settled there a long time ago, some sites going back 10,000 years, at the beginning of the migration from Asia and

the first colonization of the Americas. These tribes cultivated and planted the forest selectively, by first reconditioning the soil with fired clay shards. Large quantities of pots would be specifically made and fired, then deliberately broken in order to be used as additives to the clayish, alluvial soil of the river basin, too rich and dense to be readily appropriate for agriculture. By reconditioning the ground with fired clay shards, the organic material on top is mixed with the underneath sediment and the resulting layer is now more open, aerated, porous and easily drained while retaining sufficient amount of moisture, slowly released, within all the porous ceramic shards. Over large, vast areas of the Amazon, everywhere one digs a hole, one finds remnants of these specific ceramic shards and proof of this very unusual yet logical practice, of amending, improving and reconditioning soil, slowly and methodically, for centuries. I suspect that the observation of refuse piles which would have contained organic material along with the remnants of broken pots, as well as discarded seeds that would then grow larger than expected in another environment, led to this discovery. The Amazon rain forest is but the result of these agricultural practices and the many trees growing there were actually deliberately and selectively planted in the gardens and fields of the originals inhabitants. Here again, ceramics plays a crucial and important role. Today, instead of planting the rain forest to slowly yet endlessly renew it, it is deliberately destroyed for rapid gain.

Pottery, Cooking and Myths:

The relationship between clay, ceramics, pottery, cooking, food and myths has been analyzed in a fascinating fashion by French structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his books “The Jealous Potter” and “The Raw and the Cooked”, both looking at various aspects of the myths of the aboriginals of North and South America. I will use ideas from his impressive writings and original thoughts as a source for what follows here.

In many myths, we know that clay is often the source material for the creation of humans (see “The Figure” chapter, later on). But in other myths, humanity in its savage state was eater of soil and the earth itself was food. Recent news items in newspapers and magazines have reported this habit of geophagy, or the eating of raw clay or earth by poor people, who use this clay as a source of sustenance, to alleviate hunger, when they cannot afford real food. In Africa, the clay is shaped into round balls that are sold on the marketplace by the dozen. In Haiti, the gooey clay is shaped as a round cookie, and after drying, it is sold alongside food staples in public market, for people who need to

supplement their meagre diet. In the Peruvian Andes, cooked potatoes are first dipped in a clay slurry before eating, to augment their sustaining ability. Even myths that have the eating of clay at their origin still have contemporary applications today and activities we would consider improbable still happen in many places. But, to continue with mythology, subsequently, the earth, the soil, the ground was not deemed appropriate anymore as food for eating and, instead, the food for humans needed to be cooked. In order for that to be possible, the earth itself had to be cooked first and this explains, at the level of myths, the origins of ceramics and pottery. In the natural state of humanity, earth was food, and in the cultural state, earth in its cooked form is vessel and makes possible the cooking of food. In order for that process to take place, various restrictions have to be imposed on the raw material: where and when and by whom it can be collected, and when, where and by whom it can be transformed. These restrictions change from place to place and from myth to myth, from culture to culture, but they need to be strictly enforced and they exist everywhere in cultures where myths and taboo play an important social, religious and cultural role. If the prescriptions and restrictions are not rigidly followed in the making and firing of pots, the pots will break or be unusable, which may lead to famine and other scourges. These restrictions imply other restrictions on the part of the pots themselves. The shaped containers made with fired clay will now be waterproof and will readily keep shapeless water within its interior, restricting it. It can also hold tiny solids like grains that can now be collected and kept instead of being scattered and lost. By imposing constraints on free matter, on clay in the shaping of vessels, then on the liquids and solids they contain, the potter (often female) is also a creator, a god-like maker of things, a demiurge. By modeling a formless material, clay, into an immutable fired form, by controlling the natural forces contained in the four elements of earth, water, air and fire, and becoming a god-like creator and transformer, the potter also controls and shapes the environment and “culturizes” vegetables, plants, grains and animals, taking them as well from a natural state to a cultural state. By this transformation from clay to vessel, the art of pottery was one of the first activities of humankind to narrow the gap between matter and form, for the longest time a central aspect of art and culture. This is not so readily the case today, where art is more often understood as the product of a mediating technology than the result of the transformation of a physical material, as it was historically.

This relationship between pottery and food is organized around their mutual connection to fire. Here, the function of fire becomes double, since it now cooks food as it

previously cooked the pots in which food is to be cooked. This creates a dialectic, a binary relationship between internal and external, between inside and outside, the operative factors in containment, where both the pot and the body are containers. Clay, which is similar to excrement contained in the body, is used to make pots containing food. Food is then ingested by the body which will contain the food, until the body relieving itself ceases to be the container of food, now changed into excrement, which is in turn contained by the pot and returned to the earth that it fertilizes so that more food can grow, and where it also becomes clay again so that more pots can be made and the whole cycle can start anew, endlessly.

In the Mayan “Popol Vuh” or Book of the Dead, this story is told of a “rebellion of the tools”: “And all things began to speak...: You will feel our strength. We will grind and tear your flesh to pieces, said the grinding stones...And the pots also spoke: You have caused us pain and suffering and burned us, as if we felt no pain. Now you will feel pain too, we will also burn you.”

In pre-historic times, gathering was the domain of children and women, while men were away hunting. The gathering of food left time for two important activities, various crafts, including pot making, as well as story telling. Control over fire becomes a source of female power. It also links up with another commonly traditional female skill and responsibility, that of making and controlling the use of clay pots. The male hunters also came back with stories of their exploits as hunters and as warriors and they told around the campfire these heroic male narratives. The women relied on their imagination to devise the stories they told as they made things, while the males incorporated their heroic narratives, based on possibly exaggerated yet real experiences, into the myths of the community. There is a clear distinction between these two forms of narrative, one domestic, feminine and imaginative, and the other heroic, male and “factual”. The narrative of art history, the history of images, is also a heroic narrative and it tends to leave aside the history of objects. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, every history implies another story, one that is not being told. In art history that story that is not being told is the story of objects. It is important to keep in mind that the first cultural device was probably a recipient, and these objects were made by women, like a pot made for gathering and cooking food. This relationship between narratives and pots will be analyzed further in the “Text” chapter but it is interesting to note that if pots hold things, so do books which hold words and words hold things as well, and these things bear

meaning, even if that meaning is not always heroic. In the constant synergy between art and life, we could construct the following progressive cycles:

Pot= food=female= peace=life=pot=object (imaginative narrative, stories and all containers, etc.)

Weapon=blood=male=war= death=art=image (heroic narrative, history, laws, etc.)

These two cycles are obviously simultaneous and directly connected in every ways, yet it remains that there are intrinsic differences between images and objects that transcend mere making or even use and function. Objects and images are different at the level of experience and of meaning as well.

Revolutionary Porcelains:

Examples of other forms of narrative, political propaganda, in these cases in two other complementary yet distinct approach to making dishes and vessels for food, can be found in Russia and in China, in the revolutionary wares both Communist countries produced, at different time but for somewhat similar reasons.

Russian revolutionary porcelain was made right after the First World War, at the very beginning of the Communist revolution. The artists used dinnerware blanks that had been left unpainted in large quantities in the Imperial factory in St-Petersburg. The wares themselves are of the highest quality and made with the best, very fine porcelain. They were then painted in vivid, colorful designs using over-glaze ceramic enamels, with communist symbols and various propaganda images, by the best designers, artists and porcelain painters supporting the early years of the revolution. These plates, and the vast majority are plates with a few teapots as well, are esthetically very refined, revolutionary in themselves, with avant-garde, experimental, abstracted or representational scenes and compositions. They are very sophisticated in their cultural mixing and juxtaposition of tsarist symbols with revolutionary portraits, images and slogans meant to inspire and educate the masses. They are very beautifully made and very seductive, and now relatively rare and very collectible. Few examples exists, as they were made for only a short time, before Stalin cut short these avant-garde, modernist, elitist experiments in favor for a more proletarian esthetics, Socialist Realism. The most potent and disturbing examples, as

they relate specifically to food, show scenes of famine, when the production of wheat collapsed and was insufficient to feed the people, in the first few years following the disruptions of the war and the disturbances of the Russian Revolution itself. Some other plates show various fruits, vegetables and grains beautifully painted on the porcelain, as substitute for the real staples, not to be found in actuality. Another plate admonishes “He Who Doesn’t Work, Doesn’t Eat”, a particularly potent slogan to be found on a plate meant for the serving of food, although these extraordinary objects were not specifically made directly for practical use but were instead for propaganda purposes. They remain today as a beautiful evidence of a difficult, particular time in the history of Russia and its impact on the rest of the world.

There are other examples of ceramic objects made specifically at a time of restriction and famine. In the early 19th Century during the Napoleonic wars, there was a shortage of wheat flour in England. Wedgwood then made Jasper ware serving dishes shaped like cakes and pies, to serve as a substitute for the real thing on tables. Jasper ware is ideally suited for such a substitution, since the matt, unglazed clay body is reminiscent of crust and dough and the sprigged decoration in a contrasting white color is reminiscent of icing, a sugary impression reinforced by the soft, pastel colors of Jasper ware.

In China in the 1950’s during the Great Leap Forward and in the 1960’s, during the Cultural Revolution, the country was disrupted to a profound degree, although you would be hard pressed to find any trace of it anywhere today, if it was not for the immense quantities of propaganda wares, paintings, sculptures, posters and vast quantities of dishes, bowls, teapots, vases, plaques and commemorative souvenirs of all kinds (Mao is the perennial favorite), including countless figurines that were produced in porcelain to serve both as propaganda to renew and foster the revolutionary spirit, as well as for the practical needs of the peasants, workers and all the citizens forced into rehabilitation in the country side and in factories and work camps. These upheavals in Chinese society created great hardship and it is now admitted that the Great Leap Forward of the 1950’s was responsible for the death by famine of 40 million Chinese, something you would never guess from the ceramics made at the time, which celebrate harvest and abundance, peace and harmony, in all kinds of ways. These ceramic wares, made in porcelain, the great Chinese invention and its most important contribution to ceramics history, were usually hand painted but they were nonetheless produced in very large quantities under

industrial conditions. Making everything by hand is still often the practice in China, with its large labor force that needs to be fed and put to work in order to maintain the social order. These generally tasteless objects have very little interest stylistically and esthetically and, contrary to the very beautiful, refined, sophisticated and modernist Russian revolutionary wares, they seem banal, childish, kitschy and unsophisticated. Their most interesting and arresting characteristic is that their esthetics is based on Socialist Realism, which is actually an academic construct coming from the Soviet Union and combining the worst aspects of bourgeois taste within representational art of the European traditional canon. Narrative representation in Chinese painting and ceramics, notably with landscapes, as we have seen in “The Narrative Esthetics” chapter, are very sophisticated in their use of the figure/ground relationship, particularly in the integration of the believable, white, empty, void areas perceived as actual, credible physical space. In the 1950’s and 1960’s propaganda wares, this sophistication is totally lost and the Chinese artists, following European (and bourgeois, interestingly enough!) academic models, present the white ground of their image as spatially flat and meaningless, with a clear separation and distinction between figure and ground, as if the sophistication of representation so particular to Chinese art had been lost as well. To find such bastardized, misplaced and inappropriate stylistic influences on Chinese Cultural revolution wares is one of the most perverse, yet non-considered contradictions of these times in Chinese history.

If the wares themselves are not esthetically interesting as such, they remain as important cultural artifacts, as archives of a specific time. They are in my opinion not only the most interesting and relevant ceramics made in China in the 20th Century, but the only significant contribution Chinese ceramics has made to ceramics history and to history in general, during the last century. This is a state of affair that is by itself interesting, considering the seminal, important and extraordinary contributions China had made previously to ceramics and hopefully will continue to make again some day.

Another perverse aspect of Cultural Revolution porcelain wares is that they are still being made now in China, in large quantities, as antique fakes for the growing souvenir markets, yet their historical meaning or importance is lost. They have now become like so many other cultural products for tourists, useless, nostalgic kitsch.

Other historical examples:

Some of the most charming and exquisite serving dishes ever made are the porcelain tureens and lidded containers shaped like cabbages, melons, fruits and vegetables, as well as rabbits, hens, cocks and chicks or boar's heads made all over Europe during the 18th Century. There was often direct correspondence between their shape and their use, and a serving stand for oysters would have each individual dish shaped like an oyster, in porcelain, to receive a real oyster and a rabbit stew would be served in a tureens shaped like a rabbit. The object themselves were highly seductive and decorative and could serve as ornament in displays when not in use. This probably explains their popularity and these types of serving dishes with natural references are still being produced to this day, albeit in a different context, somewhat dissociated from 18th Century Europe, where their rococo excesses were more appropriate and relevant. The originals were also beautifully and exquisitely painted since they were produced for the aristocracy and the moneyed classes, while the more recent examples are cheaply and crudely made, for the giftware market.

An important revival of these types of presentation wares happened in England by the mid 1880's in what is called, confusingly and erroneously "majolica" with a "j". The firm of Minton in Staffordshire was the instigator of this type of naturalistic serving dishes, highly colorful and vibrant, and they are still produced there and in many other places, to this day.

Implements for preparing, cooking and serving food have always been a substantial source of income for potters and they provide endless excuses for the creation of new forms to feed new needs in the kitchen, real or imagined.

The most creative and inventive maker of new ceramic objects for the kitchen and the table was without contest Josiah Wedgwood in late 17th Century and early 18th Century England. Whether he himself invented all these clever gadgets or they were the work of anonymous designers working under his supervision, it remains that Wedgwood is probably responsible for the greatest expansion of diverse forms and various ceramic implements for the needs of the household, as they relate to food. Among dozens of new inventions, I particularly like the molds for jelly, that revealed its decoration through the clear gelatine, and the egg-beater, a small porcelain box with a screw top, in itself a rather difficult and clever trick to make in porcelain, with its interior covered in long,

pointy spikes also made of fragile, delicate porcelain. When an egg was broken into the container, the lid would be screwed back on, the content shaken through the porcelain spikes, which would then beat the egg....It is one of those useless objects, fragile and difficult to clean, that works better as a clever idea than as an actual thing, and which designers take a perverse pleasure to invent all the times, even now.

Three cultures, three bowls:

A simple rice bowl. Its form is ordinary, common, practical and ubiquitous. Millions have been made all over Asia for the daily needs of nourishment for millions of people for whom rice is a main staple. Yet this simple rice bowl will be quite different whether it is made in China, in Korea or in Japan, since these cultures are quite distinct and different, and their cultural needs around the serving and eating of rice vary accordingly.

The Chinese rice bowl is typically a triangular, conical shape. In China, rice is eaten by holding the bowl tilted in the hand, where it fits perfectly and then by bringing the bowl to the mouth and by scooping out the rice, aspiring it into the mouth while pushing it in with chopsticks. This conical shape is ideal for this purpose and it provides the hand holding the bowl with a flatter exterior surface to hold it tight and a flatter interior surface to easily gather the rice to the last grain and incur no waste.

The Japanese bowl is half spherical, yet open and shallow, not too deep and quite small in size. The bowl is meant to rest on the tabletop, and is rarely, if ever picked up. The rice is brought to the mouth by gathering a small amount with the chopsticks. The chopsticks, more pointy than in China, need easy access to the rice within the bowl, thus its open, shallow shape and smooth, round interior space. The rice is then traveled from the bowl resting on the table to the mouth with elegance and dexterity.

The Korean rice bowl is a bit larger than the other two and represent their synthesis, in some way. It is also held in the hand but for the duration of the meal while the rice is eaten. The bowl is not meant to be brought to the mouth as we have seen with the Chinese bowl, so that the rice can be vacuumed and quickly eaten. The fact that the bowl is continuously held in the hand for some time, requires the bowl to have a higher foot, to isolate the hand from the hot content while the rim of the bowl, open to the exterior,

serves as a resting point for the thumb to stabilize the bowl. Three different bowls are needed by three different cultures for the very same purpose, eating rice.

On Plates and Dishes:

Another Chinese utensil of note is the porcelain spoon, used for soup and other liquid dishes. The Chinese, given food on a flat plate, prefer to use such a porcelain spoon as it becomes an acceptable substitute for its more familiar sister, the bowl, in a culture that uses chopsticks to eat. The porcelain spoon, like the bowl, has a flat bottom, so that it can be rested down without spilling its content. This flat bottom also permits to fire them more easily as they are stacked in a kiln or later, stored on a shelf.

In ancient Greece, individual tables were used like large dishes, with the food placed directly on the wooden tabletop; vase paintings show us large loaves of bread in heaps on the table as well as large cups and long slices of meat, unwrapped from the spit on which they were cooked.

Actually, the earliest flat, modern plates (the word plate actually meant flat, originally) are depicted standing on a buffet in a fresco in Mantua, Italy, from 1525. Such early flat plates as well as later, elaborate services of porcelain, would have been used functionally only in a nominal sense as they were there mostly to be seen, to be displayed and not actually to be scarped with fork and knife. One of the most elaborate and extraordinary such porcelain service is the “Swann Service” made at Meissen in Saxony (now in Germany) for the director of the porcelain factory, Count Von Bruhl, in 1737–43. It contains 2,000 pieces altogether, now dispersed in museums and private collections all over the world. The Swann Service, being made of porcelain, a new, rare and very expensive material at the time, is mostly white, to take full advantage of the esthetic potential of the material. White dishes are ubiquitous now yet their origin is found in 19th Century hotel wares, since white as a color goes with everything, so that there is no need to change the dinnerware if there is a change of carpet or curtain in the dining room. Chefs also love to display food on a blank, plain, white background that features their art above all else.

In Islamic countries, metal tableware is forbidden by religious prescription. This probably led to the development of exquisite lusterwares, which is a ceramic surface that imitates metal by fixing a reflective layer of gold or copper onto an already fired glaze.

In China as well, many restaurants feature a very large pot just outside, on the sidewalk, near the entrance. This large pot is actually an oven, used to slow cook special dishes, themselves contained in small, individual, lidded ceramic pots. These are placed on metal racks lining the interior of the very big “pot”, whose base can be opened and closed by a door, permitting the maintenance of a charcoal fire to cook the food.

The oldest clay ovens were found in Irak, dating from 5000 B.C.E. Others were found in Iran, in Jordan and all over the eastern Mediterranean, dating from that time too. These simple chambered beehive ovens made of raw clay are also found at Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus valley.

Ceramic materials and ceramic objects are very closely related to food and to cooking in numerous ways. One of the best way to cook a very moist and tender chicken consist in wrapping the bird completely using a slab of plastic clay then place it in an oven or cover it with hot ashes until it is cooked. This will dry the clay covering that will require to be broken to find the tender chicken inside. A reusable substitute exists in the porous terracotta “cocotte”, soaked in water first, in which a chicken can be cooked in the humid atmosphere released by the evaporating water contained in the ceramic utensil.

On Use and Function:

If certain objects are by necessity part of everyday life, it might be due to the fact that they are too complex to be apprehended by a single glance, by sight and vision alone. They instead have to be lived with for a long period of time, in the most intimate manner possible, in order to be fully understood. Usually, the simpler and more familiar they seem, the more complex and difficult they actually are.

Nonetheless, no one will question the validity of functional objects, even if they are never meant to be used. And most functional pottery made today plays no such practical role since their function (historically) has been usurped by other materials and hand made objects have been replaced by industrially produced, machine made things. I think that the

makers of these types of objects today, namely hand made pots, largely retain function as a mean to retain meaning in the work, a meaning that would be greatly diminished otherwise. It is a strategy that only succeeds partly, and these handmade “functional” objects remain ambiguously positioned, thus equally ambiguously received, by society. Words, like “function” automatically imply meaning and meaning implies status. The same is true for the term “sculpture” used in a ceramics context, which confers instant status on things that would have very little to none otherwise. The meaning of hand-made functional ceramics today mainly resides in this conferring of status (and taste) through the display of gift ware whose main purpose consist in collecting dust. Their making also confers identity to the makers, by emphasis on their skill and their sensibility, and this is reflected in the self-indulgence usually displayed by this kind of work. I nonetheless deeply believe that truly functional hand made objects still play a role in human experiences, a role that cannot be filled by other objects. It is just that so few of them live up to the challenge. Basically, function alone is not enough anymore, and handmade objects have to reflect and relate to their environment in other ways as well. Since I have dealt with non-functional pots elsewhere, I will expand here instead on the concept of performance in ceramics.

Performative Aspects of Ceramics:

Each pot could be said to be remade anew each time it is used. It remains incomplete otherwise.

All tools have a performance aspect and so do containers, which are tools with specific properties and engage in action in specific ways. Conceptually, containers always combine double or even binary, opposite aspects (the interior and the exterior, or emptiness and fullness, for example) and it is in that sense that pots are simultaneously tools and containers since, if tools are not necessarily containers, all containers are tools. Containers are things that contain other things. Containers, and all pots, perform in various ways, and not only as containers. They may hold and preserve their content but by being mobile they can displace that content to another space or even to another container. Containers are essential elements of distribution, as they are moved, empty or full, from here to there, in order to be stored, to be emptied or to be filled, or simply to move materials from one place to another. All these performative aspects are obvious and they appear banal because of their familiarity. It remains that containers, pots or other kinds,

play a very important role within culture and civilization, as we know it, would not exist without them.

Containers, all pots, are performative in many other ways. They can be shaped and take various forms that imply different meanings. Often the implied meaning is a direct connection to human bodies, human activities and human experiences, through the anthropomorphism inherent to so many containers, so many pots. Yet, the shape of a vessel informs us as to its use, its function, even its content and can even clearly signify the context in which it operates. A vessel for drinking wine in a bar or at home or in a church will be significantly different depending on context. Pots can also carry on their surface text or images that may add to their signification and function in precise ways. Yet, beyond pure, basic function and practicality, these aspects of form and surface specific to vessels and pots are nonetheless an integral part of their performative nature and their potential to act on the world.

When vessels and pots are made of fired clay, they are also performative in time, not just in space. Due to the physical properties of ceramics as a material, they hold, contain and preserve not only things but also time, and even memory and history itself. This performative aspect of ceramics as an archive is too often not realized, ignored or misunderstood. By absorbing the performative potential of this archival nature of ceramic objects, one must rethink how and also why make these kinds of objects now and this may inform the making of new objects today.

Ceramic objects and especially pots are performative in a functional, practical way through the workings of their constitutive parts, first of all their interior volumetric space, the space for containment. They also perform in other ways and for these purposes they are given other parts, like lids, to cover and protect and to retain heat, and handles to help in their displacement and carriage, also spouts to pour out their contents and feet, to stabilize them or to elevate them in order to enhance their display, or the display of their content. Ceramic objects can withstand heat and be exposed to fire, which make them ideal for cooking but they also retain heat and/or isolate from heat and this property can find all kind of purposes and uses. Smoking pipes for example are often made of fired clay, since they are in effect a small hearth that acts as a chimney, a miniature space for burning another material. The connection of smoking to food, through the use of a pipe, is at the level of anxiety and satisfaction, both aspects of smoking and eating. A whole

study of pipes as specific ceramic objects could be done. Anyway and to continue, when pots are glazed, they can be more easily cleaned and this can prevent the spread of diseases. Bricks and tiles can be used to build larger volumes than pots and these structures perform in ways that are specific to ceramics as well. We have seen that ceramics also perform in various esthetic contexts, chief among them possibly, a strong connection to decoration and ornamentation. In their display, they can also transmit hierarchical meaning around status and they can perform symbolically, in rituals, in religion, in myths, in funerary practices, even in political contexts. They also engage in symbolism as trophies in sport events, as gifts between dignitaries or common folks. They play a central role in many, variously diverse communities. They also perform as a form of expression for groups, for communities and for individuals, where they imply narratives of all kinds, transmit knowledge and history or quite simply, the particular sensibility of a community or a maker, as art. Yet, it remains that it is in their archival potential that ceramic objects, whatever form they take (and that in itself, is quite remarkable), are performative in a very specific and particular way within any culture. This is where they transcend the mundane, where we usually tend to confine them, to reach toward transcendence.

The performative nature of pots is also highly anthropomorphic and pots directly refer to human bodies and human activities. They are extension of human bodies. When using a pot, the human body acts like a cyborg, half human, half machine, where a foreign, inanimate other modifies and extends the organic reality of bodies. Pots and containers are also positioned in relation to the ground on a 90 degrees axis, like bodies standing up in space. Pots and bodied occupy space in a similar manner and they are often substitutes for each other.

Food for Thought:

Ceramic objects can also be non-performative in a practical way and resist acting in relation to other spaces, but themselves. We have seen that many contemporary ceramics artists deny function in their work in order to challenge our familiar relation to these types of objects and alter our preconceived experience so that we are made aware of our experience and engage with meaning in unexpected ways. Some pots are being non-performative (in a functional way), by making it impossible to permit containment; they are meant to contain themselves instead, they come already full and this self-fulfillment is

necessary for their intent. Sometime, they even come empty and could be filled with other things, yet their interior space is metaphorical of space itself, as an empty space, and the interior void of the vessel is what is actually contained. It doesn't need more to operate at that level. The pot is then a container for itself as a container of empty space. One may think that such a conceptual approach to containment would be a recent development in ceramic art. Quite the contrary, it goes back all the way to the origins of pottery, to the Neolithic. Extraordinary pots from Crete, from Mesopotamia, from the Etruscan culture, from Islamic cultures too, but also from various pre-Columbian cultures, the Inca, the Mimbres, are of this type. A Neolithic bowl from Crete may represent within its wall a whole village, with various activities, people and livestock as well as its political structure, all clearly represented. Another, also from Crete, shows a landscape, with a large flock of sheep and a shepherd, while the rim of the bowl represents the horizon, as a black line, to define and confine the whole space, the whole world where the action takes place, but only as far as the eye can see. An Etruscan bowl will show on its rim a procession of horses and warriors and the edge of the bowl becomes a road where a journey takes place. An Inca bowl will have a boat (on a stand) in the middle of the interior well so that when filled with water, the boat appears to float. Sometimes the boat is replaced with a waterfowl, and at other times, the bird is perched on the rim, its head down and ready to drink in the bowl, and the wavy decoration at the rim, on the outside wall, indicates the ideal level of water when the bowl is empty. Mimbres bowls in their perfect half-spherical shape are said to represent the whole of the sky, the dome of heaven and when its owner dies, such a bowl will be ritually pierced at the base and placed over the face of the deceased, to serve in the afterlife as it did on earth. The bowl becomes a cosmogony, a stand in for the universe. An Islamic bowl from Iran is filled with a structural fountain, brilliantly glazed in blue, cool and liquid, to visually refresh as the water itself would. Here again the allusion is metaphorical, water representing the blessings of God for humankind.

Following in the Ogata Kenzan tradition, some of his followers in Japan in the 19th Century made wonderfully engaging bowls painted on the outside with a Spring scene of cherry blossoms and on the inside with an Autumn scene of red maple leaves, combining within a single object the endless cycle of the seasons in time, an impression reinforced by the circular shape of the object itself. In the contemporary world, the raku bowls of Wayne Higby continue this investigation of space and time so particular to ceramics, by using the American landscape in winter as inspiration. Here are a few more examples.

Working on the potter's wheel, Canadian artist Sarah Osenton made, in 2000, a series of nested bowls and dishes, with fluid, soft, distressed shapes. The domestic, functional elements of pottery forms instantly directs our interpretation toward the serving and eating of food, yet the intent of the work is more complex and challenging than this first, superficial reading might imply. In this work, again, can be found a direct visual and metaphorical association between ceramic forms, pottery functions and human bodies. The titles given to each set in the series come to our rescue and provide the clue that may not be obvious at first and make the work self-explanatory: "Cross-section of the Eye", "Cross-section of the Penis", "Cross-section of the Uterus" and "Cross-section of the Stomach". Each individual set of functional serving dishes is made around a reinterpretation of a medical illustration. These sophisticated, complex yet simple objects present intelligent, refined and new solutions to the historical connection between ceramics and food.

Another of my student, Amanda Church, made another set of serving dishes and utensils that, when reassembled as a stack, took the shape of a starving child with a distended belly, a particular disturbing and moving statement to make with objects meant for the serving and experience of food.

Ceramics and gardens:

Gardens are obviously and directly connected to food. All kinds of pots are made to serve as tools to grow plants for food in gardens. Terracotta flower pots permit to grow plants in large quantities; in them, soil can be easily amended and in their porous wall, moisture is retained. They also permit plants to be moved easily. Flower pots have been widely used since at least Roman times, and they could be found in Rome in great quantities, all over the balconies and rooftops of the city. Such pots tend to have a simple, very functional form and they are usually left unglazed in order to remain porous, absorb moisture and retain it, all properties beneficial to plant growth. When they are glazed, it will be only on the exterior since roots do not like to touch smooth, non-porous and glassy surface. Glazing the outside enhances the decorative aspect yet if the interior is also glazed, the plant will rot and die. Bonsai pots are usually of this type, for that reason. Whether in China or in Japan, bonsai pots are nonetheless always in ceramics. Pots are also used ornamentally in gardens, whether they are meant to contain plants or not. One

of the most common forms for large garden display containers remains that of the Kalix Krater, a reinterpretation of the classical Greek form, originally meant for the mixing of wine and water in a symposium. The Kalix Krater form is also still used commonly as a cooling metal bucket for wine and champagne, which connects it to its original use and function in Greek times. The elegant, footed form is itself similar to the coral of a flower, and its connection with antiquity confers instant prestige, sophistication and status and such large planters are usually found in aristocratic or public gardens, where they function is largely symbolic. Few are made of clay, interestingly enough. They are usually cast in metal, painted cast iron most often, but also carved in marble and other stones. Their exaggerated form with its narrow, high foot is not readily suited for clay work, as it would be too fragile. It is also not a form that permits to be drained easily (where would you locate the drain holes!?) a necessary attributes of pots meant to be placed outside. Drainage of excess water is essential for plant growth but water collecting in a ceramic pot would also cause breakage during a frost, a process that will be resisted by metal or stone more readily.

Other garden implements best made in ceramics, since it can be easily cleaned and doesn't harbor pests (like wood can, for example), include clever chicken fountains (research it to find out more, if curious), beehives, garden seats and stools, ant and bugs traps, with little steps on the outside but a slick, smooth glazed, slanted interior that prevents them from escaping, bird houses to attract them and help with insect control and toad houses for the same purpose. Fish bowls found in oriental gardens are large porcelain pots, and rhubarb, originating in China, can be forced to early sprouting if covered with an upside down pot in the Fall. In the kitchen, ceramic churns to make butter are heavier and more hygienic than wooden ones, which are absorptive.

Ian Hamilton Finlay is a Scottish artist and poet particularly known for his garden designs and the integration of poetry and sculptural installations within gardens. His work is greatly inspired by classical antiquity as well as the French revolution of the late 18th Century. He has incorporated into his gardens some ceramic elements, but rarely. I can think of a dog bowl inscribed with the name of Robespierre's dog Brout, as well as a porcelain water can inscribed with the name of another revolutionary, Saint-Just. These objects, one for serving food, one for growing food, are not meant to be practical. Their intent is metaphorical and poetic, as potent images to confer meaning and engage with interpretation. The porcelain water can is particularly interesting as it is painted with the

revolutionary colors, blue, red and white. It is an unusual object to be made of fragile porcelain, yet porcelain water cans were made in the mid 19th Century for the Queen of France, Marie-Antoinette, to use in her garden at Versailles. Marie-Antoinette's excesses are often blamed for instigating the revolution ("Let them eat cake!"), but it is less known that the incredibly high cost of producing very expensive porcelain at Sevres, near Paris, was also responsible for the degradation of the economic situation in France at the time. Ian Hamilton Finlay's ceramic objects re-imagine these times and these events that parallel our present day context in disturbing ways.

On Containment:

I have made this exposition before and made reference to it repeatedly as well, but since it is at the core of my argument throughout this book, I will do it again here.

Pottery and ceramics vessels, particularly as they relate to food, are articulated around the concept of containment. In the case of pottery forms, this implies the relationship between an interior space and an exterior shape, between a volumetric form and a flatter surface which in term imply and define the two central concepts in ceramics and pottery: function and decoration.

Containment has to do with the relationship between an object and its environment. Containers are bridges between two spaces, between what is an inside space (the interior void or volume and/or the content) and an outside space (the rest of the world). Containers are constituted of an actual, physical space (given by the thickness of their wall) between two empty spaces, one inside, one outside. Containers, like most objects, are about difference as continuity, not difference as rupture, which is the operative aspect of images, of representations, which separate us from reality and real experiences. Containers are the ultimate form of abstraction and, as we have seen in "The Decorative Esthetics" chapter, they often carry abstract signs and symbols within their walls. They never "represent" anything, except themselves. A container is a space where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled, where polarity becomes duality. Containers bring together the extremes in reconciliation. They cancel the dialectical impulses of language, so present in discourses, histories, theories and fictions, as well as in images of all types, which always imply a narrative content. All binaries, polarities, opposites and dichotomies (that is to say all forms of hierarchies) are reconciled within the container.

Containers combine in symbiosis the interior and the exterior, the top and the bottom, the front and the back, the surface and the form, representation and presentation, image and object, function and display, the hand and the eye, nature and culture, art and craft and design, even media, when their surface is informed by printing or photography, and any and all other binaries we can conceptualize. Only containers act in such a fashion within culture and this complexity is an inherent aspect of their intrinsic power. Beyond their obvious and important functional, practical aspects, pots made around our need for food are also cultural and conceptual objects, something their familiarity and commonality makes us too often forget

Other artists to consider:

Kim Dickey and her feeding bottles for fathers, as well as her intricate serving sets that reinvent the elaborate ritual of social eating.

Martin Tang, who fuses a porcelain turd covered in gold in the middle of porcelain plates.

Xu Yihui, from China, who made porcelain fast food with their “styrofoam” container, presented on a bed of porcelain flowers.

Both Barnaby Barford, with a map of the world and Marek Cecula with Vinci’s “Last Supper”, and also with images of oriental carpets, have used computer printed ceramic decal transfers to cover a large number of ordinary dinner plates with potent, continuous images from object to object.

Nicholas Lovegrove and Damian Repucci, from New York, Hans Booy and Paulus Fugers, from Berlin, Daniel Kruger also from Germany and Kevin Petrie from the U.K., all paint very personal portraits on dinner plates. As we will see later in the “Sex” chapter, other artists are following in the footsteps of Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party” by incorporating erotic images on dinnerware: Hans van Bentem, James Victore, Pierre Charpin, Cynthia Rowley, Liu Jian Hua, Matthias Ostermann, Keiko Fukazawa, Hugo Kaagman, Daniel Neish, Burt Payne, Attila Richard Lukacs, Danny Kotyshin, Ken Price, Bhupen Khakhar, Cindy Kolodziejski and many others. Some artists who, like Judy Chicago, do not identify as ceramics artists, nonetheless have explored the metaphorical for pottery forms and contexts in their work: Mona Hatoum with her double cups, joined

together at the lip, and Glenn Lewis, from Vancouver, Canada, with his “Air Fresheners” from the 1960’s, which were way ahead of their time...

In the design world, I single out the winning entry for the 2005 IDEA Industrial Design Excellence Award. Canadian designer Mario Gagnon won gold with a multi-layered set of dishes and utensils that rearrange the visual presentation of a meal. Hella Jongerius from Holland designs plates and bowls with animal figurines attached to the interior, for Nymphenburg porcelain, challenging our relationship to animals as potential food.

Jette Scheib and Neels Kattentidt, designed a mirror with half a dinner plate stuck to its surface so that it appears complete in reflection, as if floating in space. Also, Canadian designer Willie Tsang gold fingerprints tea cup and saucer, which revisits an old Qing Dynasty story, when the Chinese emperor, out incognito in public with an attendant who could not acknowledge the presence of the emperor by bowing before serving his tea, as protocol demanded, found as a solution to simply hit the table with his middle finger, followed by the index and the annular, to signify his head and hands touching the ground in respect. This simple yet highly symbolic gesture is transferred here as gold fingerprints on each saucer.

Jane Timberlake “Wild Mannered Dinnerware” dishes are inscribed with rude expressions. Other artists using text on dishes are too numerous to name here. I will single out Ben, from France, who has inscribed his name and other texts on various surfaces, including pots, everywhere.

Paul Mathieu, *The Art of the Future: 14 essays on ceramics*

Chapter Nine:

SHELTER: Ceramics and Architecture

Ceramics as an art form has given to culture two very important tools. The first, obviously, is pottery, all the vessels and containers made with fired clay that have so contributed to the advancement and comfort of humankind as a species on earth, as well as to the esthetic quality of human experiences. The second ceramic tool is equally important although it is often neglected in the general literature on ceramics. That other tool is the brick, and by extension, the tile, and both are necessary building blocks of architecture. If pots are in many ways, conceptually, miniature architecture, it could as easily be stated that a building is nothing other than a very large pot as well, at the conceptual level. Both operate on the same principle of containment and they are articulated formally around the transition between an interior and an exterior, defining a volumetric space, the interior being functional, while the exterior is ornamental. Pots and buildings are both about transition and passage, about entrances and exits, with a period of relative stasis between the two events, when the content is contained by the container.

In the Bible, in Genesis, the first reference to fired clay is not to pottery or vessel making but to architecture, to the Tower of Babel, built with bricks. Fired bricks had to be

used since raw clay bricks would not have permitted the great height of the structure and supported its weight.

Are pots older than buildings? This is also an interesting question. Did humanity develop and built shelters before, simultaneously, or after it had felt the need to make pots and other containers. Due to their commonality of material, structure and, if to a lesser degree, of process, I would argue that developments in pottery making and in built environments happened simultaneously, since both these forms of containment of space could learn from each other, by osmosis. By making larger pots, humans learned to make larger buildings and vice-versa.

As with pottery forms, two main concepts are at work: function and decoration. Both pottery and architecture are arts of containment. In ceramic architecture, the form of the building is constructed with bricks while its surface is covered with tiles and the brick structure operates in defining space like the clay wall of the pot does, while the tile surface is similar to the glaze covering the pottery form. If there are obvious differences of scale between pots and buildings and to a lesser degree structurally as well, at the conceptual level, both are basically similar if not actually identical, in many ways. It is interesting to keep in mind that for a long time and even today, in some cultures, buildings were (are) round, like pots. Square buildings, that confine and limit space, like framed images, are much more recent.

This extreme of scale in pottery versus architecture does not make pots miniatures (while they happen to be small, pots are nonetheless full size). Yet, their extreme in scale is an intrinsic aspect of pottery, an aspect specific to it as an art form. This small size of pots in general creates a condensation, a concentration. This density is not unlike certain aspects of Islamic art and Persian miniature paintings, where the contained nature of architectural spaces is exploded, forms within forms, to reveal the intimacy of interiors. The small scale of pots pressurizes the work, intensifies the experience and condenses their quiet power. American ceramics artist (and songwriter) Ron Nagle is probably the contemporary master of such dense experiences, in his case within the rather small format of a cup.

A recent revival and renewal of the old technique of cut and paste, where thrown or hand built clay forms are altered and reorganized by subtraction and addition, provides

another interesting parallel between pottery and architecture. While this form of making is highly intimate, it remains imminently tactile, bordering on the erotic, with its folds, curves and bulges. The results are like miniature buildings, the best examples anyway, and many of these types of pots look like nothing if not models for Frank Gehry buildings, which actually reorganize space in a similar fashion, by deconstructing it and reassembling it in an often jumbled, even arbitrary manner at times. Cut and paste potters could learn a trick or two from Gehry and he may learn a trick or two from them just as well, especially at the level of surface and decoration, which have been explored in more significant ways by ceramics than it has been by architecture recently, although this is, happily, changing. The best examples can be found in the superb pots of John Gill, the Frank Gehry of ceramics, although it could also be said that Frank Gehry is the John Gill of architecture, if things were different in the hierarchical power structures of culture.

In pottery towns and villages worldwide it is not unusual to see buildings actually made with pots, stacked on their side, one on top of the other, more or less like bricks. These pot walls are light in weight, insulating, and very cheap to make since the pots themselves are not specifically made for that architectural purpose but are coming from the countless and continuously produced rejects and seconds made by the ceramic factories and pottery studios of the community. These pots lying on their side to make the walls of buildings also provide storage space in their interiors, within the wall itself, which frees even more space within the room. I have also seen in China smaller buildings, garden huts or latrines built with discarded plaster molds, stacked like bricks, after their useful purpose as tool to cast ceramic objects has been exhausted. This recycling of containers, pots and molds into larger containers, buildings, show the ingenuity and resourcefulness of potters everywhere.

The first clay buildings, like the first pots, date from the beginning of agriculture and the sedentary life that created the first true villages and towns in the late Neolithic. Prior to that time, nomadic humans lived more or less in the open, protected by impermanent, movable structures, tents and huts or again, they lived in caves and grottoes that protected them from the elements. As we have seen in the “Food” chapter, it is with the beginning of agriculture that ceramic technology first really develops and it is at that time that we also find fired clay bricks used as a building material, for granaries where harvests are kept and protected from rain and rodents, and for the walls of the family hut as well as the larger walls surrounding villages, for protection from predatory

animals and attacking enemies. Prior to the use of fired bricks (5000 years ago), the buildings were made with raw clay, brick shaped or not, yet few of these more fragile and vulnerable structures have survived the passage of time since raw clay is particularly susceptible to rain, wind, frost as well as earthquakes. The oldest shaped raw clay bricks date to nearly 10,000 years ago and are found in the upper reaches of the Tigris river in Irak. Elsewhere in Mesopotamia (and also at Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus valley), mud bricks were used to build ziggurats, high ceremonial towers that are the inspiration for the Tower of Babel story in the Bible but as we have already seen, when the story of the Tower of Babel was written, people were already using fired clay bricks. In Jericho, the use of sun-baked bricks predates any notion of using clay to make pottery. These high mud brick structures were covered on their exterior with a more weather-proof facing of plaster or stone or even colored tiles and fired bricks, later, while the top and stages were surfaced with tar, the earliest known use of Iraki oil. In their tall form and overall structure and in their colorful surfaces, ziggurats were also the forerunner of the minaret in Islamic architecture. Recently, a fortress in Aleppo, Syria, and made with raw bricks that had withstood largely intact for millennia was basically completely destroyed when a major earthquake hit the area. If it had been constructed from fired bricks, it would have sustained the damage with less impact. The use of raw instead of fired bricks was due to economical and geographical factors in a region without the necessary source of fuel (wood, charcoal) to fire the bricks. In the Moche valley in Peru, the arid coastal plain is covered with large hills, eroded with deep ravines by periodic heavy rain in this otherwise desert environment. Many of these "hills" are not natural. They are man made pyramids built with large raw clay bricks used to progressively build ever-larger temples over centuries, one on top of the other, to monumental proportion. When these religious structures were abandoned as the Moche culture collapsed following an extended period of drought and the invasion of neighbors, they progressively eroded to their present state to now resemble hills that totally blend with the natural environment. Each citizen or family unit of Moche communities had to produce a certain amount of bricks to a specific prescribed standard of size each year and bring them to the construction site. The digging of canals necessary to irrigate cultures provided the necessary raw material. Each brick was stamped with a specific mark for each producing unit that permitted to keep accounts on everyone's contribution to the task. This brick making served as a form of taxes imposed on the populace by the ruling class and the structure themselves served to reaffirm and maintain their authority. In the Moche valley and elsewhere in the coastal desert plain of Peru, wood is a rare and precious commodity reserved for cooking and

heating and for the firing of the necessary ceramic pots for daily domestic use as well as those required for the elaborate rituals and offerings around funerary practices. If there had been sufficient fuel, no doubt that their bricks would have been fired too and their social and religious buildings would have survived much better all the way to today. Recently, a 5500 years old raw clay brick ceremonial structure has been discovered in Peru at Sechin Bajo and it is believed to be the oldest surviving structure in the Americas. It had been preserved, by being buried underneath another structure that covered it completely. Anywhere else in the world where fuel is abundant, raw clay bricks were quickly substituted for fired clay bricks which are so much more resistant, easier to transport, easier to use and provide extra protection from nature as well as enemies in times of war. If brick structures are sometimes taken down and the bricks reused, very often these obsolete buildings are left intact and are preserved from destruction since it is actually often easier, simpler and as economical to make brand new bricks than to take down, clean up, reuse and recycle old bricks.

The earliest examples of the use of fired bricks are to be found in Pakistan, in the Indus valley, around 3000 BC, where and when the earliest real cities were first built. Fired bricks were used for private and public buildings, ceremonial structures, for the city walls and for the elaborate network of canalization for water and for the sewer system, both of these based on the extensive use of brick lined cisterns to store and redistribute water.

The most beautiful use of bricks in Antiquity is certainly the fortifications and gates of Susa and Babylon in Mesopotamia. These bricks are often carved in mid relief, with life size lions, soldiers in procession and mythical winged beings, all meant to protect the city and display its richness and power. The panels of bricks were carved as a unit while raw and then glazed with vivid colors, notably blues, greens, yellow, white and black and then fired individually to be recomposed after firing, within the structure of monochrome glazed bricks (a vivid blue is often used) constituting the rest of the very high walls. Glazed bricks are actually quite rare in ceramic architecture, since the labor of glazing and the added cost of re-firing the bricks, which need to be especially stacked so that the glaze does not fuse them together, a precise process that requires time and extra space in the kiln, all contribute to their rarity, an unfortunate situation since glazed bricks are particularly attractive and they can add very permanent and bright colors to buildings, something that is altogether too rare. Nonetheless, bricks are an ideal material for architecture since, despite the fragility of ceramics to shock, the material is very resistant

to compression and can sustain a very large load under pressure. Fired clay bricks can be stacked almost endlessly without the added weight affecting the bricks at the base. These monumental walls and gates of Mesopotamia, made with polychrome glazed bricks are also among the earliest example of the use of glazes in ceramics and it is in itself interesting that glazes were first used for ornamental, decorative, esthetic purposes, for the ostentatious display of power in large architectural, theatrical structures instead of being used for domestic needs on pots and vessels, something that will only come much later. An exception to this later use of glazes on pots can be found in small, lidded boxes made for funerary purposes as offerings in tombs, from the Ziwiye culture of the 9th Century B.C.E., also in Mesopotamia. Their surface is covered with abstract patterns and figurative motifs in bold, complementary colors that are so graphically modern that they would be totally believable as recent, contemporary objects if made today, instead of having been made 3000 years ago. Here again, the use of glaze is more esthetic than necessarily practical. This esthetic application of a new technology in history usually precedes a practical one (and glazes have very obvious practical qualities, as they render clay vessels water tight, non-porous, with a surface that can be readily cleaned, thus more hygienic), often by centuries if not millennia. This is even true for any type of material, and for technological developments, in ceramics, in metallurgy or elsewhere. All cultures historically tend to develop new materials and new technologies for esthetic applications first, and if the intent was also practical, then there is a clear, strong striving for beauty in both the making and the experience of the object. We, of course, have now reversed this time frame and our new materials and new technologies are primarily practical and functional, with little esthetic value, even within art applications, since we now place more emphasis on concept, content and context than on form.

The Ishtar gate is probably the most famous of the Babylonian archeological ruins and it is now housed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, brought there after its rediscovery by German archeologists in the 19th Century. Other fragments from Babylon are in the Louvre and the British Museum. In Irak itself, south of Baghdad, all that remains are rather recent, yet faithful reconstructions but at a smaller scale, that nonetheless capture the grandeur and magnificence of the originals.

The culture that has used bricks above any other building material is that of the Romans, although we think of marble more than bricks when we think of Rome. This is just a false impression. Buildings in Rome and all over the Roman world were mostly built

with bricks. Only then is the building faced with marble, often inside and out, yet even then that usually is just a rather thin veneer. The Colosseum as we can see from its ruin today, is mostly a brick building while originally it appeared to have all been made of marble. Eventually, this marble was removed to make mortar by calcining the stone in kilns, a fate that also awaited most marble sculpture from antiquity. The Romans were the first to make specifically wedge-shaped bricks for building arches and domes. Bricks were also used to build sub-floor heating systems called hypercausts. They were used to build brick lined channels for heated air to flow under the floors. The engineering was superb as is typical of Roman ingenuity elsewhere and the gases from the furnace never leaked into the building itself. Clay, especially fired clay that often remains rather porous, retains heat and then releases it slowly. Bricks are also essential to the building of chimneys that not only serve to remove unwanted smoke and gases from the living space but also greatly improve the efficiency of heat distribution of fireplaces, furnaces, stoves and ovens while permitting a more efficient use of energy. Their origin also goes back to Roman times although they do not become in common use until the late Middle Age in Europe.

The Islamic world:

If the walls and gates of the major urban centers of Mesopotamia are amongst the most beautiful brick structures ever built, it nonetheless remains that this distinction belongs to the Islamic period, when extraordinary mosques were built all over the Middle East and the Islamic world as a whole, from Spain and Morocco all to the way to the far reaches of Indonesia. The mud clay mosque at Jenneh in Mali is not a ceramic structure since it is made, modeled really, of raw clay but even then it does have a ceramic aspect since the ventilation holes on the roof are covered with a fired clay lid, that can be removed or replaced easily. The most stunning and elaborate examples of ceramic mosques are in Iran: in Shiraz, but most notably, the Majid-I Shah Mosque (1611–1630) in Isphahan, the most spectacular architectural ensemble found anywhere (irrespective of materials), beautifully reflected and mirrored in a central pool. Other exceptional examples can be found in Azerbaijan (Samarkand, Bukhara, Baku), as well as in Jerusalem, with the Dome of the Rock, built in 690 AD, one of the earliest mosques in the Islamic world. These impressive, magnificent, jewel-like buildings are basically total ceramic objects and as such among the largest ceramic containers ever built. If one makes abstraction for the foundation made of stone and at times the first two meters of the walls covered in marble (marble is more resistant than bricks or tiles to wear from splattering

rain and from the friction of countless hands over centuries, who may be tempted as well to steal more accessible, decorated surfaces), the remainder of these mosques is all ceramics; the very high walls reaching to the heavens (represented symbolically by the color blue, usually the predominant color in the decorative schema), the columns supporting the large expanses of vaulted, arched ceilings and the imposing, phenomenal domes. All are made with either standard bricks or customized and specifically shaped into intricate forms to modulate the interior of domes, in pendentives that resemble geometrical stalactites. This “stalactite” vaulting, called “muqarna” is particular to Islamic architecture and typical of dome construction. The interior surface of the dome becomes a faceted, reflective surface of complex geometry. The muqarna system for domes originated in brick buildings, as an innovative variation in making spherical domes. By stacking bricks in a certain way, in what can only be described as brick acrobatics, the interior of the dome would present protuberances instead of the expected smoothness of previous domes. That faceted surface, in itself quite beautiful, was subsequently developed further into the muqarna, the stalactite vaulting so typical of Islamic religious architecture. This highly modulated, elaborate and complex surface would then be covered with polychrome glazed ceramic tiles, whose shrinkage had to be precisely calibrated to fit the varied surfaces. The overall brilliant and breathtaking effect reaffirms and enhances the formal, structural and visual complexity and dynamism of the ensemble. Bricks are ideal for the bridging of large domes due to their relative lightness compared to stone or even metal, and for the ease of assembly they provide in a stacking system where identical, dimensionally engineered forms are required. The most arresting and impressive aspects of these mosques nonetheless remain their surfaces, usually covered inside and out with glazed, polychrome tiles and mosaics in patterns of incredible complexity and intricacy to a degree of visual power and richness not achieved before or since. In Istanbul, Turkey, the church of Hagia Sophia built largely of bricks under Roman rule and boasting the largest expanse of dome in the world at the time and for centuries afterward (and for that reason alone it remains an engineering marvel of its time), was later transformed into a mosque during the early Ottoman period and served as a model for countless other mosques. Many of these Turkish mosques and palaces have interiors covered in Iznik ceramic tiles with intricate arabesque floral decoration representing paradise metaphorically. In other parts of the Islamic world, large religious complexes of mosque, Koranic schools (madrasas) and public squares create impressive architectural statements, notably at Isphahan, in Iran and at Samarkand, in Azerbaijan. Other examples include the palaces of the Alhambra (1360–1390) in Granada, Spain, covered with

elaborate geometric tile panels and the specifically Moroccan “zelij” mosaic decoration where the ceramic surface achieves its highest complexity of intricacy by the application of the geometric mathematical sciences of the Arabic world. The zelij decoration was explained in more details in “The Decorative Esthetics” chapter and I would refer to curious reader to that section, again. The Koranic prescription against representation in art created the obligation and necessity for the development of these highly complex and refined formal solutions to the problem of symbolic ornamentation.

The most elegant and best example of the use of unglazed bricks to catch shadow and light and create elaborate “woven” patterns combining simultaneously and seamlessly form and surface, structure and decoration, remains the mausoleum of the Samanids (from the late 9th Century) in Bukhara. Although quite a small building, by using symmetry and a wide variety of permutations in organizing bricks into patterns by alternatively projecting and recessing them, and using the play of light and shadow on its exterior surfaces with great efficiency, it achieves the supreme expression for the use of ordinary, undecorated and monochrome bricks to be found anywhere.

European Ceramic architecture:

In Europe, ceramics has also contributed greatly to the rise and development of both architecture and culture. A great example would be the dome of Florence cathedral, Santa Maria delle Fiore, with its double brick dome, like an upside down bowl within another reversed bowl, one inside the other, and designed by Brunelleschi in 1436. Brunelleschi was the most innovative mind in structural engineering for his time and he was also a pioneer of perspective in the visual arts. The dome within the dome design, each supporting the other, provides great strength while maintaining lightness. This reduced weight, already affected by the used of bricks instead of another heavier material, permitted to successfully reach and bridge the vast expanse of space it had to cover. Alternating bricks on their side and on their edge distributes the forces created by the weight of the dome and prevents its collapse. Brunelleschi didn’t have a fast setting mortar like the one used for the building of domes in Persia, so he had to rely on this particular stratagem of distributing the weight of the dome as it was being built, through a particular stacking of the bricks. At the time this was the largest dome in Europe. Its exterior surface is also covered with terracotta tiles in a distinctive red color which gives Florence and so many other Mediterranean cities much of their warm visual character.

Brunelleschi, one of the greatest architect of the Renaissance or of any other time for that matter, also collaborated with ceramic sculptor Luca della Robbia, who provided his distinctive glazed ceramic reliefs, a technique he invented and perfected and for which he remains celebrated. Two of their common achievements are for the Hospital of the Innocents near the Accademia and the Pazzi chapel at Santa Croce, both in Florence. The serene yet minimalist, understated architecture of Brunelleschi, with its subtle use of grey stone framing white plaster walls, hiding brick structures, articulates the space in a rigid, severe geometry that contrast very effectively with the sculptural modeling of the shiny glazed, blue and white tondi. A tondo is a circular image, in itself rather rare in visual arts, notably in paintings, but quite often part of the formal vocabulary of architecture, especially when fitted with a ceramic bas-relief, so typical of Della Robbia's work. These circular images of saints, madonna and child and evangelists can also be found in many other Italian buildings, inside or outside as well, since their ceramic surface is resistant to rain and light. They give a distinctive aspect to so many Italian piazzas and churches, in what remains one of the great contributions of sculptural ceramics to art history. While not being structurally architectural, the glazed terracotta panels of the della Robbia family are nonetheless so integrated within architecture and contribute so effectively to its overall effect that they cannot be separated from it and constitute an integral aspect of many Italian Renaissance buildings.

More domestic dwellings, houses, villas, shacks or palaces have been roofed with ceramic tiles worldwide than any other material. Like any other thing made with fired clay, tiles are cheap, common, easily fabricated and perfect for their intended use. They are relatively light, fire resistant and very durable. Ceramic tiles are still a very common material for roofing all over the world. Even today, in the processing of marine salt in Sicily, the large mounds of salt are dried in the sun while being covered, at least partially with loosely yet precisely stacked terracotta tiles to protect the salt from excess wind and rain.

Chinese architecture:

It had always been my belief that the Great Wall of China was a masonry structure built largely with stone, over compressed earth. I was very surprised when I visited a section of the famous site to discover that it is actually made of fired clay bricks! Ordinary, conventional bricks tend to be of a familiar, standard size, more or less the same all over

the world. For the Great Wall, each brick is about five times larger than what we would expect (which makes them look like dressed stones on photographs), a dimension probably made necessary for such a large structure. The soldiers that were employed eventually to guard this imposing structure actually manufactured the bricks themselves. Each brick was stamped with the date and the army unit, before it was fired in large, reducing, horseshoe kilns. The wall is built with two slightly sloping walls that are then filled with rammed earth, rubble and stones. A lime mortar was used to join the bricks together. The fact that the Great Wall, built over a period of at least 2000 years, since it is still being restored today, is made of fired clay bricks makes it the largest ceramic object ever made, a feat that is not going to be surpassed anytime soon, probably never.

In present day China, while traveling through the countryside, one can witness tile making happening everywhere there is suitable clay, that is to say just about everywhere in the vast alluvial plain that is most of China. The clay is dug right on the site and shaped using traditional methods and simple yet ingenious tools that haven't changed for millennia, probably. The tiles are also fired on site and the whole process is the labor of an itinerant work force that travels around to where their skills and their products are needed. Bricks are likewise produced in a similar fashion, but larger factories tend to be localized at the same site for longer period of time, until the clay source is exhausted, which can take centuries. Near Xian, in North-western China, I have seen a brick factory with its huge kiln situated at the bottom of a large pit, a few football field wide and easily 50 meters deep. When bricks were first made there, I am guessing as early as the Han or Tang dynasties, the brick factory was at ground level and, as more and more clay was dug out to make the bricks, the whole installation progressively sunk as the material was slowly depleted underneath. This process will probably only end when rock bottom is reached but there is no end in sight.

In Northern China where temperature is cold in the winter months, houses made with bricks take full advantage of the particular dimensions of the ordinary brick, the length being twice the size of the width, which is twice the size of the thickness, in a ratio that can be described mathematically as 4: 2: 1. This system of particular dimensions for bricks is found just about everywhere except interestingly enough during Roman times, and the Romans were great builders with bricks. In Roman architecture the "brick" unit is closer to a thick and rather large (30x30 cm. or so) square tile than to the expected, conventional, familiar form. Another not readily explained cultural difference I suppose.

Then again, in Roman architecture, the brick is not meant to be visible, and it is usually covered with plaster or even marble, so a brick shape that created a pleasant patterned surface may not have been necessary. Anyway, in North China, bricks are not only used to build the walls of houses, their arrangement also provides insulation by creating a hollow space trapping air and retaining heat inside the building. The walls are constructed by stacking bricks on their narrower edge (a shiner brick, as we will see later) and making two parallel walls as far from each other if we measure from their exterior reach than the length on the brick itself, which then permits the placing of a perpendicular brick (a header brick) every so often in order to connect the two walls and stabilize it while leaving a hollow space between the exterior wall and the interior wall. This ingenious method of staking bricks to create insulating walls also has an esthetic effect since the repetitive, boring, predictable pattern of the single unit of the brick is periodically altered by another pattern created by the smaller edge of the brick connecting the two walls.

In Northern China as well, not only are the houses made of bricks, but so are beds! These beds are raised platforms built with bricks, by joining short stacks and connecting them with tiles at the top, which becomes the roof of the platform, about the size of a double bed. At the foot of the bed, there is a door so that a fire can be lit under the structure, and at the head, there is a brick chimney, connected to the outside. The bed is not an actual stove or a heating device for the house itself. Yet, prior to going to bed, it will be fired up so that the whole structure can be warmed up, the mass of bricks absorbing heat and then releasing it slowly, for most of the night. In Hungary and elsewhere in Europe, notably in Germany, large brick and tile stoves, sometimes beautifully decorated and glazed, are at times also equipped with a bed on top or even with a bench on their sides, usually reserved for the elderly who find this warm spot the perfect place to rest.

In Nanjing, China, during Imperial times, a tall, multi-storied pagoda was entirely built of glazed ceramic bricks and tiles. It was the only one of its type anywhere. If the roof and even floors of pagodas are usually made of tiles, the rest of the structure is usually of masonry and wood, which is much lighter and easier to use. Nanjing's pagoda was called the Porcelain Pagoda, although it was actually made of glazed earthenware, mostly. It was eventually destroyed and only fragments remain today. In China as well, often roof brackets were made of fired bricks yet they were modeled to imitate wood brackets, which they replaced.

Too many important brick buildings exist all over the world to mention them all. At Ayutthaya, in Thailand, thousands of Buddhist stupas remain over the ruins of the former imperial city, all in bright red terracotta bricks.

Today, in Tianjin, just south of Beijing, a rich entrepreneur has renovated a late 19th Century European style mansion on four floors, covering its whole exterior and a good part of the interior with ceramic mosaics made with broken porcelain pots and dishes. Whole pots, stacked foot to mouth, are also used to build the tall, wavy fence with double doors at the front of the property, and even to cover the roofs as if pots were tiles. Even pretend columns are made with porcelain vases, stacked foot to mouth, in a chain. Hundreds of inverted bowls, plates and dishes are organized as an elaborate blue and white pattern under the roof of a large, circular balcony. The broken shards as well as the pots are grouted with cement, covering almost all of the original structure. The fantastic house also sports large, tube like twisted excretions coming out of the roof and giving the ensemble the effect of some organic growth attacking the whole thing. The blue and white or polychrome decoration of the ceramic pots and shards serves as the predominant, overwhelming visual effect. All this relentless organization of ceramic shapes, colors, textures and patterns, presented in such an unusual fashion, enchants the eye and boggles the mind, in a typical, exaggerated, obsessive and endlessly charming Chinese manner. “China House” as it is called, in a not too subtle double-entendre, is of course inspired by the architecture of Gaudi. While it remains an impressive and convincing realization, it doesn’t have the inventiveness or originality of the source, or the strong personality of the work of the Catalan architect. Like all other works that imitate or reference their source too closely and in a stylistic manner that bypass a deeper formal, stylistic and conceptual understanding, the Tianjin house remains more a curiosity, the fanciful undertaking of an idle mind with too much money and not quite enough creativity and imagination. It is “outsider” art, characterized by self-indulgence and “horror vacui” and it lacks the necessary critical distance of legitimate art and architecture.

Bricks and Brick kilns:

Bricks are basically standardized all over the world, and their shape is usually given by a specific ratio, I repeat, their length being twice their width, which is twice their thickness (4:2:1). Due to those specific proportions, bricks can be arranged in a variety of

patterns depending in which direction and orientation the brick itself is laid. There are five main ways to position a brick into a wall and each of these positions has a somewhat poetic, descriptive name. They are:

Stretcher: the usual way to lay a brick, horizontally, with the long, narrow side of the brick exposed.

Shiner: the brick is also laid horizontally but on edge, with the broad face visible.

Header: the brick is laid perpendicularly in the wall, connecting two rows. The smallest end of the brick aligns with the surface of the wall, and the brick is either set as a stretcher if the connected rows are stretchers or as a shiner, depending.

Sailor: The brick is laid vertically, standing up on its end, with the widest, broad face exposed.

Soldier: the brick is also laid vertically but with the narrow side exposed to the face of the wall.

Permutations of these five ways to lay a brick can produce endless possibilities to animate a brick wall surface with texture and pattern. These also have various names and I would refer the curious reader to investigate these other ways to organize bricks into complex patterns further.

Tiles and bricks are usually single fired in specialized kilns that vary in size and shape all over the world. The most ingenious can be found in Mexico where the brick factory has two side-by-side platforms that serve as the base for the kilns. The dried bricks are stacked on one platform following a very rigid, precise method that will allow the air to travel between the stacks, creating a good draught within the structure, to suck in oxygen during the firing and permit efficient combustion and the reaching of the necessary temperature. During the stacking, combustible materials, straw, branches, wood is also inserted in the load, to help later in the combustion process. Once the “inside” of the kiln is full, an actual kiln (called a clamp or a scove kiln) is also built with other raw, dried bricks, all around the load of bricks to be fired. Then the whole thing is fired and while the material inside will reach temperature, the stacked bricks that serve as walls for

the kiln itself on the outside will remain largely unfired. This “kiln” is then dismantled and restacked in the middle of the other platform and a new load of dried bricks is added, then a new “kiln” is built all around and then fired, the whole process is endlessly repeated from one platform to the other, alternatively.

Kilns themselves are the architectural form of the necessary ceramic process, firing. A kiln is nothing if not a building, made with fired clay bricks, to fire other clay objects. Some kilns can be monumental in size and scale and some of the largest are used exclusively to fire bricks. They are oval in shape, like an elongated donut and their continuous circular interior can be hundreds of meters long. This type of kiln is continuously fired in one section of the kiln, and this section progressively moves as the fired bricks are removed from one side and dried bricks are added and stacked on the other side. The whole process moves along in a circular motion within the kiln and about one quarter of the whole huge kiln is being used at any given time while the rest of the kiln waits for its turn to be of purpose in the process. This type of kiln is very efficient and economical to use as there is less energy loss, the heat of the firing being used to dry the unfired bricks instead of being dispersed and wasted in the normal cooling found in other type of kilns. Their main disadvantage is for the workers stacking and un-stacking the bricks, loading raw bricks on one side and removing fired bricks on the other in a closed environment that remains quite hot at all times. But brick making by hand without the recourse to mechanical means, is a hard, demanding and exhausting form of labor. Contrary to pottery making, it is not a highly skilled craft and often, whole families are engaged in the activity, even small children in the developing world. It is back breaking labor that usually pays very little. In India today, as in China and many other developing countries, the building boom created by the expanding economy rests on a large demand for bricks and many farming communities have become financially unsustainable, forcing farmers to move to brick making centers in large number to provide the necessary labor that at least generates a steady income, to make bricks for buildings and housing that they will never be able to afford, for now anyway.

In Brazil, the Amazon rain forest is now being depleted to open up grazing land for cattle. Contrary to the previous use of the forest to grow food by first reconditioning the soil with ceramic shards, as we have seen in the “Food” chapter, this new use of land is highly destructive and unsustainable. The land cleared by cutting the forest quickly becomes unproductive and new land has to be constantly cleared. In that process, the

wood itself is often burned to make charcoal. This process takes place in dome shaped structures made with fired bricks, also made on site prior to constructing the charcoal kilns.

Porcelain rooms:

During the Renaissance, in Italy, in France and elsewhere, garden fantasies and underground rooms that could remain fresh and cool in the summer heat were all the rage for royalty and aristocrats. Often their main structure was made of fired bricks and their interior surface covered in glazed tiles. Imitating natural forms like rocks, stalactites, vegetation, animals, snakes and shells, these bizarre creations find their source in the work of Bernard Palissy, who himself designed and built a number of these fantasies, according to historical records, since none has survived intact the change in fashion over time. All that is left of them is a few broken remains and the molds he used, uncovered quite recently, during the digging of the new Louvre in the middle of Paris to build I.M. Pei's pyramid, at the very spot where Palissy's studio was located during the 1550's.

During the reign of Louis XIV, in 1670, a pavilion was built at Versailles in the gardens at Trianon. It was a wood structure covered with ceramic tiles imitating porcelain. The tiles were actually white glazed earthenware decorated in blue, to emulate Chinese porcelain (the secret of porcelain is still unknown in Europe at the time). The whole building, woodwork, furniture, etc. was also painted in blue and white "à la chinoise". This pavilion, the "Trianon de Porcelaine" was unfortunately destroyed in 1687.

When the Bourbon king Charles VII was stationed in Naples, Italy at his castle at Capodimonte, he set up a porcelain factory in his garden in 1743, following the trend for royal houses and wealthy aristocrats all over Europe. The secret of porcelain had recently been rediscovered in Meissen in Germany in 1708, by Tschirnhaus and Bottger, under the patronage of Augustus the Strong who had amassed an important collection of Oriental porcelain and wanted to emulate their beauty and preciousness in wares that would embody and represent the greatness of his person and of his reign. The "secret" of porcelain quickly spread all over Europe and factories were established everywhere, usually through royal or aristocratic patronage. At Capodimonte, in Naples, Italy, one of the first production of the ceramic studio there was to create a porcelain room for the King's palace. All the walls of this sizable room are covered in porcelain panels in the

exuberant Rococo style with Chinese motifs in relief of flowers, monkeys and fanciful, exotic Chinamen dispersed in the excessive scrolls and flourishes of the style. Porcelain wall sconces around large mirrors that expand and multiply the scale of the room, as well as large porcelain chandeliers complete the theatrical, phenomenal experience of the place. When the Bourbon throne was reestablished in Spain, the court was moved to the outskirts of Madrid and a new porcelain factory was established there as well, in the garden setting of Buen Retiro near the royal palace. There again, a new porcelain room was created for the then King of Naples, now King of Spain.

Other rooms covered in glazed tiles, decorated or even painted with large, complex pictorial programs can be found all over Europe, in churches (the floor of the parish church in Capri, near Naples, is a great example), in palaces, villas, public and private buildings of all types and shapes. Portugal and Holland are particularly well stocked with examples. The town of Delft in Holland has been making blue and white painted tiles for centuries and is still producing them today. These low fired red earthenware tiles and pots are glazed with an opaque white glaze over which the blue cobalt decoration is painted. If a white earthenware clay is used, then the cobalt decoration is painted directly on the clay to be covered with a clear, transparent glaze. Whether the decoration is painted under the glaze (clear) or over the glaze (opaque white), the results, while being similar to the uninitiated are quite distinct. What remains is that in either case, at their origin in the 17th Century, these Dutch ceramics imitated Chinese models in the “Chinoiserie” style so popular at the time all over Europe. They quickly developed into a typically Dutch style, with landscapes, tulips and more European forms of ornamentation. It remains nonetheless interesting to note that their source was Chinese, despite the fact that the Chinese ceramics they emulate is made of high-fired porcelain, which is quite different at the material, technical and esthetic levels. Due to the resilience of the materials, many of these rooms have retained almost intact and with great freshness their ceramic decoration. It is important to realize that at the time, such ceramic ornamentation with very bright, intense colors, provided the most intense chromatic experience available outside nature and due to the exceptional stability and permanency of ceramic materials and colors, they haven’t faded or changed in the least and they can still be appreciated as if new, today.

For the 400th anniversary of Rembrandt’s birth, a life size reproduction of his most famous work, “The Night Watch”, was painted in blue and white tiles at Delft. Like so many

ceramic reproductions of works of art (irrespective of their actual artistic value), it will probably outlive the original, eventually.

Architectural Ceramic Wonders:

Beyond the Islamic mosques and the porcelain rooms of Europe, the most extraordinary use of ceramics in architecture is to be found in the work of Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi, who worked in Barcelona, Spain, in the late 1800's. His three most major and relevant ceramic based works are the mosaic towers of the Sagrada Familia church, itself built with stone, and still under construction today. The mosaics of Park Guell also remain an architectural fantasy without peers anywhere. A close competitor would be the Watts Towers of Simon Rodia in Los Angeles, likewise covered with ceramic found objects that recycle refuse in to a sublime expression of singular vision and individuality, as well as in numerous other "outsider art" garden creations found all over the world and often incorporating ceramics, as we have already seen with China House in Tianjin, China; an "insider art" version is provided by Niki de Saint-Phalle garden extravaganza in Italy, in Garravicchio, in Tuscany. Park Guell is specifically known and celebrated for its extraordinary snaking bench that encircles and waves around its superior terrace. The long, continuous, sinuous and ergonomic seating arrangement is completely covered with a dynamic, wild collage of shards from dishes and broken tiles that animate the moving, undulating form to bring it alive under the sun in an incredibly original and efficient way. Other benches in public parks have followed suit in many other places, but none achieve the inventive richness and peculiar beauty as well as comfort of Gaudi's: Lover's Park in Lima, Peru, situated on a cliff with a view of the sea and the sunset, incorporates fragments of love poems within its more prosaic mosaics. In Melbourne, Australia, a neighborhood has been outfitted with bloated ceramic tiled couches, set in the middle of the large sidewalk at intersections, to provide a meeting place for the community. They serve that purpose efficiently and playfully but their esthetic is more cute than potent; they tell us more about the particular taste of the maker than they reflect the spirit of the place. The third of Gaudi's ceramic masterpiece remains Casa Battlo, a private home completely designed by the Catalan master, not only the building itself, but all the furniture, hardware, wallpaper, carpets, etc. It is the roof of this fantastic, sculptural structure that constitutes its most characteristic and impressive aspect and where Gaudi has found the most fertile ground for the expression for his near delirious formal imagination, as we would expect from such an original, visionary mind.

Gaudi's bricks and glazed roof tiles are custom designed and made for each of his buildings and he generates new forms for each particular need. Considering that bricks and tiles are basically the same everywhere, following a few fixed, conventional models, it is quite extraordinary to see how inventive and imaginative Gaudi's formal creativity was, always finding a new solution to what was in actuality a very old problem. The roof of Casa Battlo is exceptional in that sense and it presents a surreal fantasy of shapes and forms referencing nature without copying it, something Gaudi has always been particularly successful at doing. He has absorbed fully in his work the structural, organic systems used by nature, plants, animals, marine life forms, geology and sedimentation, to generate amazing, original forms, shapes, structures and surfaces. Gaudi never directly imitates or even directly references these sources but instead transform them into a vision that remains profoundly unique and again, original. Others may attempt to imitate Gaudi but that remains a pointless exercise. It would be better instead to learn and absorb his lesson, not by stylistic imitation but by conceptual emulation, and then apply the results to new work, like he did himself. The roof chimneys and ventilation towers on the roof of Casa Mila, near Casa Battlo, are also phenomenal in their dynamic form and their white mosaic coverings. Gaudi's contemporary Luis Domenech I Montaner does his own version of the use of polychrome ceramic surfaces in his own buildings, notably the Palau de la Musica Catalana, also in Barcelona, likewise covered inside and out with Art Nouveau ceramic tiles, mosaic and panels. His talent, while real, is nonetheless more conventional and of a different scope of reach than Gaudi's genius. In architecture as elsewhere there are many more followers than leaders and Gaudi was a visionary. Visionaries usually end up leading only themselves. They cannot be followed.

These architects made use of the vast history of architectural ceramics as source of inspiration as well. Islamic art, Hispano-Mauresque palaces and mosques, the work of Palissy, all served as sources beyond the lessons of nature to develop and define their individual vision. Art Nouveau architecture, the last truly decorative architectural style, abounds with ceramic examples, notably in Belgium, in France, in Hungary, in Austria and elsewhere. There are too many great examples to be included and analyzed here. In France, architect Hector Guimard made extraordinary use of glazed lava rocks, a volcanic stone that can be cut and carved but also glazed and fired, to combine the properties of stone and of ceramics in the same material.

Gaudi is also particularly remembered for his fantastic chimneys and ventilation towers covered in ceramic mosaic, on the roof of his buildings, as we have seen with Casa Mila. An historical precedent to these is found in the red brick chimneys of Tudor era Hampton Court castle south of London, England. The roof of this vast palace is surmounted by a large number of tall red brick chimneys connected to the numerous, necessary fireplaces inside. Each chimney is unique and different from the others and each present an original solution and permutation to the problem of animating a simple form by the various organization of a simple, repeated unit, the brick. No other building before or since has shown so efficiently the potential for amazing diversity in using such a simple, seemingly limited system.

On a visit to London, England I would also recommend the Victoria and Albert Museum, not just for its impressive collection of Decorative Arts, including more ceramics than you care to see at any one time, but also for the ceramic staircase, designed by Frank Moody during the Victorian era, where all the steps, landings, as well as the walls and ceilings are covered with highly decorated, polychrome porcelain tiles, made by the firm of Minton. Taking a break, make your way to the restaurant, likewise completely covered, floors, walls and ceiling in patterned porcelain tiles. These Victorian extravaganzas in ceramics are inspired by Gothic architecture and their tiled floors are based on the tiles made by the Cistercians monks for their monasteries during the Middle Age. These encaustic tiles have a design created with different colors of clay, red and white usually, which goes all the way through the tiles, which never wears away. Even today, after centuries, Cistercian encaustic tiles retain their pattern after having been trampled by countless feet.

Architectural models and architectural ceramics sculpture:

In the late Neolithic, around 6000 B.C.E., small fired clay models of buildings were often made to be placed in tombs, to contain the ashes of cremated bodies. They are the earliest architectural models we have, irrespective of materials, and they provide important information on what is actually the very beginning of architecture and cities.

Chinese culture also provides us with faithful, highly detailed miniature architectural models made in ceramics for funerary purposes, where the objects placed as offerings in tombs would provide the necessary necessities for the afterlife. The actual buildings these

ceramic models represent have long disappeared yet from the glazed and fired clay models we can learn much about ancient Chinese buildings, both domestic, public or ceremonial, their size and shape, their style, their function, their decoration as well as the materials, methods and techniques used in their construction. Most date from the Han and Tang dynasties, to be replaced during the Song dynasty and later by large, at times very tall clay jars and vessels surmounted by elaborate depictions of paradise, which includes temple like buildings surrounded by real or mythical animals, gods and goddesses and other spiritual beings. Other cultures have followed similar funerary practices and architectural ceramic models are also common in pre-Columbian America, in Mexico and in Peru in most cultures found there over millennia. Again, beyond their obvious esthetic value, these representations of architecture and buildings on ceramic objects, often including scenes of religious or civic rituals, provide critical, important information about various aspects of life in these times and cultures that would be lost otherwise.

Numerous contemporary artists are making ceramic models as independent, potent metaphorical symbols and images in their sculptural practice. Like all the bags and boxes of “The Simulation Esthetics”, this use of architectural forms as an appropriate subject for ceramic objects and sculptures permits the exploration of the concept of containment, so central to ceramics as an art form, beyond the recourse to the conventional, traditional, functional forms of standard pottery wares. If pots and vessels are informed by the concept of containment, which implies a non-hierarchical approach to both making and experience, it remains that buildings are much more hierarchical than pots, conceptually and politically as well. Architecture tends to have a clear hierarchical, political purpose and function within society and culture. Buildings themselves are hierarchically structured, with a clear emphasis on the facade over the back, on the frontal elevation aspect first presented to view where the entrance is usually located. Likewise, the exterior aspect is often more important than the interior organization of spaces, which tend to be more conventional than the showy, expressive shell of the building. Within recent developments in architecture, we can even see examples where the plan of the building, the image it defines as seen from above is the main esthetic aspect of the architecture, which then operates very poorly visually and esthetically when seen and experienced at ground level, since humans are not birds.

In architecture, like in pottery, the exterior is usually the manifestation of the interior, which it follows. This was an important precept of Modernism, for example. Yet

recent monumental and conceptual architecture is on the contrary theatrical and false, misleading, in its presentation. Such buildings are often designed from the outside in, in a reversal from the classical approach to functional form. If function is still a criteria used to deny “art” status to various things, and in a context where the definition of art has become basically meaningless (art can be anything and everything, thus nothing, really) there is still a continuous resistance in accepting function as a valid concept in art. Function is tolerated, barely, within design, and of course, within architecture but even in these practices it is not deemed essential anymore, probably the contrary, in fact. For that reason, recent buildings, especially if they are museums, end up containing the ego of the architect (and the sponsor) above all else. These kinds of buildings never look so good than when they are brand new and completely empty, empty of furniture (unless it has been designed by the architect as well), empty of people, and in the case of museums, totally empty of art as well. Furniture, people, art are but unnecessary inconveniences and distractions inside (and/or outside) such structures. They interfere and disrupt with the “vision” of the architect. In fact, architecture and museums of that type (the current trend) can only accommodate art of that type too, theatrical, monumental and conceptual, art that reflects the ego of the artist more than the necessity of art. Of course, such art and such architecture are popular with tourists and they operate as magnets for those interested in entertainment, in spectacle, over contemplation.

I mentioned in “The Classical Esthetics” chapter that one the most popular architectural conceit found in China today consists in the perverse quoting of Ancient Greek orders. Taking a trip through Chinese cities, one finds numerous examples of buildings of all types adorned with columns, porticoes and pediments. One even finds skyscrapers, office towers and large condo complexes, multi storied, 30 to 50 stories tall, crowned with Greek columns and the pretensions of faux Greek temples. The orders of Greek architecture, as it was the case for Greek Attic pottery, are instantaneous and clear signs of elegance, refinement and sophistication, in a direct lineage with an ideal, utopian age. They represent for everyone, everywhere, constancy and continuity, stability, power and strength and they carry an overall implication of status and hierarchy. Quite simply, they are, universally, the most obvious sign for culture and for civilization that we have. The eternal forms of Greek architecture and Greek pottery, probably the most successful designs ever, in term of dispersion and permanency anyway, do not change much, if at all, with time and even space, since they quite simply do not need to change. Their shapes, be they column or vase, are perfectly performing the task for which they are destined,

whether it is practical, symbolic or esthetic or simply stylistic and iconic, as familiar sign for stability and constancy. They are a rather rare example in the history of design, of styles, of forms that remain the same, basically unchanged, with very little variation, if any, over such a long period of time, roughly 3,000 years and counting.

Contemporary examples:

While not being directly a building per se, the various space shuttles used by NASA for the exploration of space are nonetheless connected to architectural ceramics by being covered on their underside by refractory ceramic tiles that diffuse the high heat created by friction during reentry into earth's atmosphere. We also call these spaceships "vessels", as we do other ships as well, and the use of this term "vessel" is a very interesting example of its polyvalence as a term that can have so many different, yet complementary meanings. Anyway, if it were not for this protective covering of ceramic tiles, the space vessel would disintegrate and burn on the return journey. This unfortunate event happened recently when just a few tiles of the shuttle Columbia were loosened up and lost during lift off, which caused the loss of the vessel and its crew on its return from space.

The specific esthetic and material properties of ceramics are being rediscovered by architects everywhere and many new buildings use the extraordinary potential of bricks, tiles and other ceramic surfaces to integrate structural needs with visual, esthetic effect of great beauty and richness. A great example is the Sydney Opera House in Australia, designed by Danish architect Jorn Utzon and built in the early sixties. Its distinctive and iconic sail-like structure (the roof is the wall, and vice-versa) is covered with shiny white and matt cream glazed ceramic tiles that glow in the sun. The subtle chevron pattern is composed with 1,056,006 tiles! Ceramic was used for this purpose, as it is largely self-cleaning. The tiles were actually made in Sweden and shipped all the way to Australia. When I first saw the Sydney Opera House I was as surprised to find this somewhat unusual yet logical use for ceramic tiles, as I had been with the ceramic nature of the Great Wall of China. Another example of the limitation of photographic or mediated experiences and of the general silence found in the literature about these extraordinary uses of ceramics in architecture.

During the 20th Century, with the hegemony of Modernism in architecture, ceramics as a material was not very often used, if we make abstraction of the fact that cement and

glass, two of the preferred materials (with steel) of modernist architecture, are also, technically, ceramic materials. In the 19th and early 20th Centuries, glazed ceramic coverings, often imitating marble or other stones, were very often used to clad the whole exterior of buildings. This also brought the cost of construction down significantly over using actual stone. These glazed “terracotta” panels first appeared on buildings in the late 19th Century, in Chicago, after the great fire in 1871. It was discovered then that a layer of bricks or ceramic tile panels would protect structural iron beams from heat and fire. By using molds and casting to make architectural ceramic coverings, multiples of the same complex modeling could be easily reproduced and a small number of molds could provide a complex decorative program of columns, window treatments, decorative elements and even sculptural additions. This use of glazed ceramics for buildings also provided esthetic possibilities of color and texture not available or possible with other materials. Three million glazed bricks were made to cover the exterior of the Chrysler Building in 1930. The exceptional resistance of ceramics to weather, to rain, snow as well as the resistance of ceramic colors to light are all important advantages to this quasi universal use of ceramics in architecture prior to Modernism, a use that is presently being revived. In Vancouver, Canada, the best examples are the Marine Building and the Bay department store, both downtown.

Recent developments in large scale tiles as well as new methods of surfacing and glazing ceramics made possible by computer generated printing processes, both 2D and 3D, will provide exciting new possibilities for the development of this unique potential for ceramics to integrate with architecture again in the future.

The Otsuka Ohmi Ceramics Co. factory in Shigaraki, Japan, has developed and patented a method to cast and fire very large ceramic tiles (1 by 2 meters or even more) of a size and with physical properties not possible before, and that can be used to cover rapidly and easily the interior and exterior of large, high-rise buildings. As a demonstration tool and as a public relation, advertising strategy, the factory also uses its ceramic tiles to reproduce incredibly faithful and believable copies of important Western, European works of art, notably paintings by the Impressionists and modern masters. Using photographic, printmaking and digital processes as well as some hand retouching, a faithful reproduction of the original is recreated on a ceramic tile, then framed and exhibited in a museum specifically built for that purpose. Their most extraordinary achievements are Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper and Michelangelo’s Last Judgment from

the Sistine Chapel, as well as a full-scale reproduction of the whole interior of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel from Padua, Italy. Michaelangelo's frescoed ceiling for the Sistine Chapel is also reproduced life size and on view with 1000 other perfect reproductions of masterpieces of Western Art on ceramic tiles. All these important, seminal works of European and Renaissance art history are reproduced in complete and absolute fidelity and credibility, if it wasn't for the nonetheless subtle grid created by the necessary visual and physical transition between each large tile, for the larger works anyway. Even when observed from a very close distance, it is difficult to perceive that these are but reproductions since they capture visually all the colors but also all the cracks, pits and defects of the originals. These reproductions of fragile, frescoed paintings housed in equally fragile, vulnerable and old buildings, will probably survive the eventual destruction of the originals when they are destroyed by earthquake or fire, or simply crumble with age. Proof of that is that some of these ceramic reproductions found in Japan (the Leonardo, the Michelangelo) are actually permanently installed on the EXTERIOR of the museum (located in Naruto City, Tokushima prefecture), where they are subjected to, yet remain unaffected by rain and snow or wind. They are now impervious to the elements, including time in many ways, by their transfer to the permanency and resilience of ceramics as a physical material, which is ideally positioned to intersect with culture esthetically, structurally but most importantly as an archive of the past, in the present, for the future.

The small chapel church of the Madonna del Bagno built in 1657 in Deruta, Italy, has its interior walls almost completely covered with ceramic ex-votos made and painted by the local ceramic factories workers. They were made to celebrate, commemorate or offer thanks to various saints for their miraculous interventions in specific events in their lives, accidents, sicknesses, etc. Deruta has long been famous for its beautiful maiolica pottery. Some of these maiolica ex-votos and painted tiles date from the Renaissance and they provide all the way to today an uninterrupted, continuous record of the events, dramas, accidents and recoveries and the whole history of the lives of these people engaged in the making of ceramics from generation to generation, a tradition that is still continuing now and hopefully for as long time still.

In France starting in the late 1960's and continuing for a period of 25 years, conceptualist artist Jean-Pierre Raynaud built a large cast cement house that he completely covered inside and out, including all the necessary furniture, the chairs, the

table, the bed, etc., with standard, white glazed, industrial ceramic tiles. The standard, square white ceramic tile is an ideal form that conveys an aura of utopian perfection and industrial efficiency. Its whiteness is clean but also empty, void, innocent and pure. It is untouched, unspoilt, virgin. Its logical organisation as a rigid, predictable and reassuring grid also confirms all these modernist ideals, like the empty, white interior of the standard gallery space, as a conventional sign for the context of art now. It is for these reasons and these effects that Raynaud is using such a material, beyond its obvious functionality, cheapness, ubiquity and ease of use. He financed and funded this elaborate, ambitious project by producing and marketing autonomous ceramic sculptures also based on the use of the same standard white tiles and on the ubiquitous terracotta flower pot. He used both the tile and the horticultural flowerpot as icons for his own practice as well as for their obvious familiarity, accessibility and for their metaphorical potential to embody the nature/culture divide so prevalent in contemporary life. Once this “house” in which he lived during construction was finally completed, he destroyed it completely with a bulldozer, no doubt documenting the gesture, to reaffirm the conceptual nature of his project and the philosophical intentions of his art. In fact, he reused the broken fragments in subsequent art works too.

The American architectural firm SITE has used bricks to similar conceptual intent in a series of iconic buildings for the Best chain of department stores, using the familiar, dismissible, unimportant form of the red terracotta brick. These showrooms and stores for an important retail company all incorporate bricks in the façade and the surroundings of the buildings, each one different from the other in constantly inventive and surprising ways. The series of buildings create a continuous, repeated statement that challenges expectations and promotes recognition for the brand and foster consumerism through this efficient yet unusual form of advertising, while they also contest and critique with subtlety American culture. I suggest the curious reader to Google then and check.

The sport stadium in Soweto, South Africa, is covered with tiles in order to resemble a traditional African pot.

California ceramic artist Robert Arneson, famous for his life long commitment to the self-portrait, has also repeatedly used bricks as a specifically ceramic icon and as a metaphor for both the individual lost within the multitude (a specific aspect of “brickhood”) as well as a sign for culture and history themselves. He has produced

individual bricks stamped with his name, elevating the humble object to the status of art, in order to reaffirm and reestablish individuality and authorship. Like all the rulers of Mesopotamia, from Babylonian times all the way to Saddam Hussein who all stamped with their names all the bricks used in the construction of buildings during their reigns, Robert Arneson inserts himself back into history using the ideal form of the brick and of ceramics as a cultural material to do so. He has also used these bricks to build large life-size self-portrait sculptures that are then broken into pieces and presented as ruins. The naked artist is seen as a broken idol, a deposed despot or ruler whose power has been usurped by others. These “ruined” sculptures represent the artist as fallen hero and are emblematic of our present relation to art and to artists as well as history itself. Like the humble brick, they embody and transmit with specific efficiency the role and importance of ceramics as an intrinsic and indispensable building block of civilization. Rulers, kings and dictators have always felt the need to immortalize their reign for posterity. All over the Middle East, in Saddam Hussein Iraq, in Muammar Khadafi’s Libya, in Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt and elsewhere, in Amadinejad’s Iran, portraits of rulers painted on ceramic tiles are placed on public buildings, where they act as propaganda and where they embody the continuity and permanency of the ideology of the regime. Interestingly enough, this practice of large ceramic portraits of rulers is not found in China or in Korea, where portraits painted on canvas, in an academic, western style are preferred, perversely enough. The ceramic portraits may be eventually broken or replaced by other portraits, newer faces, yet their remnants in shards will nonetheless be passed down on the garbage heap of history, as fragmented witness to a particular time and system.

Recently, ceramic portraits of Ponzi scheme financiers Sir Allen Stamford and Bernard Madoff have found their way for sale, very successfully, on the internet. They too will play a similar historical role, eventually. Tyrants and crooks have always been favorites of history, throughout time.

Other artists, designers and architects to consider:

Friedrich Hundertwasser from Austria, whose architectural fantasies, while being livable, are nonetheless highly fanciful. They always incorporate colorful ceramic tiling, often in elaborate, playful patterns.

The work of British sculptor Rachel Whiteread is also interesting as it materializes absence by turning empty volume into solid mass. Her iconic piece remains “House” from 1993–94, where she filled the interior of a house with plaster to then remove the exterior shell to reveal the empty space inside, now given physical, material presence. Her sculptures are like ghosts, rather morbid specters. She has also captured the absence of books and the interior of libraries, notably for the Holocaust Memorial, in Berlin. I do not believe she has ever done any ceramic works, yet her sculptural work is infused with concepts, like the relation between mass/volume, interior/exterior and processes (reversal, for example) that are intrinsic to ceramics as an art form. The basis for her work is actually an early work by Bruce Nauman, where the American artist gave solid presence to the empty space under an ordinary chair. While Nauman did this work as an experiment that he never repeated or even used subsequently, Rachel Whiteread, in a legitimate conceptual appropriation of her predecessor’s idea, has made a very successful career out of it.

Eladio Dieste is an Uruguayan architect known for his buildings roofed with a thin shell vaulting constructed with bricks and ceramic tiles, cheaper and lighter than reinforced concrete and that do not require ribs or beams. Following an original idea first developed by Gaudi at the end of the 19th Century in Spain, when he built a wavy roof for his design studio, Dieste nonetheless develops this influential approach to the use of bricks in roofs and wall much further and in doing so, he was an innovator. His most iconic buildings with that original method of roofing are the Iglesia Cristo Obrero and a Montevideo shopping mall.

Enric Miralles from Barcelona, Spain, follows in Gaudi’s and Dieste’s examples with his colorful, wavy roof covered in polychrome ceramic tiles for the Santa Catarina market.

In India, Ray Meeker and in Iran, Nader Khalili, both trained, professional architects, have built houses with raw clay and then fired them whole, like giant pots.

On a lighter note, J. Schatz ceramic birdhouse is shaped like a bird’s egg, whose smooth, colorfully glazed exterior surface is not only attractive but also serves to repel predators who could not grab and get a hold on the form, to get to the birds inside, due to the slickness of the material itself, a slickness and slipperiness reinforced by the rounded, bloated egg shape.

Not to forget Picasso's use of the coming together of architecture and ceramics on plates, bowls and dishes painted with arenas where bulls and matadors are depicted. They combine with amazing sophistication the small, intimate and domestic space of pottery with the large, public space of ritual death.

Chapter Ten

HYGIENE: Ceramics and the body

"The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges." Marcel Duchamp.

"The invention of television can be compared to the introduction of indoor plumbing. Fundamentally, it brought no change in the public's habit. It simply eliminated the necessity of leaving the house." Alfred Hitchcock

A short fiction:

This research will never be finished. Like cleaning up (and messing up), there will always be another detail to check, another fact to verify or to add, another insight to articulate, another point to argue.

As an example, I cannot remember where exactly, what was the name of the book or its author, but a friend showed me once, years ago now, an illustrated comic book about an archeologist digging a site on earth, in the very distant future. He had just discovered a new site that he believed to be particularly significant socially and religiously, as an important place for specific rituals in the ancient, forgotten culture he was investigating. He had just found an important, major structure and from the remains of the foundation

and from the artifacts found on site, he could speculate that it was not particularly large since it must have been only one story high, possibly two, at most. It was clearly made up of a series of smaller rooms, about a dozen, all of the same size and shape, all independent from each other, yet connected by a shared wall. Each room was clearly entered by a single door, opening into a courtyard. He deduced that this large courtyard, open and bare, provided a meeting place for the clergy and the faithful, since this was clearly a religious site. Important roads from many directions led to this courtyard and along these roads, more similar structures were also located, about 50 miles from each other, or so. In his opinion, only members of the clergy would be allowed inside the rooms, while the populace would witness the rites from the courtyard outside. This average size room, according to the interpretations and speculations of our archeologist, was just an antechamber, a transition space before accessing a much smaller room beyond, where the important religious rituals took place. These small rooms, all similar yet very special, were certainly the most sacred and holy places in the mythology of the civilization under study. In each small room could be found the same paraphernalia necessary for the rites performed. There was an ablution bowl, where the priests could purify and cleanse themselves and another recipient, of the same material, whose purpose obviously served to make offerings to the deity. This other container was lower, closer to the ground (the god worshipped there must have been connected to the earth, possibly), which permitted the officiants to genuflect and prostrate themselves as they accomplished the sacrament. The small room itself, in contrast to the antechamber, which was bare, was decorated with symbols and signs, on the floor and on the wall, using the same material used for the sacred vessels. The archeologists interpreted this material as particularly significant and important for that culture, specifically at the religious level. This material was obviously fragile, since all the objects found were broken (ritualistically, probably) but also very permanent, since they had otherwise survived for millennia, since the destruction of the temple. Our archeologist remained nonetheless puzzled by the succession of rooms, their consecutive arrangement, all identical, with offering altars and chapels, all connected to the exterior courtyard. He deduced that this permitted for numerous sacrifices to be made, simultaneously by multiple priests for the benefice of the assembled community.

Obviously to us, what our future archeologist was unearthing is but the remnants, the ruins of an ordinary motel, along a motorway, at some point in the future. The sacred chapel with its porcelain altar is just an ordinary bathroom. This may be how the future

will look at our familiar present, and reinterpret the world all around us, in which we presently live. What remains certain, is that ceramics will be at the centre of whatever traces of our passage here has left for interpretation.

The modest, bland, ubiquitous bathrooms, will remain, whether in a motel room or anywhere else, as one of the essential spaces of our culture.

Like the human body itself, pottery forms contain, preserve and excrete solids and liquids, and pots receive the waste the body rejects. Pottery is also part of the cycle of life (and death) sustained by food and pottery functions are closely related to bodily functions. This domestic dimension, of bodies coming in intimate and direct contact with ceramic objects, is still central to ceramics today.

If all visual arts were suddenly to disappear, hardly anyone would notice. Take away all porcelain toilets and civilization, as we know it, would collapse.

Another sort of fiction:

Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain", a ready-made found object (a porcelain urinal) was presented as a work of art in the context of an exhibition at the Armory Show in New York, in 1917. Duchamp believed and stated as such that America's greatest contribution to art and culture were its engineering and plumbing. "Fountain", arguably the most famous art object of the 20th Century is (ironically) a ceramic object, although its nature as ceramics and the implications of that fact are usually ignored, unmentioned, certainly not analyzed or explained in the vast literature on this controversial object, more a conceptual gesture than an actual thing, of course. This is but another example of the invisibility of ceramics in art theory and art discourses. When even a ceramic object defies categorization as ceramics, we can see how the definition of "ceramics" as a term is intrinsically ambiguous and fluid. This difficulty to categorize "Fountain" (and all the other objects it inspired all the way to today, and it is a tremendously influential object) is of course part of its potency. The urinal itself, that gave materiality to "Fountain", was soon discarded, by the artist, after the exhibition and it is probably now resting in some garbage dump somewhere. It went from being worthless, ordinary hardware to become, for a short while, highly controversial art within the context of an exhibition, to return to irrelevant, worthless garbage at the end of the show. I predict that all the numerous art objects it

subsequently influenced will probably succumb to the same fate. Nonetheless, if “Fountain” were ever found, as one of the most important early 20th Century artwork, it would certainly bring untold millions of dollars at auction. Will its present meaning and significance as a seminal icon survive long enough, until the day in the probably distant future when it is finally found and dug out by archeologists? Will it have returned to the status of the lowly ceramic urinal or will it still shock and create controversy or even have any monetary value? Of course, a few reproductions already exist in museums and collections all over the world, since Duchamp himself reissued his artwork as an edition in the early 1960’s, to generate much needed funds in his older, more pragmatic days. Since “Fountain” is arguably the most famous artwork of the 20th Century, then could it be said that Duchamp himself is the most famous ceramic artist of the period, despite the obvious fact that the material he used is completely irrelevant to his dematerialized, conceptual practice? Or is it? All the associations and connotations that the urinal operates, with technology and the modern world, with the human body and its abject functions, with the relation between nature (peeing) and culture (the urinal), with the fact that the object for exclusive masculine use is obviously gendered, all these would not exist if it wasn’t for the familiar and ubiquitous nature of the material itself with which it is made and that provides the emblematic, semantic potency of the thing through implied function. It is interesting and important to note here that despite his reputation as a conceptualist who played a pioneer and seminal role in the dematerialization of art, Duchamp created many important works where the transformation of actual, physical materials, with great skill and savoir-faire, was crucial. Another of his major work that embodied this very fact remains “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelor, Even”, a large stained glass “picture” containing, like all craft objects, multiple references to containers and to containment (the malic molds, the chocolate crusher). So, Duchamp is not only the greatest and most important ceramic artist of the 20th Century, he is also a great craft artist and the best glass artist of the time, since his “Large Glass” is without contest not only the best glass work of the century but possibly the only truly important one as well. This may make the father of conceptual art a double craft artist, in ceramics then in glass, an awkward position for him to occupy considering his status and importance in the art world, where craft practices and craft artists are generally ignored or dismissed and where Duchamp is presented (wrongly) as the antithesis of the transformative maker who uses materials with skill and technique to embody ideas and thoughts. Yet this new identity as a craft artist I am advocating for Marcel Duchamp is totally logical if we consider craft practices to have their

own specific concepts and to be by necessity as conceptual as any other art practices, whether they actually necessitate the use of materials, skills and techniques, or not.

A brief history of...:

There is a branch of Anthropology called Cultural Ecology or Ecological Archeology, which researches the connection between water uses and cultural development. It posits that some ancient civilizations were kept from developing their full potential by a lack of knowledge about irrigation systems and the management of water, as well as the control of waste and refuse; that there is a direct correlation between technological progress regarding sewer systems and the cultural development of civilizations. Ceramics, of course, is at the core of these technological developments. The first remnants of sewers, canalizations for water and actual drainage systems for agriculture are found in the Indus valley culture of 3500 years ago. As communities grew around the development of agriculture, the planting and harvesting of selected crops and the husbandry of animals, towns and cities became ever larger in size and population. This necessitated the need for sanitation practices that were planned and organized. All the waste had to be removed from the living space of animals and humans. Solutions had to be found to dispose of the waste, and if much could be reused in agriculture, it was also necessary to evacuate this unwanted material in order to prevent the contagion of diseases spread by unsanitary practices. Yet, it took a long time for technological developments to happen and the bathroom as we know it is a rather recent development. From 3500 years ago to the middle of the 19th Century, the solutions to sanitation are more or less the same all over the world. If possible, the bodily waste is deposited in ceramic pots, then the night soil collector goes from door to door to collect this refuse and bring it to the outskirts of cities and to the countryside, where it will be used as compost and fertilizer in gardens and fields. This simple yet nonetheless efficient process, as it controls and consumes the substance in a sustainable, economically and ecologically logical manner, instead of returning it to pollute the water supply, can still be witnessed in many parts of the developing world. In the industrial world, we need to occult, erase, ignore and render invisible this essential aspect of human nature by making the whole process disappear as if it didn't exist. This denial of the actuality of shit in the contemporary world has tremendous cultural implication and our culture is infused by the consequences of this denial for which we pay a heavy price.

In antiquity, Olynthis, in northern Greece boasted ceramic tiled bathrooms with bathtubs. These tubs were equipped with drains and could be emptied through underground ceramic pipes. In Knossos, in Crete, in 1700 B.C.E., the palaces and other buildings throughout the city were provided with earthenware sewer pipes laid beneath the corridors. A tapered cylindrical form, thrown on the wheel, that could be fitted smaller end to larger opening, provided the efficient design. Rooftop cisterns also lined with earthenware bricks, collected rainwater, which was used to flush through the terracotta pipes and into the flushing toilets as well.

The solution to dispose of waste requires civic engineering and the stable context of a political system that can finance, plan and supervise such work. When these conditions were met, as they were in the Indus valley, in Mesopotamia, in Egypt and during Roman times, cities are equipped with underground pipes, drains and canalizations that bring water to buildings and with large sewers that then dispose of the waste, bringing it to the nearest flowing water source, that it will then pollute. But, out of sight, out of mind. Most of these engineering water works use fired clay bricks as lining, although they can also be made of stone, of metal like lead (which can contaminate the water and cause poisoning, as it did for the Romans), even hollowed wood, at times. Ceramic water pipes for drainage and irrigation, greatly improving agriculture, were in use in Babylon and in Egypt. Water was also drawn from wells with porous earthenware jars attached to great wheels. Similar water wheels can still be seen today in the Middle East. If the Indus valley civilization is the first to use such a drainage and canalization system, the most advanced developments around water management happened under the Romans who built a vast network of aqueducts and sewers in major cities all over their area of control, which is over most of present day Europe, in the Middle East and North Africa. This effective control and provision of the water supply and of the disposal of used waters greatly contributed to the rise and power of Roman civilization. The Romans also did important work for the drainage of swamps to the south of Rome, to stop the spread of mosquito borne diseases and to create in the process more arable land for agriculture. Ceramic materials and technologies played a critical role in that advantage the Romans had over other cultures at the time. The original aqueducts and canalizations of Rome are still in use today and Rome remains one of the few cities in the world where one can drink potable water directly from public fountains, since the water still comes from the same clean sources deep in the countryside and it is brought to the city with the same aqueducts and canalizations, lined with bricks, as in Roman times. Yet, the expense and complexity of such water

management prevented it to spread quickly and a city like London, for example, will only get a functioning sewer system in the 18th Century, after numerous plagues brought about by unsanitary practices in the evermore crowded city, forced the authorities to act. Again, this important network of tunnels and sewers all lined with bricks and vitrified, glazed stoneware drains and pipes (salt glazed, actually) are still in use today.

It is Henry Doulton (1820–97), the great ceramic manufacturer, who improved this system by developing and using salt-glazed vitreous stoneware for the task. Effluence travels more efficiently through non-porous, smooth, vitrified stoneware and the enclosed, underground system greatly improves sanitation for the citizens as well as providing improvement to the smell of the air in cities. Improved and built in 1840, the current sewer system of London is primarily made of ceramics and it is still in use today, in perfect condition, and probably will be for a long time still.

Toilets and Bathrooms:

In fact it is to the British that the most important technological advances in sanitation are due with the invention of earliest example of the water closet (the Romans had already explored the idea under emperor Vespasian, in the 3rd Century) by Sir John Harrington, in 1596. In his book “A New Discourse on a Stale Subject...”, the hero, Captain Ajax, invents the flush toilet and the book includes diagrams, instructions, a material list and costs. Although no one at the time believed the premise that a fouled environment caused diseases, Harrington nonetheless built an actual toilet for Queen Elizabeth at her Richmond Palace. His design was later perfected into the flushing porcelain water closet (what the French call a WC) as we know it today, by Alexander Cummings in 1775. The U-bend stink trap was then incorporated in a ceramic toilet in 1782 by potter John Gaitland. But it is not until 1851 that the first public toilet is installed, for the visitors to the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace, in London.

Thomas Crapper (1836–1910), whose name is often associated with the toilet itself, is wrongly credited as the inventor of the flushing toilet. He simply improved on it, by patenting the floating ballcock that controls the level of water in the tank. Trained as a plumber himself, he was instrumental in promoting sanitary wares through the concept of the bathroom fittings showroom, which greatly helped in increasing their popularity. The porcelain toilet as it is universally found and used today is the direct descendant of these

19th Century British advancements. Porcelain is the ideal material for this purpose; it is cheap to produce, very strong and resistant, and its smooth, white, glassy surface represents cleanliness itself, yet it actually is easier to clean thus more sanitary than other materials could possibly be. Laboratory wares used in scientific experiments are, for the same reasons, most often made of glass or of white, clean, sturdy, sanitary and inexpensive porcelain. Glazed pottery (and a sink, a bathtub or a toilet are just variations on pottery forms), greatly contributed in advancement in sanitation and for the control of bacteria and other infectious diseases agents. As we have seen in the previous chapter on food, the glazing of ceramic dishes and utensils also greatly contributed to the control of infectious diseases borne by food contaminated by bacteria.

Porcelain toilets also provide the opportunity for interesting forms and shapes and their surfaces, inside and out can be painted and decorated in various ways; in Victorian times, floral motifs tend to dominate, for their imaginative association with pleasant odor and fragrant smell. Very interesting examples of these heavily decorated toilets from the 19th Century (in the 20th Century and under the influence of a purist approach to simple form, truth to function, truth to material ideology of Modernism, the fashion disappears) can be admired in numerous (interestingly enough) toilets museums, all over the world. In fact, bathrooms have a long history and large pots were specifically made by the Minoans to serve as bathtubs and in Crete at that time too, “toilets” had a lid made with a fired clay slab. In fact most cultures have specific ceramic vessels used for the expulsion and collection of human bodily waste, and their form usually refer, by necessity, to human anatomy and bodily functions. Quite often they are quite funny as well or even used as the source for jokes and tricks. Such a chamber pot, an example among many, carries the motto: “Keep me clean and use me well, and what I see I will not tell”. George Ohr made many chamber pots that already contained a ceramic turd attached to the interior bottom so that it would be impossible to remove. He would sell those as novelties in fairs and other such events. The scatological connection in ceramics is double, first at the level of the material itself, clay, which looks and behaves like shit, and at the level of form, through so many ceramic objects made specifically for sanitary purposes.

In spa towns all over Europe, the sick would go on cures to take care of various diseases, often related to stomach ailments and digestive problems. This kind of water therapy included the taking of baths in the curative waters as well as the ingestion of the medicinal water in specialized utensils, often made of porcelain. At Karoly Vary in the

Czech Republic, a special ceramic cup is designed with a handle that doubles as a spout acting as a straw, through which one can aspire the bubbly water, in order to preserve the water's carbon dioxide, essential to its curative qualities.

Notes on kitsch:

Most of the ornamental and heavily decorated Victorian toilets and bathroom fixtures would readily fall for us now in the category of “kitsch”, as expression of particularly bad taste. Novelist Milan Kundera in his novel “The Unbearable Lightness of Being”, a story taking place in a spa town in Czechoslovakia, in a place very much like Karoly Vary, develops one of the chapter of his book around the concept of “kitsch”. I simplify here his central argument that “kitsch is the absolute denial of shit” and that this denial of shit is central to contemporary culture. We surround ourselves with kitsch in order to deny and suppress the degenerated and abject physical nature of our bodies. This denial of bodily functions as embodied by toilets and bathrooms and the quick removal of all traces of the process as quickly, efficiently and permanently as possible, illustrates this point. It is also evident that ceramics has made great contributions to kitsch, in all the knick-knacks it endlessly produced, now fortunately largely replaced by plastics. It is an interesting coincidence that the rise of kitsch in culture parallels the development of the modern bathroom, of modern design and of modern art. Clement Greenberg analyzed this relationship in his important essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, in 1939. Now, many contemporary artists working in ceramics, as we will see, make anti-kitsch works that not only acknowledge shit but also embody the effects of excretion, of metaphorical bodily functions, as transferred into clay, as a material that is ideally suited for this very purpose.

The relation of ceramic materials and ceramic as an art form is fraught with difficulties in expressing that connection. Improper or inappropriate subject matter cannot be avoided. At the scatological level, clay is like shit, it is base, primal, dirty yet also fertile and generative too.

On myths and mythology:

There is also another particular aspect to investigate between ceramics and mythology. Both relate to the specific nature of clay as a plastic substance and its connection to dirt and excrement. This scatological aspect of clay is reinforced not only by

its appearance, color and tactile qualities, but also by its commonality, its availability and cheapness, its crudeness as well as its domestic nature as it relates to food primarily but also, and importantly here, to bodily functions. After all, the bathroom itself is an almost completely ceramic space with all of its furniture having ceramic references (even if not being always made directly with clay), from the sink, to the toilet, to the enameled bathtub, all the way to the glazed ceramic tiles and mosaics covering floor and walls. The bathroom is, within the specific context and concepts of ceramics, a true example of a site-specific installation.

I will defer here again to anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who wrote important essays investigating the relationship of ceramics and pottery to mythology and to develop further some ideas first examined in the food chapter. He writes:

“At the same time as the function of fire becomes double (it cooks food and cook pots in which food will be cooked), there emerges a dialectic of internal and external, of inside and outside: clay, congruent to excrement CONTAINED in the body, is used to make pots CONTAINING food, which will be CONTAINED in the body, who relieving itself, ceases to be the CONTAINER of excrement”.

While it is now the clay pot, the toilet, that contains the excrement and these excrements, in contact with the ground that they fertilize, become food again, which becomes excrement, which becomes clay which become pots, and the whole circular system continues endlessly. Levi-Strauss adds:

“Clay and excrement coincide with the starting point of two cycles, namely the technological and the psychological”.

It is in this double relation to clay and ceramics in relation to bodily functions that the human mind addresses both technological and psychological issues. If the technological aspects of ceramics are readily accepted and understood, the psychological implications of pottery and ceramics are less obvious or even generally considered. At the Amsterdam airport, an experiment in behavioral economics and psychology is taking place. A realistic fly has been added as a ceramic decal fired into each porcelain urinal, at the bottom, near the drain. We know that men like to aim and kill things. Since putting “flies” into the urinals, spillage as fallen by 80%, reducing the need for cleaning the floor

and the cost of maintenance significantly. This is an example of a “nudge” in design, a harmless bit of engineering that attracts people’s attention and alter their behavior in a positive way without actually requiring anyone to change their habits at all.

On Openings and Passages:

Many historical or contemporary pots meant either for display or as vicarious, pictorial representations of pots, will have an opening at the bottom instead of the top, where it is usually expected. I am thinking specifically of the work of Leopold L.Foulem and Richard Milette, but also of Wouter Dam and Barbara Nanning, who use this principle for formal aims, and many others. The hole at the base or through these pots not only denies function, but it reinforces through denial the idea of the enclosed volume, one of the operative concepts at work in these objects. In a pottery form, when there is an opening at the top (where it is expected) and at the bottom as well, the interior volume is transformed from a container to a passage and the superior opening acts as a mouth while the inferior one becomes an anus. This passage is reminiscent of the digestive system, the pipes, drains and tubes of the scatological impulse. In ancient Greek funerary pottery, especially for large amphorae displayed as offerings and as effigy on tombs, often the bottom of the vessel is open or pierced. This removed the possibility that they be stolen and used in a practical, functional context but it also extended their usefulness as markers and effigies, by providing for the easy drainage of water that may otherwise have collected inside, which would have caused the pot to break during a frost.

According to Sigmund Freud, there is also a direct, implicit connection between excrement and gold, and gold surfaces are an intrinsic part of much kitsch stuff, particularly in ceramics. Contemporary uses of gold in ceramics often make that connection, implicitly or explicitly, intuitively or deliberately. Freud states that: “excrement and gold are part of the same cycle, caught between retention and expenditure”. In Los Angeles, in the 1980’s Martin Tang made a series of porcelain plates with attached gold covered porcelain turds in the middle of each dish, combining explicitly ceramics and kitsch, excrement and gold, and the cycle analyzed by Levi-Strauss.

Thus, interesting connections with basic matter and primary transformation are made by the scatological nature of clay and the special (and specialized) role played by ceramic objects in food preparation, absorption and rejection. Beyond these connections,

ceramic objects and human bodies remain basically interchangeable at the metaphorical level, but also through semantic analogies between form and parts, openings and passages. Ceramic objects are extensions of human bodies as well (the first porcelain teeth were made in Paris, in 1774). Pottery forms are representations, abstractly, of human bodies. Through touch and direct contact, they are also intimately experienced by bodies and their inherent functions mimic as well as support bodily functions. This emphasis on tactile experience, on physical touch, is an essential phenomenological aspect of clay as a material and of ceramic objects as well.

Contemporary examples:

In the recent past, a large number of ceramic artists, following somewhat in Duchamp's footsteps, have used sanitary and hygienic references in their work. There has been a resurgence notably of toilets and urinals, and bathroom installations, but also a reinvestigation of the metaphorical potential of hot water bottles, feeding bottles, nursing bottles, chamber pots and condom containers, as well as a wide variety of sexual tools and toys. These ceramic objects are often used in large installation pieces or as props in performances and video works. The use of these kinds of objects to serve as images, as signs for various social and political issues, often around gender roles and identity politics, is emblematic of contemporary culture and is found elsewhere outside ceramics as well. Yet ceramic materials and ceramic objects, in their particular historical references as well as their familiarity and accessibility, are ideally positioned to tackle these issues head on and provide meaningful, relevant, essential commentary on various aspects of life today.

A pioneer in these investigations is, once again, California ceramic artist Robert Arneson. In a series of shocking and very gutsy "funk" bathrooms, toilets and urinals of the early 1960's, the artist explores and challenges our relationship to ugliness and bad taste by presenting these disturbing, offensive and depreciated objects in an abject, dirty, scuzzy environment that reinforces their potency. Of course, these are all now in important museum collections, yet their disruptive power has not abated. Despite the earlier example of Marcel Duchamp, whose cerebral, distant conceptual approach diffuses the abject, repulsive nature of the urinal, by shifting its position in space and presenting it as a pure, sublime form, Arneson's visceral, scatological and anthropomorphized bathrooms, visibly tactile in their making, are exploring the polar side of this material as a

serious subject for the investigation of art. Their embrace of the abject, of ugliness and the discomfort they celebrate make a clear anti-kitsch statement that reverses Kundera's aphorism. In Arneson's work, an example among many, shit is the absolute denial of kitsch. John de Fazio in his investigation of the relationship between shit and death, and many others, followed suit.

New York artist Ann Agee's ceramic works provides a commentary on bodily fluids that is directly related to our occulted and ambiguous rapport with the ceramic elements and objects present in our bathrooms. Her "Lake Michigan Bathroom", made in 1992 at the Kohler factory in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, captures these ideas around bodily functions, cleanliness, hygiene, pollution and industrial waste. She represents all these aspects on the ceramic furniture and the large wall tiled panel that constitute her "installation", and the potent and somewhat unexpected images are surrounded by more predicable (therein lies their efficiency), floral and decorative patterns in tasteful blue and white. The work examines all the familiar gestures and the innocent, unconsidered space where these acts take place and what follow suits in the ecology outside the bathroom. This beautiful and powerful work represents a subtle yet efficient critique of the bathroom as a space for the making and confining of uncomfortable and disturbing realities, here clearly brought to full visibility. This is something feminist artist Judy Chicago also explored previously in her "Menstrual Bathroom", at Woman's House in Los Angeles in 1972.

Another New-York artist who made important work at the Koehler artist residency is Matt Nolen. While working at the factory he was commissioned to design and create a full set of urinals and a tiled wall for the Men's Bathroom at the Koehler Art Centre, where it remains, on display and in use. His bathroom is designed around "The Social History of Architecture" and the intensely colored, patterned and inscribed surfaces of the urinals and walls clearly contest the slickness and cleanliness of the all white and familiar public bathroom while they also incorporate various images around issues of masculinity, machismo and the expectations of men in social environments. I wonder how the patrons feel when they have to be confronted with such critical content as they relieve themselves directly on the elaborate and rather confrontational, critical artwork.

All the diverse and numerous bathrooms at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center have been designed by artists while in residency at the factory. Ann Agee is responsible for the "Sheboygan's Men's Room", Cynthia Consentino for "The Atrium, Women's Room", Merrill

Mason for the “East Women’s Room– Emptying and Filling”, Carter Kustera for “The Family Room– Tell Me Something I Don’t Already Know” and Casey O’Connor for the pre-school convenience “Childhood Vitreous”. Please check the website for the Arts Centre to find out more about this impressive ensemble.

A younger generation of women artists is continuing in this tradition. Kim Dickey 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 “intensifying the relationship between user and object”. These are meant to fit the female body and when inserted between the legs, enable a woman to pee standing up. They are politicized contemporary reinterpretations of the 18th Century bourdalou, a specially made type of porcelain vessel used in church at Versailles for the relief of women during the too-long sermons of a long-winded preacher, Abbe Bourdalou. Kim Dickey writes: “ the theatrical aspect of my work has led me to document my pieces ‘in action’ or ‘in situ’ through photography and video, which allows their suggestive qualities to be realized and encourages an interaction with the work that is necessary to its understanding”. Its documentation in use by photography “suggests intimacy and the function of the vessel...the mediation places the viewer at a further distance from the events and objects, emphasizing our ambiguous relationship to real acts and physical touch”. This reference to touch is central to Kim Dickey’s work since her preferred mode of construction is the assemblage of pinched clay forms, often shaped to refer vaginal, organic forms.

Comparable ideas are present in the work of Tsehai Johnson, but in a more readily functional context. Her “Condom Dispenser and Receptacle for Used Condoms”, 2000, is a complementary pair of elegantly sensual and sensuous vessels for the containment, in two states, before and after use, of the ubiquitous and necessary prophylactics. She writes: “ I do not want to ignore the potentially abject aspects of disposing of a used condom. The receptacle is removable from the wall, so it is very necessary to touch the used condom or the fluids contained therein...I believe that personal habits must be marched out of the realm of privacy and into the world of public acceptability”. The formal qualities of shape and surfaces of these objects, successfully bring the more private and hidden bathroom esthetics into the somewhat more public bedroom space.

The worldwide phenomenon of ceramic art residencies, a phenomenon that is very important in the ceramics world and almost exclusive, to that degree anyway, to ceramics

as a art form, has been particularly helpful in permitting artists to expand on their practice. When these residencies happen in an industrial context, as is often the case like it is at Kohler in Wisconsin, at the largest sanitary wares factory in the world, the results, as they relate to hygiene can be particularly revelatory.

New York artist John de Fazio has taken advantage, like many others before or since, of the Kohler residency, in a complex series of toilet and urinal sculptures and installations. In his work, the notion of base materialism of ceramics (dirt, clay, junk, shit, etc.) is central. His work also often uses xerography for a similar reason, as it is “perfect in its inherent gesture of populist communication and appropriation, as well as for its patina of esthetic poverty”. The artist is very aware that his ceramic objects are the materialization of contemporary myths and that they might very well eventually become archeological artifacts, revealing to future generations the present state of our consciousness, not necessarily the one that most people would want to transmit. In doing so, the anarchic and contentious impulses of the artist and of the work itself are mitigated by an uneasy positivism.

New York artist and industrial designer Marek Cecula is another ceramist who has absorbed and regurgitated the lessons of Marcel Duchamp, particularly with his “Scatology” series of 1993, an edition of six sets of six pieces, made at the European Ceramics Work Center in S’Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands. The artist writes that his work: “explores our paramount fear of death coming together with puritanical, obsessive attitudes toward sex and bodies, especially today in the midst of the AIDS crisis. White glassy porcelain made to fit the body, conveys a contradiction; it is a beautiful, luminescent form and surface which is used to channel and dispose of the dirty, unwanted by-products of our organism”. The forms themselves suggest male and female bodies, orifices and sex while the stainless steel trays remind us of the clinical sterility of laboratories and hospitals, and the fear of sicknesses and the degradation of the body they engender. Similar ideas are also further developed in the series “Hygiene” of 1995–96, with the porcelain vessels acting simultaneously as substitute for bodies and as possible sheeting for flesh, emphasizing the direct connection between bodily functions and the evacuation of the resulting matter through porcelain bowls, pipes and drains. In Cecula’s work, these processes are directly connected to the making of the forms themselves, especially with the “Scatology” series. In these works, in order to generate the basic form that will then be cast to make the porcelain objects, the artist made a

depression, a hole, a negative shape, by digging his hands into wet sand. The holes left by his hands were then filled with liquid plaster to create the starting point for the models for the forms. It is very significant that these objects are not created deliberately, with the mind and the eye, but that their original form begins strictly as a tactile sensation.

Such a vicarious or actually tactile experience is critical to the understanding and appreciation of these kinds of works. Contemporary philosophy and critical theory are both invested greatly in the reconciliation of all the senses in their attempt to propose new and all encompassing ways to understand reality. A new field of art history and art theory called “Relational Aesthetics” is particularly interested in this relation between real experiences and the experience historically assigned to art and artworks. Relational aesthetics wants to extend the esthetic experience beyond the purely visual in order to engage the whole human body in relation to its environment. Ceramics has a particularly important and efficient role to play in works based on such a relational aesthetics. Yet, sight and the eye, still remain largely central to contemporary discourses and practices (all mediating technologies and other forms of image making). This partly explains why practices that rely on touch, both in their materialization and their experience, remain fundamentally misunderstood and ignored in a world where the complacency of entertainment culture, in art or anywhere else, is endlessly feeding us more images to consume, then throw away, to be replaced by others, equally disposable.

The whole world has become one giant toilet.

Other artists to consider:

Jennifer Woodland, Indre Ror, Jen Woodin and Systema Somatica, Denise Pelletier, Sinta Werner in collaboration with Markus Wuestre, Cariston Johansson, Alex Schweder, Joshua Davis and Commonwealth, Damian O’Sullivan pro-esthetics, Susan Fagermo, Paul Scott, Babak Golkar, Clark Sorensen, Droog Design, Karim Rashid, JSPP Studio in Eindhoven, Philip Watts spoon urinal and Eleonora Chiari and Sandra Goldschmild’s toilet that plays the Italian National Anthem while flushing and made for the Group Therapy Show in Bolzano, Italy. I may add Paul Mathieu’s “Bathroom Gestures” tiles as well.

The bathroom as a whole has been rethought and redesigned by numerous designers recently, usually to stress its cleanliness and slickness through an emphasis on

reductive form and exquisite taste, in a continuation of the prescriptions of Modernism, much in contrast to the work of contemporary ceramic artists, which more directly challenge and contest issues of style and taste so prevalent in Design.

Chapter Eleven

TEXT: Speaking Volumes; Pottery and Words

“Writing’s main function is to facilitate the enslavement of humans”, Claude Levi-Strauss.

Writing this on my computer, a tool invented by the devil on a very good day, I truly understand what he means...

The relationships between ceramics and text, pottery and words are very old and very new. These relationships may not be too obvious at first but it is my intent here to show that there is a very intimate connection between clay and language, ceramics and the written text, pottery and words and that this symbiosis between the two cultural phenomena is very ancient and profoundly meaningful. Much has been made of the use of words and text in art and in contemporary culture, especially now with new media technologies, but this has always been true of ceramic objects, since the very beginning of recorded history. This fact is not often acknowledged or even well known, by most, even within ceramics itself.

The earliest examples of ceramic objects related to language and writing are the clay tokens from Mesopotamia, dating from 8000 B.C. E. These tokens were part of an accounting system used in exchange and commercial transactions. These clay tokens were

used for thousands of years before graphic signs for numbers or even accounting were invented. Yet they played a significant and important role in the invention and discovery of numbers and letters, of mathematics and writing, and this is not always acknowledged, as it should. Each little round clay ball represented a unit of merchandise, i.e. a sheep, a measure of grain, etc. Around 3700 B.C.E., these tokens were enclosed in hollow clay spheres called bullas, and kept in archives. Their use is rather interesting. When merchandise was moved, a bulla containing tokens representing the quantity of goods (say 10 sheeps), was given to the transporter. When the merchandise was delivered, the recipient would break the bulla to make sure that the correct amount of sheep was delivered to him and none was lost in transit. By 3500 B.C.E., impressions are made on the outside of the bullas to represent the tokens, also called calculi, contained inside. For this reason, the bullas themselves became quickly obsolete, and similar impressions appear on clay tablets instead. By 3000 B.C.E., these pictographs are simplified into cuneiform, angular signs made by pressing the wedge-shaped edge of a split reed into the fresh clay. Thus cuneiform developed during the 3,000 years it was in use; from a sign first incised in the clay, to signify the content of the envelope, then later impressed instead, to leave softer edges and to speed the process of writing; these symbols came to denote things, then numbers, then abstracts concepts, sounds and syllables. Thus a graphic sign for “sheep” is progressively abstracted until it represents a code for “sheep”, then the sound for the word “sheep” and then simply the phonetic and alphabetical aspects. It is through such a process that ceramic materials and technologies are at the very beginning of both mathematics and writing. The fact that ceramic materials, ceramic processes and ceramic technologies are at the origins of both writing and mathematics as elaborate, codified and transmissible systems, is one of the proudest claim it can make for its contribution to world culture, actually.

Writing was first invented to record business activities, and the overwhelming majority of cuneiform texts were written on clay tablets. Not all of these tablets were baked or fired, only those meant for permanent record. The advantage is that unfired clay tablets can be reused, remoistened and altered. Most of the tablets that survived were originally unbaked: but many were fired when the archive, the “library” where they were kept was eventually burned down and the record was thus buried in the charred remains of the building where they remained until their discovery by archeologists. Clay was the ideal material for the preservation of these texts, some of which hold the earliest examples of poetry and fiction. It is believed that some texts were written on bark paper,

which eventually was completely destroyed. For the Mesopotamians, the idea of a permanent record was very important. Early Mesopotamian cuneiform was thought to be the world's first written language, followed closely by similar developments in Egypt, but recent discoveries show that the Indus valley script, also found on clay tablets in the city of Harappa emerged independently at the same time. A 7000 years old stone tablet from Bulgaria also seem to bear carvings that may turn out to be the world's oldest inscription. Other contenders are three clay tablets that have recently been discovered at a site in Tartaria, Romania; they were produced by the Neolithic Vinca culture around 4000 B.C.E., which may push the earliest date for written inscriptions in ceramics back by a thousand years, if they eventually happen to be proven to be texts, written and readable forms of speech.

In Mesopotamia, the achievements of rulers were inscribed on clay prisms or clay "nails", often inserted in the structure of buildings. To this day, this practice continues in Iraq. Saddam Hussein had his name and accomplishments written on the bricks used on all public buildings constructed under his rule as well as on all the reconstructions of historic buildings and sites executed during his rule. This is also true for all other preceding rulers of Iraq before him. Thus a record of construction, repair and reconstruction of major buildings is embedded within the building itself, sometimes over millennia. I wonder if the Americans are following this practice too, a practice that has been continuous for thousands of years! This makes me think of all those bricks made by California ceramic artist Robert Arneson with his name stamped on them. He will probably be thought to have been a very important ruler by future archeologists, one day.

Writing is the most essential discovery of humankind after the still more ancient discovery of fire, and both are closely related to ceramics as an art form, as well as to the contribution ceramics has made to the development of civilization and world culture. If the origin of the alphabet and numbers, of writing and mathematics, is closely related to clay and ceramics, it is interesting to note that ceramics itself as a technology becomes mature at the same time as these intellectual developments, with the invention of the wheel, of kilns and of the first glazes. This part of the world that we now call the Middle East not only gave us the earliest written texts, both also saw the birth of pottery and of ceramics as a refined technology. The Sumerians of Mesopotamia taught us to read and to write as well as to count, to live in cities, to make pots on the wheel and to use the wheel for transportation, and also some aspects of our political systems. An early use of written text

is the 4000 years old code of Urnammi, the oldest set of recorded laws, preserved on clay tablets.

Most texts from Mesopotamia were of a commercial nature, statements of accounting and transactions, or they celebrated the military or civic accomplishments of rulers. But as tends to be so often the case, the most moving and informative objects are those related to the daily life of ordinary people with whom we can readily relate. Numerous incantation bowls were made, painted on their interior with drawings of devils and spirits and inscribed with cast spells meant to ward off evil. They were positioned face down to imprison the evil meant to be contained and neutralized, inside, who then couldn't escape through the rigid earthenware wall of the bowl. One also finds letters written on pots or shards, an example consists of a message from a mother to her dead son asking for his help and support from the afterlife. Many examples of these are in the British Museum or the Louvre. Another small bowl from the Louvre, dating from Egypt in 592 B.C.E. is written in cursive demotic, which was the written form of ordinary people and everyday affairs, the hieroglyphic being reserved for official and religious documents. Also, papyrus being rare and expensive, ordinary people, through scribes probably, used shards or discarded pots to write on. For that reason alone, many of their texts were preserved for us. The use of clay and the firing process might also have served some magical purpose to guarantee the efficiency of the spell cast or the permanency of the contract signed. This little Egyptian bowl reads as follows:

"Year 4, second summer month, 20th day under Pharaoh Psammetique, the lady Djetourisphaonkh, daughter of Nesmhat declares to Amenopouh: You have fulfilled my heart with money for which I become your servant. No other man in the world can reclaim me but you. I will not be able to consider myself a private independent person toward you, until I have reimbursed all money, all grain, any other thing in the world, including the children that will be born of me, with all that I own and everything I shall produce, with the clothes on my back, from this day of the year 4, second summer month, from now and forever."

This very simple and ordinary thrown and fired clay bowl, this simple domestic object is also a record of life enslavement for debt.

Egyptian script was long thought to be as old as the Sumerian, both about 5000 years old. But new discoveries of pots in cemeteries have inscriptions that appear to be older than Sumerian. The debate continues.

A very different object is the Phaistos disk found in Crete. This 3600 year-old fired clay disk is impressed with 241 pictogram seals, and it holds the earliest known example of printing. Covering both sides are sixty-one “words” separated by lines and arranged in a spiral form. This Cretan system of writing and printing is yet undeciphered. So not only does writing find its origin in ceramics, but printing as well, as is the case in China too, a few millennia later. The Phaistos disk is a unique object and no other printed text from that time and that culture has been found and the original stamps to print it have not been found either. Printing on clay probably did not come into current use because clay is clumsier and heavier than paper, and printing on clay offered few advantages over writing by hand, like the example offered by cuneiform. The Cretan disk shows a syllabism with more signs, of more complex forms than the Roman alphabet of later times. Maybe someday, its text will be accessible but its mystery remains whole for now. It is interesting to note that the next effort at printing will happen in China, 2500 years later and in Medieval Europe, 3,100 years later only. Today, printing is everywhere and we could not conceive of communication otherwise, but that may not last forever either.

The oldest Greek text preserved is inscribed on a ceramic cup. It reads: “I am Nestor’s delicious drinking cup. Whoever drinks from this cup swiftly, will the desire of fair Aphrodite size him”. Another inscription from around the same time, 740 B.C.E., is scratched on a clay wine jug; it is a line of poetry announcing a dancing contest: “Whoever of all dancers performs most nimbly will win this vase as a prize”. The earliest Etruscan and Roman texts preserved are also inscriptions on earthenware wine cups and wine jars. A Pompeian wine jar from Roman times is inscribed with the word “Visuvinum” which is a word play which combines Vesuvius and “vinum”, the mountain where the wine was made and the word for wine in Latin. It is the first instance of branding and marketing we have in culture, again, on a ceramic object.

Greek vases too are often inscribed with text, usually the names of the represented figures painted on the pots, but also unrelated elements like homage to young athletes to whom the vase might have been presented as a gift or as a prize. These inscriptions complimenting the youth on his beauty often help in dating the vase since these

celebrated boys often became important civic figures later on and we can match their names with other dated records. These Greek vases are often signed by the potter who made them and/or by the painter who decorated them, at times the same person. We find vases inscribed “so and so made me” to refer to the potter, or “so and so painted me” to refer to the painter. A few vases are inscribed as having been made and painted by the same person or possibly under the supervision of a studio owner. 19th Century connoisseurship has played a bizarre trick on us by attributing the painting on some vases to a fictional artist referred to as “this potter’s name painter”, the Amasis Painter being a famous example. Many pots are signed by the potter Amasis and all of his production was painted by the same hand which remains anonymous. Instead of attributing the painting on the vase to Amasis himself, who signed the pot as potter, “Amasis made me”, a fictive character called “the Amasis Painter” was created! Amasis himself is thought to have been Egyptian and possibly of African origin, because of his name which is not Greek in origin. It was assumed that the painter had to be another person whose name has been lost to us since the potter couldn’t be the painter as well, despite numerous and celebrated examples to the contrary! The earliest signed Greek vase bears the mark of Sophilos, which makes him the earliest recorded potter in history, and also the first artist to sign his work as art! This aspect of Greek Attic ceramics has been analyzed with more depth in “The Classical Esthetics” chapter.

Another very interesting use of ceramic and text in Greek antiquity is the “ostrakon”. When a citizen had been deemed unworthy for an action or a behavior, other citizens would pick a pottery shard (the meaning of the term “ostrakon”) lying on the ground and inscribe or scratch the name of the offending person on it and depose the piece in a special container reserved for that purpose on the public square, the agora. Ceramic shards were easily found everywhere, discarded all over the place since pottery was the plastic of the time and it was thrown away carelessly everywhere. At public meetings, the shards were counted and if a sufficient number of them held the name of an individual, that person was sent into exile. This practice gave us the word “ostracize”. In Rome and all over the Roman world, tickets for theatrical events or game performances were made of a fired clay token embossed with theatrical masks, which probably meant that the potters who made them could go to the circus for free.

By the first century A.D., we find small, unassuming dishes that are actually Gallo-Roman pottery accounts. These small plates are inscribed by scratching into the clay with

a pointed tool, all the content of the kiln, all the various wares, as it was being loaded. Potters worked in groups and shared firing facilities. Since the work produced was standardized and stylistically homogenous, a record was kept of the number and type of wares loaded in the communal kiln by each potter. This record on a clay plate or dish was then fired with the load. Before unloading, it was retrieved and each potter was given back the same number and type of objects, not necessarily those he had originally produced. Breakage was accounted for, and the loss was spread evenly and proportionately to what the original record showed, inscribed on these small dishes. These inscribed accounting plates are very useful to archeologists and historians to determine the number and type of objects made, the name of individual potters and their number in any given community and they clearly demonstrate economic and social conditions as well as their evolution through time. Few pots themselves survived but lots of these unassuming scratched dishes, which were instantly discarded to the trash pile, can be found on kiln sites all over Roman France.

Recently, a shard of pottery from the 10th Century B.C.E. was excavated in the Judean Hills, in Israel. We know the shard comes originally from a pot due to its distinctive curved shape. It was discovered amid debris on the floor of an excavated house atop a rocky ridge that overlooks the Valley of Elah. The pottery shard is covered with five lines of text written in ink (another example were a shard served as support for a document, in a world where other support for texts were hard to come by). So far the words slave, judge and king have been deciphered by experts, but the whole text remains cryptic. It is hoped that this pottery shard will eventually provide evidence to support biblical accounts that King David ruled over a great kingdom.

All these records on clay objects have been preserved for us, due to the particular physical properties of ceramics and its potential to contain and preserve not only goods and things, but also time and memory itself. Texts on paper, parchment or other perishable materials rarely survived. For example, the Dead Sea Scrolls were written on parchment. Luckily, they were stored inside custom made pottery jars, of a shape and size found nowhere else and sealed under a lid, which certainly greatly helped in their preservation. Otherwise bacteria or rodents, not counting the ravages of weather or light itself, would have long digested or destroyed them. The Qumran jars for the Dead Sea Scrolls were made at a pottery workshop nearby and this helps to ascertain the connection between the scrolls and the Essenes community who made the jars. At Qumran, near

where the jars were found, excavations turned up pottery kilns, whole vessels, production rejects and thousands of clay fragments. Derelict water reservoirs contained thick deposits of fine potter's clay. An elaborate water system appears to have been designed specifically to bring the clay slip to the site for the purpose of pottery manufacturing. No other site in the region has been found to have such a water system. When Qumran was destroyed by the Romans, in 68 C.E., the site had already been a centre for pottery production for at least one hundred years. Inkwells used to write the Dead Sea scrolls were also found at Qumran. They too are of fired clay.

One of the main impetus behind the propagation of writing, beyond the need to enslave humanity, as Levi-Strauss so clearly stated, was the fact that writing also became the main place to seek the divine, and all organized religions have a text at their foundation. The Dead Sea Scrolls, preserved for us in the pottery jars, are testament to this search.

This need to record, preserve and maintain memory through the combined use of pottery and text can also be found on two 6th Century, Anglo-Saxon cremation urns (British Museum). One is marked with inscriptions in runes, recording the personal name of the deceased, while the other has similar markings, yet they only imitate runes since the maker of that urn was illiterate, yet felt the need to appropriate the power of the written word, even if it was only by erroneous imitation, on the funerary object.

Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, one finds countless pots with various inscriptions pertaining to daily life, marriages, births and deaths, celebrations and libations, as well as the names of the maker, of the painter or the person who commissioned the vessel. In European cultures, potters always loved to inscribe their names to their wares, and this is often incorporated as part of the design. In the 17th Century, English potter Thomas Toft wrote his name very prominently on the wide lips of his large slip-trailed platters, to the point where the signature becomes a crucial element of the decoration. Bernard Leach emulated him much later. In Chinese and Asian ceramics, the pots are usually if not always anonymous and the inscriptions, if any, and usually located under the foot, inform us as to the name of the emperor and the reign or dynasty when the object was made. It is only by the 19th Century that some pots will be signed by makers and even then quite rarely. These objects were not seen as the expression or creation of an individual, and they were in fact made by a large number of expert workers,

and this explain why they cannot be attributed to any individual. The practice of making ceramic art from an individual position is quite recent in China. The first potter to sign his name to his work in Japan is Nonomura Ninsei (1648–1690). The practice became quite common after that, even if the signature is often a stamp with a distinctive graphic sign. Italian Renaissance majolica abounds in inscriptions on vessels, mostly gallant messages to beautiful ladies or betrothal promises. The most common ones of course bear the description of contents on apothecary jars found in large quantities in pharmacies and laboratories. A number of other fascinating plates with sexual contents have been illustrated and discussed by Catherine Hess and myself in the book “Sexpots: Eroticism in Ceramics”.

Another example of inscribed majolica can be found in the place that saw the rebirth of that painterly technique at the beginning of the 20th Century in Deruta, Italy. The small church of the Madonna del Bagno (Our Lady of the Bathtub) has interior walls covered with majolica ex-votos dating from the 17th Century to the present. These ex-votos commemorate events in the lives of the local people, most of whom worked in the majolica industries of Deruta. They serve as thanks to God and saints for favors obtained. Examples include exorcisms and a crash between a car and a bicycle. These ex-votos, hundreds of them, offer us a written and visual record, through their various changes, stylistically or otherwise, that took place in Deruta over centuries. I had mentioned as well this little church serving the needs of a pottery town before, in the “Shelter” chapter.

In pre-Columbian America, pots with texts are common in the Mayan and Aztec cultures, the two cultures with literacy in the New World. The Mayan pioneered the use of script and their particular phonetic hieroglyphic system, highly graphic and one of the most esthetically beautiful to be found anywhere, is around 2,600 years old. They then passed that knowledge later on to the Aztecs, much later, just before the Spanish conquest. Mayan pots with glyphs often describe the scene represented on the vessel and give us the names and functions of the protagonists. These glyphs are often found as a band all around the rim. This band is called the “primary standard sequence” and it is the most frequent pictorial element found on Mayan pots. An example would read: “ This happened, the surface and the writing on this vessel for (various uses) was blessed. This vessel was made for the holy lord (various names), who holds many elite titles.” These glyphs around the outside rim of vessels describe the type of vessel, its content, the name of the owner and sometimes the name of the scribe and/or the painter of the image, but

never who actually made it, the potter, although with carved or inscribed vessels the writer and the maker may have been the same individual. Such vessels were used in burials to contain actual food and drink for use in the underworld and the afterlife. Dried, encrusted remnants found in these containers confirm the relationship between inscriptions and contents. Mayan pots also have figures with squiggly lines coming out of their mouths to denote “speech”. There are also pots with incorrect or “faux” writing, perhaps decorated by illiterate potters for their illiterate clients. In Mayan script, the focus is entirely on rulers and their elite retainers. No mention of lower classes! We can only speculate on the status of potters but it is evident that painters and scribes had a high status since they are often represented on pots. Not the slightest hint of economic or mercantile accounts, unlike the cuneiform tablets of the Near East. But another characteristic of Mayan written records is on the emphasis on mathematical calculations of dates and elaborate calendars of cycles and events in the very distant past, their present and the very distant future. This complex relationship to time was central to their cosmology and their religion as well as to the extremely hierarchical nature of society. Genealogies of rulers are also common, particularly on building inscriptions, but these are in stone, since ceramics was never a building material in the Americas, although raw clay was often used. The best examples of Mayan ceramics are from the classic period, until 900 C.E. After that time and until the Spanish conquest, there are few written documents left. It is believed that there was a shift from limestone or ceramics to bark paper, a material more vulnerable to decay and destruction. Presumably, many texts, perhaps even a majority, were once on perishable materials and objects and thus destroyed for posterity. This was certainly the case for many codexes written on paper. They were burned by zealous and misguided missionaries in the 17th Century. Only very few remain now, but we know from historical records that large quantities of these “books” were destroyed, deliberately. It begs the question, what will be left of our culture in the future?

In the “Food” chapter, a section analyses the performative nature of pots and ceramics, in relation to reality, to use, to function and to practicality. This performative and relational aspect of ceramics is also found in the transmission of data, of facts and events, and the transmission of knowledge as well, through the use of scratched, painted, impressed, carved or printed texts on ceramic objects, who can then, behaving as an archive, even if unintentionally, transmit this information through time.

Many other historical objects pertain to drinking and libations. These can be found in most cultures, as far back as the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Greeks and the Romans, as we have already seen, as well as in the Far East. These are inscribed with all sorts of wordplay, jokes, sayings, proverbs and morals. An Isnik tankard from Ottoman Turkey states: "The world is a banquet. If you pass through it and do not see this, you are a fool." Many other inscriptions refer to political events, kings and queens, to the Napoleonic wars, and to military heroes etc. Many great examples are to be found at the V&A, in London. A very interesting example is the seal of the Emancipation Society made by Wedgwood, who was an early supporter and member of that organization, whose aim was to end slavery, at the end of the 18th Century. It was modeled for Wedgwood by William Hackwood and it bears the message "Am I not a man, and a brother" and features the image of a Negro in chain, in black basalt on the white porcelain clay, a very dramatic use of the contrasting clay bodies in silhouette, bringing together formally, in black and white, the conflict between the races. The important and seminal contribution of Josiah Wedgwood to ceramics as well as to world culture in general has been previously examined in "The Industrial Esthetics" chapter.

Another group of amazing domestic wares dealing with contemporary politics can be found in French faience made at the time of the revolution between 1780 and 1800. Most of these wares with captions deal with revolutionary ideals and propaganda slogans, both for the monarchy and for the forces for change. Their great charm comes from their freshness as products of folk potteries with no great pretension. Their freely painted, colorful surfaces are graffiti-like, as if improvised. This improvisational quality clearly reflects the urgency of the time and they convey the emotions and conflicts of these turbulent years with freshness and great effect.

This tradition of propaganda revolutionary wares continues in Russia between 1915 and 1925. Imperial porcelain blanks left unpainted in factories, were then enameled by communist painters and avant-garde artists in aggressive, bold and revolutionary patterns, images and propaganda statements, meant to stimulate the people. Not only is the content revolutionary but the use of such new forms of image making, on pots or elsewhere, was also revolutionary. The most touching examples deal with war and famine and we find images of food and grain on plates at a time of great scarcity and well as writing such as "He who doesn't work doesn't eat" or again "The reign of the workers and peasants shall be without end", proof again that porcelain outlives revolutions. Other

examples are painted with newsprint and books motifs, either closed or open, stressing the relationship between paper as a material and the use of text within objects in propaganda. More on these revolutionary porcelains, including those from China, from the 1950's and 60's, that often feature political, revolutionary quotes from Chairman Mao, has already been discussed in the "Food" chapter.

Political statements and commentary continues to this day in ceramics in the work of numerous practitioners worldwide.

Islamic art and architecture:

In the Islamic world, script and text play a particularly important role, as does decorative and abstract pattern, due to the forbidden use of representation and images by religion. A bowl may hold the inscription "The sacred month of Ramadan", the month of fasting during daylight hours, an inscription particularly appropriate in a bowl used for serving food. Another English plate made by Copeland about 1853 has Arabic transfer prints. These blue and white printed plates were made in England to be exported to Indonesia where they were very popular, according to Oliver Watson, curator of ceramics at the V&A. The script is "a rather curious one...copied from Arabic scripts that appear in China rather than anything Middle Eastern or European. The inscription is Koranic and refers to Muhammad and Allah." I find fascinating such an English plate with Arabic text, made for the Indonesian market, with an inscription copied from a Chinese transcription of a Middle Eastern original! Layering, appropriation, cultural (mis) quotations and globalization are not entirely post-modern after all.

In Islamic wares with texts in a circular format, all around the rim of bowl, for example, the text is often chosen for its formal quality as a graphic element that can be organized in the round as much as it is for its intrinsic content. For the same reason, it happens that letters are altered, shortened or lengthened to accentuate symmetry and graphic effect sometime to a degree that creates spelling errors, on purpose. The oldest form of Islamic script is the geometric Kufic character, from the city of Kufa on the Euphrates. This type of calligraphy is often found on buildings since its geometric angularity translates well into glazed bricks and tiles, but it is difficult to read due to its abstraction and extraneous ornaments. It was eventually changed for a cursive script, which was also extensively used on buildings, usually on painted tiles, despite its

extraordinary formal complexity. The decorative panel with text is often concentrated at the level of a standing figure, with the abstract geometric pattern occupying the lower portion and the Koranic text inscribed at eye level, to facilitate reading and create a direct and constant contact visually with the word of God. Such continuous, long bands of text can also often be found around the exterior base of the dome of mosques, a notable example, among many, being the Dome of the Rock, in Jerusalem.

On texts, tools and Ceramics:

It is interesting to note, somewhat as an aside, that diverse cultures have diverse tools to write. The Sumerians, the inventors of writing, used the edge of a reed to impress little elongated triangles into the soft clay tablets, which gave the name cuneiform to their writing. Impressing marks in the soft clay left a soft edge and a deep depression (so that the text would be long lasting), while the process was also efficient and quick, important qualities when writing while taking notation from a speaker. Of course, one of the most common tools to paint images and to write texts as well, remains the brush, and the use of this particular tool can be found in most if not all cultures. It remains nonetheless that the brush is the preferred and emblematic tool of Oriental cultures, notably the Chinese, who have greatly influenced all the other oriental cultures. The brush is the ideal tool for a fluid, gestural, curvilinear, calligraphic style of writing and the 47,035 Kanji Chinese characters are ideally suited to be written with a brush, although the pen and printing is now mostly used in communication in China. The Arabic script is also a very calligraphic writing system that uses the brush preferably, in documents where the inherent esthetic qualities of the script, as is true for the Chinese, need to be retained. In the western world, originating in Europe, the preferred form for the written text remains the printed letter, due to the notable advantage of a limited (in the number of signs) alphabet. Even prior to the discovery of the movable type in Germany by Gutenberg, European scripts and alphabets, all closely connected, were designed as if they were awaiting their use in printed form. The simplicity of European alphabets (more or less 26 letters and a few other signs) makes them ideal for the purpose of printing, although the system was devised long before it was used in printing. That simplicity may come from the need to carve letters on monuments, as was the case in Roman times, for example. Carving is slow and laborious, and may even have been made by workers who were themselves illiterate, and needed simple, graphic, recognizable and memorable signs to copy faithfully. Yet, the two great scripts that are articulated around carving, in their form and in their use, are the

hieroglyphic Egyptian and the Mayan from pre-Columbian America, both containing a rather large number of complex signs to communicate a written text. If Mayan writing is found carved in stone in ceremonial and political contexts, it remains that the most beautiful examples are carved on clay pots, where the soft, responsive material conveys with the utmost efficiency the roundness, generosity, almost bloated nature of the script.

Closer to us, pencils are made with a fired mixture of lead and graphite, encased in wood. They were invented and perfected in the 18th Century. The most recent advancement to the ballpoint pen is the ceramic roller ball, made of precision formed hard ceramics that will never corrode, flatten or skip, providing a smooth, clean and continuous stroke each time. Most paper also has a 2 to 10% clay content, which provides opacity and whiteness and helps in controlling the flow of ink in both writing and printing.

The importance of tools and materials in conveying the meaning of a text can be seen in a Chinese porcelain box from Cheng-te, made in 1506. It is inscribed in Arabic, another example of trans-cultural exchange, and it reads: "A fool finds no contentment. Strive for excellence in penmanship for it is the key to a livelihood."

Different inscriptions occur on different kinds of objects. A redware pie plate from New-York, 1801, has a slip trailed decoration that states "Why will you die?", a rather puzzling and disturbing question to ask on such a dish! Similarly, George Ohr often added inscriptions on his work. When his friend, the potter Jules Gabry died, Ohr was very shaken and he recorded the sad event several times on different pots: "Jules Gabry, born in France, 1829, suicide in Biloxi's water, August 18, 1897, 68 years, poverty cause." Another inscription by a potter is on a large jar by Dave, made December 9, 1860, at the Lewis Miles Pottery, in South Carolina. Dave was an African American literate slave, who could read and write. A number of his massive storage jars carry his incised poems: "A noble jar for pork and beef, then carry it around to the Indian chief". Dave was an accomplished potter who threw the largest pots known to have been made from Edgefield district. The biggest of his "noble jars" held over 40 gallons.

China and the Orient is also very fertile ground for the use of calligraphy on pottery. Many porcelain wine ewers were made in the shape of characters for happiness or longevity, two very appropriate symbols on objects used for drinking and made with such a timeless material. A contemporary example would be the Ampersand teapots of Adrian

Saxe, which reinterpret the Chinese originals. Porcelain seals are also very common and they were the forerunners of printing blocks and movable types. Movable types for printing longer texts were actually invented in China by Pi-Sheng in 1041, centuries before Guttenberg in Germany. As you would have guessed, these earliest movable types were made of fired clay. Pi-Sheng made clay copies of Chinese characters, fired them so that they would be hard and resistant to pressure, then he glued them to an iron plate, inked them and pressed them to paper to make copies. Books had been copied by hand before or at times printed, but then the whole page had to be carved from a block of wood and few copies were made. The oldest extant printed document of this type is the Diamond Sutra, printed in 868 C.E., found in a cave in Dunhuang in North Western China. The invention of the movable type by Pi-Sheng made printing much easier and the propagation of numerous copies helped in preserving many texts. In Chinese history, it was often the case that a new Emperor or a new dynasty would destroy the records of predecessors. When the Chinese emperor Qin Shi Jiangdi (of terracotta army fame) came to power in 200 B.C.E., he condemned all previously written books as worthless and had them all burned, keeping only treatises on medicine and science. The earliest, most ancient examples of Chinese scripts are not found on ceramics, interestingly enough, considering the deep connection ceramics has with all things Chinese. The oracle bones of the Shang dynasty, from around 1300 to 1100 B.C.E., are found in tombs in Anyang. These engraved texts on bones were first discovered by scientists in apothecary shops in Chinese cities, where these old bones were ground up to make medicine. Large quantities were thus destroyed before their value as documents and their historical importance was realized. If these early texts had been engraved on ceramic tablets or other ceramic objects instead of bones, they would have been much better preserved and would not have been so readily destroyed for such spurious use to become pills of dubious medicinal value.

In Japan, the potter Ogata Kenzan (1663–1743) often used calligraphic poetry to decorate his wares, both in his individual work and in his collaboration with his celebrated painter brother Korin. These poems on plates and square dishes, make references to the times of the year when a particular utensil was actually used, or they were playful addition for games, for guessing what poem was hidden under the food, helped by clues offered by the visible painted image. In the 1950's in Japan as well, Kitaoji Rosanjin and Tomimoto Kenkichi both used script on their functional yet highly decorative wares. An example of a decoratively patterned Tomimoto plate also shows four characters for wind, flower, snow

and moon, all about change and impermanency. Their contemporary Sawada Chitojin does the same on his vases covered with inscriptions in old Japanese, mostly decorative and optical in purpose, since it cannot be read by anyone but experts since the text is now reduced to complete abstraction, as markers for history more than for actual communication. I have seen pots decorated likewise in China today, with an illegible squiggle, a script that no one could actually read, and whose effect was totally symbolic and ornamental. The contemporary Japanese ceramist Kohei Nakamura did a room-size installation in 1989, titled "Resurrection". One wall was covered with a long inscription in English, a quotation from the Bible, actually, made with ceramic letters dealing with the theme of the installation work.

Other contemporary examples:

In America, ceramist Steve Freedman, now living in Hawaii, is probably the artist in clay who has used narrative text in the most consistent, sustained and efficient manner. He often cuts letters and texts through the walls of large thrown or cast vessels, rendering them non-functional, unable to contain or to hold anything but meaning, in the void left by the missing letters and the opened, pierced interior space. "All the important possessions of my race and my ancestors can be contained within these two vessels", a pair of vases offers. Another states: "Pretend that these spaces can be filled with this translucent viscous substance, thus closing the doorway to places YOU CAN NO LONGER GO, THINGS YOU CAN NO LONGER FEEL, but may wish to view from time to time." These vessels at times carry poems by the surrealist artist Kenneth Patchen or by Vietnam War veteran Grady Harp, who collaborated with Steve Freedman on a series of vessels for their installation "War Songs". Other pieces yet have text that is so abstracted, fragmented or altogether jumbled that it simply reads as a decorative motif and has become impossible to decipher. This interest in language, poetry, history as well as the preservation of memory, the containment of space and time and meaning is something that connects the work of Steve Freedman to the much earlier poetry on clay tablets of the Mesopotamians.

Wu-Min is a contemporary Yi-Xing potter from China who also uses poetry to add meaning and content to his otherwise technically superb yet conventional and traditional teapots. In his "The Modest Gentleman" series of 1996, he has transformed the domestic object into a bamboo tank form, in a typical proto trompe-l'oeil Yi-Xing traditional fashion. The bamboo references change the menacing war machine into an unthreatening,

fragile toy shaped into an innocent, domestic, functional utensil, a teapot. The title of the series itself, "The Modest Gentleman", makes me think of the young Chinese student stopping tanks in their tracks on Tienamen Square, in 1989. The poetry carved into the clay is composed by Wu-Min himself and refers to the power of small gestures, the modesty and humility of the ordinary in the face of adversity and the intrinsic worth of everyday people engaged in events big and small.

The work of New-Yorker Ann Agee embodies also perfectly all the ideas I discuss here. In her work of 1991, realized at the Kohler factory and residency in Wisconsin, she recorded portraits of employees, along with information about their lives, their interests, their work at the factory, etc., taken from interviews she conducted with these collaborators working in the sanitary ware factory. From these plates and large tile panels, much can be learned about the working conditions of these people and the times they live in. These objects will eventually serve as a historical record for future archeologists and as such will provide valuable information about our society now. This potential for ceramics to record, contain, preserve and transmit time is not yet irrelevant. It is continuing and along with the millions of toilets and sinks made at Kohler, these objects of Ann Agee will act as our testament and as witness of the ordinary lives of workers who may not leave much trace, otherwise.

Canadian artist Baco Ohama uses text obsessively in her room size installations, dealing with her identity as a Japanese Canadian as well as other issues regarding gender, culture and difference. She rolls long coils of clay by hand and laboriously "writes" words with them. After firing, these fragile and vulnerable pieces are carefully pinned to the wall to reconstruct the original text. Different colors of clay are used, brown, white or black for skin tone, and red for Japan (or blood), to reinforce her intended meaning. Confronted with these ambitious and overpowering pieces, we are made aware of the intensity of labor, the amount of time invested and the vastness of feeling they represent. This intense, direct and personal identification through the potency of the accessible written text, holds the spectator in place and this pause provides the time for reading and for communication to take place. Then, after the show is over, the work is disassembled and probably now difficult if not impossible to reconstruct, like so much impermanent contemporary art. This symbiosis of permanency and fleetingness, of solidity (materializing thoughts and sounds) and temporality, and this layering of conceptual intent with intense personal content are also emblematic of the times we live in. Most art,

most of what people now make to be looked at, actually rarely last much longer than the words they speak. This reliance on language in contemporary art to engage in communication with words and texts instead of images or even less with objects, has created an abdication of responsibility on the part of artists, and it is now a reality that the words of artists actually lasts longer than their work.

Anne Kraus's work of the past twenty years pushes the limits of the narrative scene and loads it with psychological tensions. The captions written on her vessels are descriptive, yet deliberately incomplete and confusing. "ROAD'S END, TURN BACK, One Cold Autumn Morning I Wished You Luck and Watched You Go. What Do You Hope To Find Out There". These sentimental vignettes play a mostly formal role, to animate the space, to decorate the object, as do the other patterns and colors. The usual hierarchy between text, image, pattern, color and object itself becomes flattened and irrelevant in an over-determined jumble of seductive materiality and skill, creating an attractive/repulsive dynamic that is highly effective and psychological.

It could be said that artist Richard Milette from Montreal is the anti Anne Kraus. If her work is overwhelmed with fictions and (frustrated) narrative impulses, Milette's work operates around a resistance to and a deconstruction of narratives, and as such implies a critique of institutions and of history, more specifically art history as a fictive form of narrative. The text on his faithfully reproduced Greek vases consist of simple words or even fragments loaded with potency, LOVE, RAPE, or even FUCK, SCUM, in a series on "Four Letter Words", etc. If all kinds of interpretation of meaning are possible, the paucity of information creates a resistance that prevents all attempts to rationalize in a logical, narrative manner. In VENGEANCE or JALOUSY, from 1997, the panels positioned on the sides of classical Greek prototypes may make direct references to the narrative panels found on the Greek originals and the classical faux marble background reinforces that association. Yet actually, the text materializes the negativity of narration, making it impossible to define the content of these objects and/or images in a fictional manner. The content is elsewhere in a conceptual approach to making. In an earlier piece based on Renee Magritte "The Treachery of Images", Richard Milette articulates this resistance more graphically. The statement THIS IS NOT A PIPE brings to mind that this is not a pot either, but the materialization of an idea, a physical image. In his work, Milette deconstructs the potential of ceramics to be simultaneously surface and form, history and culture combined. In his work, Milette makes manifest the simple fact that an image is a text,

meant to be “read”, to be deciphered in a narrative way, while an object is not a text, although, while it also signifies, that signification is not literal. Objects like pots, while grounded in physicality and reality, defy and contest the experience of reality by making us aware of the physical experience we have of reality. Images, like texts, on the contrary operate a distance from reality and are like texts, in the direct dimension of language, of narratives, of fictions, theories and discourses. His work shifts the emphasis from the narrative to the non-narrative, from literal meaning to conceptual meaning. In Milette’s work and contrary to most hand made ceramics, the meaning of the object does not reside in the materiality of clay or in its plasticity and its transformation or even in the intrinsic beauty of materials; it is not about technique, or even skill (although the objects are superbly made), or glaze recipe or firing processes; it is not about personality or biography either. It represents instead the investigation of the nature of ceramics within the larger context of art and its histories.

Other works by Milette, combining the seminal Greek forms with parts from other stylistic periods, like Meissen or Sevres, push these ideas even further. On these pieces the panel on the side of each object is filled with a fragmented text, arbitrarily chosen. Despite the use of language, any attempt at clarity of meaning or storytelling is frustrated. The juxtaposition of the Greek vase and the Rococo faux porcelain lids (these objects are made with earthenware) adds to the intent. This sophisticated analysis of the specific concepts of ceramics, by creating hybrids of different periods, different styles, different materials, challenge the accepted hierarchies and orthodoxies; they contest and critique the conventions of interpretation imposed on us by art history and connoisseurship. On other works still, the expected black and red figures have been changed into arbitrary abstractions confusing even more the negative/positive shifts existing on black figure or red figure Greek Vases. These “trompe-cerveau” fool the mind into creating identifiable images and question our incessant need for meaning and rationality. They force us to question everything else we may have learned before. A subsequent series of Garnitures, a suite of pots presented as a continuous unit (see “The Decorative Esthetics” chapter), bears the images of rebus, contained within reserved cartouches on the front and back of each pot. Again, their reading is rather laborious but if one takes the time to connect each sign, and/or image, to a sound, one can reconstruct a full sentence. While grammatically correct, this brief text nonetheless remains basically meaningless at worst and cryptic at best, on purpose. One such Garniture, made with five “oriental” interrelated pottery forms painted with an overall pink ground, the visual rebus reads on one side: “The subtle

deterioration of the weather left in a comatose state with no chance of being repaired”, while the other side reads: “The appearance in fact of night disrupted by a frightening vision of narrow beams of light overhead like holes in a hidden space”. More mind games at work here.

Matt Nolen’s work operates at the exact polar opposite. It is overfilled with narratives, meaning and didactic references. The captions are always used to reinforce images and forms. 12 steps Decanter and Wedding Urn are covered with quotes and directives related to abstinence and the rituals of marriage. The forms and images are illustrative while the texts are prescriptive and descriptive. That is where their power and efficiency lies. They are commentary and witness.

Edouard Jasmin from Montreal was an urban folk artist who worked with clay, in itself a rare occurrence, within folk art, since ceramics imply complex tools and technologies that are rarely accessible to folk, “naïve” and “outsider” artists. His work is also descriptive and prescriptive. Sentimental memories of his childhood are presented in charming and fresh details. He sometimes uses language with exuberance and excess. In “Pronunciation Lesson” we see the teacher at the board pointing at letters, and a panel with French puns on language. Another panel shows the position of the mouth and lips for each letter of the alphabet. Jasmin’s intuitive sense of composition, of color and the inventive narration all add to the endearing charm of the ceramic tableau. Edouard Jasmin started his ceramic work after retirement and worked until his death some years ago. Near the end of his life, his work became popular in Toronto and then even in New-York, and he felt the need to translate everything written on his work to accommodate his expanding market. At times, this accommodation is pushed to extremes; the French and English texts end up taking up most of the available space, leaving hardly any space for the vignette, which should be the central focus. Yet the final effect is all the more funny, efficient, and brilliant for that reason.

I am concluding with a series of books. As we have seen previously in “The Simulation Esthetics” chapter, potters and ceramics artists have also made books out of clay, in all forms and shapes and for all kinds of reasons. Like all the bags, luggage, shoes and boxes made out of ceramics, books provide the artist working with clay with another volumetric form, beyond and different from the volumetric form of functional pottery forms. This strategy provides potters and other artists with another context in which to

investigate the particular relation and connection of ceramics to culture. Books are also volumes (in both meanings of the term) that, like pots, also contain, transport, preserve and transmit knowledge of all kinds.

We tend as a culture to be more image literate and text literate than form literate or even less, object literate. I am specifically here interested in the implicit difference between a “text”, which is something that already exists, that is perceived through the eye, visually, and “writing”, which is something grounded in action, in transformation and in becoming, that happens through the gesture of the hand. With the ceramic objects under discussion here, it is writing that takes precedence over text, the act over the expression, the materiality of words over literal meaning, frustrating our impulsive needs for rationality and logical fictions, for theories and for discourse. In so many of these works, the tension between the recognizable signs as texts and the impossibility of accessing their code, creates another form of extreme, where we are presented with the clarity, openness and generosity of the objects (pots or books) themselves and with the difficulty to interpret them as well. Writing is also connected to making as a physical experience, while text is related to interpretation and to an intellectual relation to things and to reality. This investigation of books as an appropriate and particularly relevant format for ceramic art continues today and may even be more significant now than it was before. I think of Liu Jian Hua and Xu Yihui in China, one with closed yet seemingly empty, white porcelain books, fragile and vulnerable, the other with a porcelain rendition of Mao’s influential, meaningful (for a while anyway) and political Little Red Book, open over a bed of porcelain flowers, yet with empty, white pages, going from nothingness to emptiness.... Liu Jian Hua has cast books in ghostly, white porcelain, books that feel void and empty, despite their closed format. These shells of books are used, along with other familiar objects also cast in porcelain, in large-scale installations, often including broken shards coming from the unsuccessfully fired objects produced, breaking deliberately those who broke through process. The design collective Klein/Reid in New York, makes ghostly porcelain renderings of stacks of books, part of the duo Still-Life series. Julie Bartholomew, from Australia, makes ceramic books as well. In Canada, Jamelie Hassan has made large ceramic books for her sculptural installations within art institutions. All these artists comment, in various ways, on diverse aspects of contemporary culture as embodied in books as images, and at the transference of meaning that happens when a familiar form, the book, is translated in a differently familiar material, ceramics, a material seemingly inappropriate for the task at the practical level yet highly efficient symbolically.

Certainly, a large number of other artists have made ceramic books recently. It is actually difficult to keep up. Takako Araki from Japan has been working with the Bible form for many years. Books are containers of language and like pots they transmit and transport knowledge and history; they preserve and transmit time and memory. The first books were written on clay, and they came to us through millennia for that reason. Maybe someday all that will be left of the Judeo-Christian tradition will be the scorched and incomplete fragments of the Bible to be found in Takako Araki's work. Robert Arneson likewise made his *Book of Secret Glaze Recipes* permanently closed and impossible to consult, truly secretive. Another name for book is volume. Volume is also the defining factor in pottery, and by extension in ceramics as a whole. Volume is what makes containment possible. Here again, there is a close connection between clay and language through volume, at the semantic level. The open ceramic books of Takako Araki embody permanency and decay simultaneously, and they remind us of the transience of authoritative statements, dogmas, codes and beliefs and the fleeting nature of time and history itself. Nevertheless, if I wanted to pass some knowledge, some record, some trace to the future, I would do like the Mesopotamians and fire it on clay.

Ceramics is the memory of humankind.

Chapter Twelve

The Figure and the Figurine: Representations of the Human Form

In most creation myths, worldwide, the deity creates the first human with earth, or dust, or clay. All are equivalents as primary materials from which creation happens. A great example of this can be found in Genesis, in the Bible, with the story of God modeling the first man, Adam, from clay. Clay plays an important role in numerous such creation myths, but clay is also recurring elsewhere in religious beliefs and in mythologies. Many people have suggested that I should consider including religion as one of my themes in this book, for that very reason. I considered this option seriously, but decided to reject it. The relation of ceramics and pottery to religions and to mythologies, is covered specifically elsewhere, under most esthetics and most themes, and notably in the “Death” chapter which follows later, where that connection is most relevant, appropriate and efficient. Above all, a direct connection to religion is found mostly, almost exclusively, in relation to clay as a basic material, and clay alone, and not to ceramics, per se. As I have stated in the introduction and repeatedly since, I am not interested here in clay, by itself. Clay is just a material, nothing more. I am interested in what can be done with it, instead. And that is what we call ceramics, which is, in my opinion, much more interesting than clay. Clay is of little to no interest to me. I am interested in the transformation that occurs in ceramics and the meaning(s) of that transformation. I am then interested in ceramics not so much for its materiality as a physical material but for its particular potential as a

cultural one. In fact, I would argue that there is way too much clay in ceramics right now, and that is a large part of the problem with the art form today, as I see it.

This being said, there are numerous and fascinating references to clay, to potter's fields, to pottery and to vessels of various types, in the Bible, among other religious texts, for example. I would refer the curious reader to this book itself, or to other such books, obviously. All these very interesting references can be easily located by consulting the index. I will single out here a brief passage from the Noah story. After the Flood has receded, Noah supervised the land and declared: "I looked at the face of the world and there was silence. All mankind was turned to clay." Humanity had returned to its original, primal and formless material, ready to be reborn, cleansed and purified.

In its relation to time and eternity, ceramics is like an instant fossil. Any ceramic object holds a record that will be preserved, even in geological terms. Fossils themselves are similar to ceramics, since they are silica accretions, formed under pressure and heat over time, when organic materials, usually bones, but not exclusively, since other parts of organisms can also be fossilized, are replaced by silica crystals that then reconstruct the original structure, which then preserves it, as a fossil. This geological process is in fact related to the formation of ceramic materials, in reverse, with the rock becoming clay, becoming plant, animal or human and all other life forms.

Another transcendent aspect is manifest when shaping ceramic forms and specifically the hollow forms of pottery, when a clear ascendancy of the elements, earth, water, air and fire, toward the above, is materialized through process and transformation. This superior aspect is signified within the form itself by the opening at the top. In numerous myths as well, the sky is perceived as an upside down bowl and the stars are holes in its wall, and God above is light and the creator of permanent things, of which ceramics is a particularly good example. A tomb painting from 300 B.C.E. in Egypt shows the god Khum sitting at the potter's wheel with a newly made person emerging from the spinning clay.

In Christian apocrypha, Jesus is said to have made model birds from clay, which he would then make to sing, flap their wings and fly, after he had pronounced the correct words. There is also a clear connection between the power of creation and the power to

enunciate words, connecting making and language together, again, as we have seen in the preceding chapter.

This relation to creation and language is also found in the Jewish apocrypha, and the medieval story of the Golem, a creature shaped with clay that could be given life. The recipe to make such a Golem (at the origins of the Frankenstein fiction) can be found in the Sepher Yetzirah or “Book of Creation”: “Start with the necessary quantity of untouched mountain soil. Knead this clay with fresh spring water and form into a human image. Then recite over each of its limb the appropriate formula and walk around it clockwise seven times and the Golem will breathe; reverse your walk for seven rotations again and the Golem will then glow bright red as a vessel in a kiln fire and it will rise and live.” In order to revert the creature to clay, its maker would simply reverse the direction of the rotations around the figure. Like humanity in the Noah story who went from clay (Adam), to flesh, to clay again after the Flood, likewise could the Golem be controlled and used, made for clay and returned to clay. If a real, actual bionic human is ever achieved, important parts and elements will have to be made of ceramic materials.

As well, in the Koran, we read: “So Allah shaped Adam into a human being, but he remained a figure for 40 years. The angels went past him. They were paralyzed with fear by what they saw...and the figure of Adam would make a sound like pottery. Allah said: He created man (Adam) from sounding clay, like the clay of potters.” The name Adam actually means red earth or clay.

In an African Dogon myth, the male god throws a ball of clay, which then spats as a square to the four cardinal points, and it becomes a woman, mother earth. In pre-Columbian America, a very modern looking stir-up vessel also represents mother earth. The volume of the container is shaped from four connected breast-like forms, representing the four directions of space (east, west, north, south). The stir-up handle is itself very phallic, with two little balls at the base of the erect spout, uniting the female and male principles. The overall effect is so stylistically refined that it would have made Constantin Brancusi proud if its maker.

Which brings us to other figures made with clay. Ceramic figures.

It may be logical to presume that the oldest ceramic objects would be pots since pots are, after all, the most common type of objects made in ceramics. But that is not actually true. Before making pots, long before actually, humans modeled human representations, small figures in clay and they also fired these before any clay pot, fired or otherwise, was ever made.

The figurative tradition in ceramics is the oldest by far and representations of the human form in clay precede pottery containers by millennia. The oldest, earliest figurative works in ceramics (in fired clay) are found in what is today Czechoslovakia at the Neolithic archeological site of Dolni Vestovice and they date from as early as 25,000 years ago, possibly more. Other objects made with raw clay may have preceded the fired clay figures that were preserved through time by the permanency conferred by the ceramic process of firing, but as with other objects made with less permanent materials, we will never know since no evidence remains for us to interpret. Objects made with other organic materials like wood, plants, fibers, leather, etc., quickly became biodegradable food for bacteria and for rodents.

Ceramic vessels, pots and containers will first appear much later, the oldest being made by the Jomon culture of Japan, 12,000 year ago, probably preceded by Neolithic pots made by cave dwelling groups in China, upward to 18,000 years ago. These first pots were hand-made and we will have to wait 4000 more years to about 6000 B.C.E. for the earliest examples of wheel thrown or cast forms (like bricks) to be made.

Interestingly enough, this precedence in history of the ceramic figure has been largely ignored by the vast literature on ceramics and pottery that tends to focus, at times exclusively, on vessels and containers. Figurative work will more often be classified under archeology or even sculpture, as if the material (fired clay) was incidental to the meaning of the object. Architectural applications of ceramics likewise tend to be included in the literature on architecture, but then it tends to be seen and understood for their structural properties (and decorative qualities) instead of their importance and seminal role in defining large spaces for containment that are informed by the qualities and properties of ceramics as a specific material and as an autonomous art form.

The same could be said for the exclusion or neglect of the figure in books and scholarship dealing with ceramic history and art history. It is perceived to be the domain

of sculpture to deal with this material (figurative works) and we know that sculpture as a category tends to ignore ceramics to focus and concentrate on the contribution of other materials instead, namely marble and stone, or metal and to lesser degree wood, ceramics being hardly mentioned at times. This 19th Century mind-set is still around today. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, ceramics and sculpture have very little in common beyond three-dimensionality, and that is true for figurative work as well. A figurative ceramic object is totally different, conceptually, from a figurative sculpture in another material. To confuse the two as similar, or worse as identical is to misunderstand both.

I will attempt here to clarify my point and create some redress. It seems at times that the figure and the figurine, which both have received significantly less coverage and inclusion in ceramics histories, are but a diversion, a rather insignificant digression compared to the more serious and important contributions, as cultural tools, of the pot and the brick. Both of these are, of course, clearly connected to daily life, to physical sustenance and protective shelter. Yet the contribution of the figurative tradition in ceramics, independently of its contribution to sculpture itself, has been immense and very important not only to culture and civilization but also to the esthetic experience as defined by art as an anthropological practice. If the pot and the brick are two of the great contributions of ceramics to humanity, the figure (and the figurine) is without a doubt the third.

The Neolithic figures of prehistory are always representations of fertility as embodied by the female form (the Mother Goddess), with exaggerated breasts, hips, buttocks and a large, triangular, sexual pudenda. Many of these fired clay figurines are quite small in size and are obviously modeled to be held easily and comfortably by the hand, in an intimate contact that acknowledges and reaffirm tactility in transformation and experience. It is speculated by some researchers that the Neolithic figures may represent women looking at themselves, looking down at their own bodies, which may explain why they rarely exhibit facial features. This also justifies the theory that they were the labor of women as well. As guardian of fire and the hearth, women's connection to ceramics technology and its development is arguably direct and essential, even. The first examples were found in the 1920's, in the Pavlov Hills of Moravia in Czechoslovakia. Many have been found in fragments and the evidence suggests that they were intentionally exploded in the firing. The reasons for this deliberate, violent, destructive yet cathartic act provide a speculative terrain for multiple interpretations, as is always the case with material coming

from pre-literate, pre-historical times, when the only connection we have in (re)creating meaning is the vague, incomplete physical context where the object was found and our own anthropological constancy that may permit a projection through time into the mind of the maker and the user. Fired clay pellets were also found at the site and scientists have reproduced these using the local clay, to determine their chemical make-up. These new test pellets survived the firing intact, as did the originals originally, even at quite high temperature. These tests provided proof that the makers of these objects clearly knew how to fire clay objects successfully and that the explosion of the figures was the result of intentional effort and practice.

The handling of plastic clay to model these quite sophisticated and beautiful figures was one of the earliest directly transformative activity of humankind, where a material could be given shape not only by subtraction, as was the case with the making of stone tools, or not only by direct transfer where an animal skin would become protective wearing on a human body, or a dried gourd could be used as a container, but by actual addition and manipulation of the clay, changing formlessness into actual presence, giving materiality to a thought formed in the brain, actualizing outside the body another physical thing that embodies that internalized image, creating something where nothing existed before: a true conceptual act. This conceptual act is at the very source of art and of ceramics. After all, few forms of image making elicit a stronger, positive and/or negative, reaction than representations of the human form.

These figures were modeled as a solid mass in a sexualized, potent, powerful, regenerative and pregnant (actually and metaphorically) object. These figures are never hollow since their small size doesn't require such structural necessity, and since the intention was often to explode them anyway, a solid mass was more appropriate for that intended result. The magical power of transformation, from thought to thing, once realized in the responsive material, the object was placed in a bonfire to release its contained energy. This process would explode and shatter the idol, as its water content would expand in contact with the heat of the flame, returning the form to formlessness, and completing the cycle. These early experiments in "firing" clay objects eventually led to more controlled results. Eventually, if necessary, full, complete figures could be successfully fired and preserved, to become artifacts that retained their form through time all the way to our times, and in this process changing their identity and role, going from the ritual of fabrication for the context of the altar or the tomb where they may have been

deposited as a funerary offering, to the archeological site, then the museum, the collection and lastly to the publication of the find in print. Yet through these processes and transformations, the recognizable, universal, in-temporal image retains much of its original capability and capacity to engage the imagination. Small figurative ceramic offerings, clearly spiritual and religious in intent, are found all over the world and in most cultures.

In Sumerian times, in Mesopotamia, clay figures with large, protruding eyes, all more or less identical and made in large number (using simple clay molds), would be placed in temples and altars to worship the deity. Their placement was clearly strategic and each figure faced the image of the protective god in order to look at that image directly. Each one of these figures stood for, literally, a citizen who had commissioned its making and paid for its display, as a form of insurance policy since the substitute figure could continue the worship vicariously while its human counterpart could go about its daily business and activities. A contemporary, secular version exists in the large sculptural installation "Field" by British sculptor Anthony Gromley, where big eyed, diminutive, tactile figures are presented and placed to fill completely the floor of a large room, facing the door and staring at us, who are standing impotently outside. 20,000 such figures were made in a Mexican pottery village by the whole community, more or less identical, despite their obvious handmade and very tactile quality of form and surface. We are being denied access, there is no room left for us, no space to enter. We mere mortals have now become the deity these charming yet disturbing apparitions are worshipping in our present day temples, the art museums.

Greek Ceramics and the Figure:

Human figures in ancient Greek Art are mostly made of marble or bronze, the two preferred materials for sculptural works at the time. Clay as a sculptural material is rarely used in Greece, although there are some exceptions. On the other hand, the Etruscans used ceramics extensively in both architecture and large-scale (life size) figurative representations of humans and gods. Of course, the human figure was incessantly represented on Greek Attic pottery. Among some examples of figurative ceramic works in Greek art, the city of Tanagra near Athens specialized in elegant, miniature (up to 30 cm. tall) feminine figures made by pressing clay into fired clay molds. Large quantities were made and are found as votive offerings in local shrines and tombs. While somewhat

crudely made and meant to be cheap and accessible to the population at large, their modeling and gesture can be quite elegant and the drapery flowing over the standing figures is efficiently describing the female form. If Greek art is justly celebrated for its representation of the human body (usually the naked male) in sculpture, it is necessary to remember that this esthetic development in expressive naturalism finds its root in the picture painted on ceramic pots, where the human body plays an important role. These representations of human bodies on pots, themselves stylized and idealized (graphic representations of human bodies), are examples of another specific contribution ceramics as made to art history. We know from Panathenaic amphorae, specifically made as gifts for athletes competing in sporting events, that Greek athletes competed in the nude ever since the early 6th Century B.C.E. I have analyzed elsewhere, in "The Classical Esthetics" chapter, the differences between black figure and red figure painting in Greek pottery. As far as the development of naturalism in human representations, it is in the red figure style that we find for the first time the delineation of both relaxed and active poses, totally believable, assured and observed. These realistic and credible depictions of bodies in space on pots constitute a first in art history and precede similar developments in the round in sculpture, subsequently. The style of red figure painting necessitated the delicate use of fine, linear details. This simple and supple graphic rendering of bodies nonetheless succeeds in suggesting rotundity, even voluptuousness and it does so as efficiently as the following Greek sculpture. It is now believed by experts that plastically rendered figures made by sculptors, which show the same proportions than those found on vases and describe similar stylization of form are following in the successful results and solutions of the vase painters who were the first to successfully render convincing volume in visual representation. The most potent examples also use efficiently the convex surface of the pottery form to accentuate this volumetric effect. It is in red figure vase painting that can be observed the first believable rendering of live bodies with realistic postures and gestures, proving that the move toward a fully representational art began there, on pottery surfaces. This experimental development was easier, quicker and cheaper to investigate in two-dimensional works and a mastery of drawing was certainly an essential factor in the progressive development of realism from the Archaic to the Classical period in Greek art. Examples of human representations on pots are found in many other cultures, notably in the Orient and in pre-Columbian America, as well as today where images of human bodies on pots are ubiquitous. The material deserves further study, suffice to say for now that this combination of literal figures on pottery forms that are themselves abstracted from human bodies, provide a fertile ground for complex associative metaphors and

relationships. The anthropomorphism of pottery form was also acknowledged by the Greeks, through the naming of parts, and they also spoke of the neck, shoulder, belly and foot of a vase, though they called handles “ears”. Another connection can be made between pots and bodies, since both are also connected in the axis vertical to the ground which pots share with humans.

Pre-Columbian Ceramics (and others):

In this transition between vessel image and the complete representation of human bodies in ceramics, the vocabulary of ceramics operates many shifts and changes from pottery vessel to purely representational sculpture. Many degrees of transformation are necessary between the point where a functional object ceases to be a container of its own space to become a sculptured image. Like the pot itself, which is meant to contain various substances, this image can operate in its own symbolic space or again equally contain, yet metaphorically, its own imaginative, spiritual embodiment. In pre-Columbian America, more specifically in Mexico and in Peru, the figure in ceramics is a constant production of the various cultures. My favorites are the early Olmec babies, fat and happy. Also engaging and distinctive, the broadly smiling, even laughing (open mouths and laughter are rarely depicted in sculpture) figures from Veracruz, with their welcoming open arms. The freshly modeled Mayan figures from Jaina, with their distinctive blue slip painting are also distinctly beautiful. Fat, bloated Colima figures and dogs are likewise very graceful (surprisingly) and charming in their constant inventiveness and variety of form. The bloated, expansive, pneumatic form of these figures stresses their hollow, interior volume and this quality plays a significant sculptural role, something quite characteristic of much pre/Columbian figurative ceramics. The plastic, formal identity of the object is provided by its hollow interior and its physical presence is not so much communicated by the impress of external forces than by internal ones. At the same time, these forms produced by the implied pressure of inner volumes are also articulated further by external modeling that serves to complete the necessary descriptive detail but at the same time acts as a counter pressure to reestablish balance and equilibrium between interior and exterior forces. This phenomenon, so particular to ceramics formal vocabulary, is particularly noticeable and used with great sophistication on African pots where the exterior decoration, carved or usually modeled, contains the two energies implied by the container. The surface of African pots is often articulated with strong rhythmic sequences of striations, either carved into the wall of the pot or, more commonly, modeled as a raised

ridge over the smooth surface of the vessel. These decorations are clearly connected to and refer scarifications on bodies. The earliest examples of African terracotta figures are from Nigeria, from the Nok culture of 250 B.C., and their characteristic surface of linear markings are found on subsequent pots all the way to today and are also at the origins of later Benin portrait bronzes.

In Africa as well as in America, this making of effigies for temples, altars, tombs, and for other offerings and rituals, is often connected to human sacrifice, funerals, funerary furniture and practices around death. The Toltec culture of Mexico (900–1200 C.E.) often represents the God of Spring Xipe Totec, chanting exultantly, as embodied by the figure of a priest wearing the flayed skin cut away, carefully removed from a sacrificial victim. The skin of a sacrificed prisoner of war would be completely removed, possibly while still alive, then turned upside down, to be worn by a priest, skin against skin, like a vestment over his own body, thus sporting a double skin, a dead one over a live one, with the internal, cut, bloody and dripping skin of the victim offered to the view of the celebrants. This was an essential element in this important ritual for the regeneration of the cycle of seasons in springtime, permitting the return of rain and the growing of vital corn. These life size fired clay figures of Xipe Totec, made with a material, ceramics, that permits the representation of flayed, bleeding flesh in all its gory detail and with more physicality and believability that any other material could possibly achieve, are eerily disturbing yet weirdly beautiful nonetheless, especially their head where we can perceive the living eyes and mouth of the priest underneath the openings left by the sacrifice in the very skin of the offered victim. They are unique representations of such extreme rituals in art and very potent, original images of a figure inside another one, and as such they are quite distinctive and recognizable once you know the code to read them.

In a different mode altogether, much pre-Columbian pottery is also anthropomorphic and vessels shaped like bodies (of humans and animals) are very frequent in Central and South America. The rightly celebrated Colima dogs are a great example. In these works, the figure actually becomes a clay vessel, a hollow volumetric receptacle that can transform from being filled with not only flesh and blood but also vitality, energy and emotion, now that it is changed into a fired clay container. Its empty, void interior can also be used for the containment of liquids, food and grains. These can have symbolic meaning in various rituals or simply as tools in the needs of daily, domestic activities. Nonetheless, the fact that they were also used as offerings in tombs is an

important aspect of their role in these societies. The form of these figurative vessels is always clearly volumetric, built as an expanding shell with coils or slabs of clay to create the basic shapes that are then modified and altered by modeling and by decorative additions (often made with the help of clay molds, permitting repetition). The figurative form is obviously expanded from the inside out, like a pot should be, with the energy and directional expansion of the form created by a force operating from the core center to the outer skin in a process that is specific to ceramics in its use of a plastic material that is ideally suited for this kind of making, for forms and objects that are metaphorically full and pregnant. The Mochica culture of Peru, one of the most fascinating culture in the world in many aspects, but particularly for its important contribution to ceramic history, is known primarily for the stir-up vessel portrait heads, unique in the New World for capturing not only the physical appearance of an individual but his (they always represent males) emotional, psychological, interior life. These ceramic vessels portraying an actual individual constitute the only examples of true portraiture to be found in the Americas and they provide us with the only available experience of looking at another human being in the eyes in a direct mode of address, confrontation and identification. Face pots and jars are frequently found in most cultures, all over the world. In the American south, since Colonial times and to this day, potters make grotesque face jugs with bits of broken crockery sticking out in their open mouths, for teeth. These folk objects have great presence and charm, despite their apparent ugliness. Face and head pots are also part of a category of ceramic vessels that represent only one element of the human form and where the part stands for the whole, like the synecdoche, in literature. We find not only heads and faces but also, if less frequently, hands, or feet, at times legs, or arms, torsos less frequently since, if the separated hand may feel alive, the independent torso implies dismemberment and death in too obvious a way. Again, such vessels shaped like parts of the human body are found throughout time, all over the world. This phenomenon constitutes a very interesting contribution of specific pottery forms to art and culture. Mochica portrait heads always represent male warriors and rulers, although women, as illustrated on other vessels, could play important roles in religious rituals as priestesses as well as in the social, political life of the society. True portraiture is one of the greatest achievements of the Moche potters. The hand modeling and burnishing of Moche vessels articulate the containing wall of the pot around a contained volume into a dynamic three-dimensional surface and form. This form has a plastic identity informed by its hollow, volumetric interior and by its physical presence coming from an interior pressure and force and not by the working of exterior forms as would be the case in modeled sculpture,

in works dependent on mass for their materialization. This approach to bloated, elastic, pneumatic forms is symptomatic of much if not all pre-Columbian pottery and of signature ceramic sculpture as well.

Chinese Figurative Ceramics:

The most elaborate, impressive and famous examples of figurative ceramic effigies remain the army of Emperor Qin (260–210 B.C.E.) found near Xian in north-western China in the early 1970's. These figures were made in such vast quantities that they required to be fabricated at potteries elsewhere in the kingdom, signed with the first initial of the maker and then shipped, after firing, to the tomb site. 6000 life size terracotta figures of soldiers, archers and generals with horses were unearthed from pits surrounding an artificial hill containing the burial chamber of the Emperor. This funerary tumulus still remains to be accessed, opened and dug out. It is believed to contain even more wonders. Each figure is built in sections with slabs and coils of clay, at times using molds for standard parts. After basic assembly, the face, head and hair features were individually modeled and each represents the portrait of an actual person, so that no two figures are alike. This characterization, while conventionalized, remains astounding. After firing, the effigies were used to act as substitutes for actual people (prior to that time, real human victims and live horses were sacrificed and buried with the emperor for his journey in the afterlife). They were painted realistically with organic and mineral colors (glazing is in its infancy then in China and provided a very limited palette of colors). They are then organized according to rank in large formations and they were protected under canopies built with wood and covered with tiles. Expectedly, soon after the completion of the immense project, which necessitated the labor, expertise and talent of thousands of craftsmen and artists over many years, all the figures were broken, their protective sheds burned and the remains buried by erosion, sedimentation and time, until their rediscovery recently, 2000 years later. The figures originally were fitted with actual metal weapons that were of course stolen, reused and subsequently melted and recast into new objects and these metal weapons may have actually served to attract pillage instead of protecting vicariously the emperor as was intended.

The original paint and colors is largely gone too and what is presented to us in Xian today, under a large, functional yet unattractive roof, is a greatly restored and reconstructed showpiece, reassembled from fragments of the broken figures. Nearby, in

numerous gift shops can be purchased fired clay reproductions in all sizes, from miniature to even larger than the originals. Actual factories nearby are endlessly producing these more or less factual copies of dubious esthetic quality, at times. They are produced using molds and unlike the originals, which are all unique, these are all identical from being made with a few stock molds, and their surface bears a faux antiquing finish that adds even more to their debased kitschiness. These terracotta warriors reproductions can now be found in all the Chinatown of the world and it is probably certain that many more of these figures have been produced, as of today, since the 1970's, than were originally made for the 6000 strong army of Emperor Qin, the unifier of China and the first builder of the Great Wall who gave his name to the country as well. This is one of the ironies of contemporary consumer culture and world tourism and it is as emblematic of our time and culture as the original ceramic objects were in their times. Recently, three life size copies were made, sporting the portraits of tennis players, for a tournament in Shanghai. The three tennis stars are seen in the full body armor of the original Qin soldiers, but holding tennis rackets. Now that their image has been translated into ceramics, their fame and glory is assured for the distant future. Norwegian artist Marian Heyerdahl has made feminist versions of these warriors, with female attributes which contest and critique the original intent of the figures and subvert them for a potent, efficient commentary on our culture now, as it connects to history, through time.

During the Tang dynasty, sancai three color glazed tomb guardians as well as horses with attendants, court musicians, dancers and acrobats and very gracious, elegant fat ladies, soldiers and other people representing various crafts were also made for similar funerary purposes. They are found in large quantities and have fed the antiquities market in what seems to be an endless supply. They are of reduced scale, yet their modeling and coloring is nonetheless very vivacious and full of contained, restrained energy. The ceramic glazes in the distinctive Tang three colors of green, yellow and brown with occasional white and blue, are used sparingly and with relative restraint, leaving selective areas of bare clay uncovered in an efficient contrast between the dry, matt areas of unglazed surface and the bright, shiny, reflective and distinctly runny colors of the glaze. Tang horses are bursting with contained energy and even at rest they seem ready to explode in gallop. These colorful, vivid, quietly animated and expressive figures, particularly the ferocious devils and guardians, are much celebrated and admired. The Tang horses are particularly remarkable in their graceful yet powerful nobility and presence. Like all ceramic objects, they provide much information within a very beautiful,

elegant and esthetic format, of the rituals of the Chinese court and society in general, as well as for the elaborate, detailed forms of dress, of jewelry and hairstyle, of furniture, buildings and houses and of other aspects of life at the times, which would all have been lost otherwise.

During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the best figurative work consists of small Buddhist deities in creamy, white porcelain (called blanc-de-chine or Te-Hua, by connoisseurs). This type of monochrome Te Hua ware (after the town where the best were produced) was extremely influential in subsequent developments in porcelain figurines in Europe in the 18th and 19th Centuries, and it was much imitated and is still made today. Few imitators, even Chinese ones, achieve the quiet, serene implied vitality and translucent beauty of the originals. Their main esthetic quality comes not only from the real and specific beauty of the material used, a creamy, luminous, white porcelain covered with a soft, fat, whitish yet translucent glaze, but most importantly from the sensitive modeling (the best example are all hand modeled and constructed without the use of molds) which take full advantage of the pneumatic potential of plastic clay, which is retained nonetheless in the hard, unyielding fired material, to communicate and transmit the impression of internal pressure that can simulate breathing flesh very effectively in a manner that ivory carving (to which Dehua, another spelling, figures are sometimes compared, despite their independence in inspiration as well as overall spirit), could ever achieve with such charm, refinement and potency. If porcelain were as precious and rare a material as ivory, these blanc-de-chine figures would be appreciated and celebrated even more, another example of material hierarchy and prejudice in art appreciation. The fact that they were made in huge quantities, often a characteristic of things Chinese, also reduces their commercial appeal, thus their “artistic” appeal, in a world where monetary value is used as a standard for esthetic appreciation.

China has had a tremendous influence on the development of Japanese figurative sculpture and this is true in ceramics as well. An exception exists in Haniwa figures, which are very ancient and date from the beginning of historical times and are at the source of a typically Japanese esthetics, generated independently from outside influences. Haniwa figures are emblematic of “Japaneseness” in a manner that is still clearly identifiable today. Haniwa figures comprise human forms mostly but also horses, buildings and abstracted military shields. They are slab-built and stand up on a cylindrical tube pierced with a hole. They were then positioned all around a funerary tumulus, and connected together, one to

the other with wood beams, through their hole, to form a fence and an enclosure all around the burial site. They are always very directly and simply modeled, with a crudeness and dynamism that shows great refinement and subtlety, all characteristic of much Japanese ceramics and Japanese art, to this day.

Other examples of terracotta figurative works in Asia would be the large, modeled horses found in Tamil Nadu in southern India, at Umpetti and elsewhere. They too embody the genius and sensibility of the people and the culture that gave them form.

European Figurative Ceramics:

In the “Shelter: Ceramics and Architecture” chapter, we have seen how the glazed relief images of lions, mythical creatures and processions of archers, modeled on bricks in Mesopotamia were integrated to the walls and gates of cities. This was also the case during the Renaissance with the sculpted glazed low to mid relief panels of the della Robbia family, which provided an important visual counterpoint to much severe Renaissance buildings, to their interiors as well as their relation to the exterior, to the public spaces they animated, contributing greatly to the visual urban landscape in Italy.

There is another less famous and somewhat neglected Renaissance artist who has not received as much recognition for a variety of reasons, I believe. First of all, we know very little about him and he did not produce much work. On the other hand, the della Robbias made their Madonnas and Saints in industrial quantities, in a factory situation using assistants and molds for the standard parts. This doesn't diminish their great contribution as originals, distinct artists. The work was also produced over a long period of time by three generations of the family founded by Luca della Robbia in the early 1400's. Luca, who himself lived to be in his eighties, a very old age for the time, was also an exceptional sculptor in marble and he was singled out by Alberti, the first art historian, as one of the first five founders of the Italian Renaissance with Masaccio, Donatello, Ghiberti and Brunelleschi, with whom he was a frequent collaborator on architectural projects. Our other artist died relatively young (he was active between 1462–94) and he did his principal work in unglazed terracotta, a material quite widely used during the Renaissance (notably by Verrocchio), yet that remains neglected by art historians in a shameful way compared to marble or bronze. The della Robbias escape this prejudicial neglect by the sheer quantity of work they produced, but also by the use of a white glaze

that, while retaining its independent esthetic identity and with no imitative intent, refers nonetheless to marble in its formal association. Finally, our artist was also ahead of his times by nearly two hundred years (his theatrical work is closer to excessive Baroque art than to the cool Classicism of the Renaissance), always a problem within art history, which tends to ignore art and artists that do not readily fit the prevalent category to challenge instead the stylistic homogeneity of their time or period. His name was Nicolo del'Arca and his masterpiece is a "Deposition" found in the church of Santa Maria della Vita in Bologna, Italy. Renaissance art and sculpture is characterized by a noble and serene presence that doesn't favor excessive expression or dynamic movement, which will be explored later during the Baroque period, by sculptors like Bernini, for example. Nicolo del'Arca's work is specifically notable for its split second analysis of motion and movement, capturing an active gesture and transient event as it happens, arresting and capturing time, almost photographically. In his "Deposition", six life size modeled figures surround the dead, eerily realistic and naked body of Christ, lying motionless on the ground and surrounded on one side by the other figures. Their full size is in itself a technical, material feat for fired clay objects, few artists would even dare attempt and successfully at that. The figures represent two patrons who commissioned the three dimensional, theatrical group as well as saints in contemporary clothing, lamenting over the dead Christ figure. From left to right, there is a progressive transformation of the figures from a static position to one of great expressive animation both in term of passive to active gestures and serene to demented facial features. The figure farthest to the right, Mary Magdalene, is shown screaming with her mouth wide open (again, open mouths are quite rare in sculpture) and rushing to the feet of the dead Christ as if ready to fall over the body itself. Her eyes are protruding, her mouth is open in a silent scream that is all the more shrill and effective. Her long, elaborate, flowing dress, molds her figure, clinging to her body at the front while flying freely and madly into space at her back, as if it was responding to the wind velocity of a jet plane at take-off. All the figures were originally painted naturalistically (again, something that goes against the idealistic, platonic esthetic of much Renaissance art and is more in keeping with the earlier Gothic style in sculpture, adding to the idiosyncratic nature of the artist as outside his time, simultaneously backward and forward but not contemporary). Little of that paint remains today and the natural color and texture of the fired red clay provides the main visual interest, beyond its extraordinary form, for this unusual work. Only modeled clay, in its capacity to flow and bend, to move and freeze simultaneously, to capture volume and mass, to imitate flesh and fabric so convincingly could create such a sculptural group. Any other material, wood,

marble, even bronze which could have been used by creating molds from the original modeled figures then casting them, would not provide the same, efficient, direct, spontaneous experience that permits and offer instant identification. Clay, even when fired, retains a visual memory of its former softness and malleability and is for this reason perfect to represent bodies and flesh, following the example set in the Garden of Eden and in so many other creation myths worldwide, where the first humans were fashioned from plastic, responsive, malleable, living clay. Nicolo del'Arca has captured that potential fully and presents the results for our benefit and admiration, frozen and fixed. Other "Lamentation" terracotta groups of these times can be found in Italian churches, notably in Faenza, the Italian capital of maiolica painted pottery. Another group by Guido Nazzoni, in San Giovanni Battista, in Modena, retains much of its polychromy since it has been partially glazed and glaze is much more resistant than paint to time and to the abrasive friction of repeated cleanings. Yet, one has simply to compare these other "Lamentations" with del Arca's to see how differently the same subject is treated and how dynamic and unconventional is magisterial work remains.

The Figurine:

In figurative sculpture, the statue is a fixture of Western culture. Sculpture is a form of image making and, as such, sculptures are three-dimensional images, meant primarily to be looked at, in an experience where looking suffices. If sculptures operate phenomenologically in a particular way in relation to space and in their situation, they remain nonetheless images, to be perceived and experienced visually, primarily, and they often have a preferred viewpoint, like all images, from which they are to be appreciated. This is especially true when the figure is experienced in an architectural context. I am obviously here using a definition for sculpture that is not current anymore. Sculpture today is facing an identity crisis. What is a sculpture? Exactly? What isn't a sculpture, even? Right now, anything and everything can be a sculpture, and anything and everything can be art. You just say so. To make ceramics is a little bit more difficult. Ceramics has no such identity crisis, but it does have an image problem. Nonetheless, I will keep using such a definition that is not current anymore (it is from the 19th Century, when art history was defined as a discipline), as it serves my purposes.

What is the difference between a figure and a figurine? Is the difference a question of scale exclusively, of size only? Not necessarily. Of course, what we call the figurine is as

a rule, if not a law, much smaller in size than these other works we would call a figure or a figurative work in the visual arts. Yet, much figurative sculpture is small in scale without being classified, categorized as “figurine”. Figurative Renaissance bronzes for example are often miniature, scaled-down representations of bodies and human forms yet they are logically and rightfully understood and explained as would be full or even larger than life size sculptures. The very term “figurine” implies a diminution not only in size but also in inherent status compared with the figure, and the figurine occupies a lowlier position in the (still) existing hierarchy of three-dimensional images, in the domain of sculpture within the visual arts. If the difference is not one of scale, could it be one of material? Is ceramics as a material integral to the status and classification conferred on certain objects like figurines? Possibly. The figurine is largely if not exclusively a ceramics category, although much figurine is now produced industrially using plastics, which has replaced ceramics in other spheres as well, historically reserved for clay and its derivatives. Is the difference between a figure (what is also called a statue) and a figurine, only one of size and material? I would argue that although size and material are important factors in defining the genre, there are also, more importantly, conceptual and contextual differences at work. It seems important here to question and define the differences between a figure and a figurine since both play such an important and seminal role in defining an essential aspect of the contributions of ceramics as an autonomous, specific and independent art form.

In fact, there are three aspects to distinguish the figurine from the figure. The first is scale, the figurine is usually smaller; the second is surface, since the figurine as a specific ceramics genre, is usually glazed, with a polychrome, naturalistic, descriptive surface, something in itself rather rare for figurative sculpture, especially when other materials than clay are used, which is usually the case. Polychromy of surface is one of the distinctive formal aspects of ceramics in relation to sculpture, along with volumetric form, of course. Clay, if we make exception of the transitional use of the material in casting, is actually rarely used, relative to other materials, to create life size figurative sculptures. The third aspect is that the figurine is hollow and the process of its making (casting, molding, coiling, etc.) implies the formation of a hollow shell and it is this empty interior that defines the formal qualities of the work. One can tell or feel that the form is hollow. Within figurative sculpture, the form reads as mass and the directional pressure of the work is from the exterior toward the core, while the reverse is true for hollow forms. Solid, massive forms are imploding while hollow forms are exploding, figuratively speaking, and

their directional energy is in direct opposition to sculpture made and experienced as mass. This is even true when the figurine is not actually hollow but instead modeled solid. To state it again, since it is such a crucial, important point, ceramics as a material has the particular property to often retain after firing, and this needs to be repeated again, the pneumatic, plastic and malleable aspect of the original material, clay. When this material is used to represent figures or bodies made of flesh, this effect is even more noticeable and efficient.

The figure, within sculpture (to make a broad yet workable generalization), is basically independent of its surrounding context. It creates, embodies and contains its own context in a conceptual fashion, internally, intrinsically. It has what art historians call “independent life”. The environment in which the figure, the statue, the sculpture is placed only reinforces that implied, internalized context. This physical, external context is not necessary for meaning to operate. The work remains independent and complete in itself. Even outside a church or religion even, a crucifix remains a crucifix, for example. This historical aspect of sculpture has been, of course, greatly challenged and contested by much contemporary art and it is not a tenable argument anymore. Today, most art is not only totally dependent on context but basically doesn’t exist outside that (institutional) context. Anyway and on the other hand, the figurine is always in relation to a context and operates effectively only within that context. For example, the base of a sculpture, a figure, a statue, is there basically for structural reasons and if it carries information about the nature of the space occupied by the figure, it remains nonetheless independent from the surrounding space, like the ground on which I stand is independent from myself. The base or the plinth on which a figure stands is like a frame for an image, a picture. It creates a distinct border between two separate, irreconcilable entities, the world of the image and the real world, each operating in a completely different manner. With the figurine, on the other hand, the base operates in a completely different way. Even without such a distinction, the sculptural figure, the statue, remains framed by its external context. For the figure, the base or support or the plinth, all act as framing devices that are independent to the work and it is this transitional aspect that makes it possible for the sculpture to relate to the larger world, with little to no transition. Likewise, the energy of the sculpture is directed from the outside toward the core (the operative nature of mass), while the energy of the figurine (and the volume) is directed from its center to the exterior, the outside, to the larger world. The figure, the sculpture is separate from the world, independent from it, and it emerges into reality as a transformation of what was

previously undefined. While the figurine (like the pot) is integral to the world, a part of it, in continuity with it. The base for the figurine is like a condensation of the ground to which it connects. The figurine operates in a fluid environment that embraces its surroundings, while remaining mysterious. The figurine (like the pot) is also positioned in a vertical axis in relation to the ground, like bodies standing in space. The base of the figurine is not only there to support the image, it also provides a context, an environment that is integral to the visual, esthetic experience as well as the meaning of the work. This is particularly true for the Rococo figurine of the 18th Century (the golden age of the genre) in Europe. The figurine is nonetheless also dependent on its external context and is greatly modified by the environment in which it operates. Moving from the showcase to the table to the museum, in each context the object acquires a new function and a new identity. In fact, for this reason alone, it works much more like an object does, acquiring a new meaning depending on context while retaining the same identity. A cup is always a cup independent of where it finds itself but its meaning changes depending on context. Images (sculptures, etc.) reverse that proposition.

The figurine is one of the great contributions of ceramics to art history and to culture, along with the pot and the brick. It doesn't do so in a practical, functional way, like the other two, but as a poetic, metaphorical reflection of society in its hybrid nature between image and object, combining the two, as do containers. Figurines operate formally like other ceramic objects do, basically and also conceptually, and I could go as far as to state that they operate like pots, vessels and any other ceramic containers in such a way, as well. The figurine is a typically specific ceramics genre, like pottery, and both are basically identical, conceptually.

The material nature of the figurine as ceramics is not altogether irrelevant. It is important to keep in mind that what differentiates ceramics from other art forms and provides its specificity (again!) is not only the use of clay as a basic, formative substance, but much more importantly the fact that the form is volumetric, hollow and materialized from the inside-out, while its surface remains distinct from the form itself. These aspects are also present in the figurine, even if less obviously as far as volume is concerned, than it is with clay pots and buildings made with bricks and tiles. Nonetheless, the figurine in the materialization of a volumetric space, in the representation of human and animal bodies (themselves volumetric containers), in its use of clay as a transformable, plastic, pneumatic material and in its use of molds (themselves hollow, volumetric containers used

to make other hollow, volumetric forms). And the surface of the figurine is generally painted, decorated with colors, patterns and images that may describe and reference the form, yet remain independent from it, procedurally, visually and conceptually. This surface is another layer of information added to the form.

The Rococo swirls and curlicues of the base, which seem to gather the ground around the figure in the conceptualization of context and physical space, permit a psychological and physical transition between the scene and the world, providing in their continuous, connected curves a sinuous, uninterrupted flow between the two, in a combination of line and surface that reaffirms the seeming contradiction between continuity and disruption, and proposing to us an ideal, valid space for contemplation and reverie. The object then belongs to an un-determinate, all embracing and fluid environment and the figures realistically appear as if transforming the vague, ambiguous and formless nature of the decorative space. The base, however stylized and abstracted is never a frame, another separate element. It never operates a break. Like a frame would, but a TRANSITION instead, like the lip on a bowl. The complexity of these seemingly light, fanciful, frivolous, superficial and dismissible objects is far greater than usually realized.

The figurine has always been the subject of a rather intense love/hate relationship, adored and revered by some while rejected and despised by others. This extreme relation is in itself symptomatic of its great power, to seduce and to repel, as it leaves no one indifferent. The great classicist J.J. Winkelmann (1717–1769) who lived at the height of the golden age of the figurine, said of these very popular objects, at the time: “Porcelain is almost always made into idiotic puppets.” A common reaction from authorities when confronted with a phenomenon beyond their understanding is to be dismissive. This makes them feel powerful and even more authoritative. Such “intelligent” reaction is still well spread today.

The two great figurine modelers are Johan Joachim Kandler at Meissen (1706–75) and Franz Anton Bustelli (1723–63) at Nymphenburg, both in Saxony, at the times, now in Germany. Meissen is where European porcelain was first rediscovered (following precedents in China) by Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and Johan Friedrich Bottger in 1708–09. To make a figurine an original would have been modeled in wax, another highly tactile and pneumatic material, from which a plaster mold, in multiple parts was made. It may have been necessary, for the more complex figures and certainly for groups, to cut

apart the object into independent sections (the limbs from the body, for example), and make independent molds of each section. From these molds, clay impressions would be taken, by pressing the material into the mold or again by filling the interior cavity of the mold with liquid clay slip. Then, all the different parts would be joined together, to be dried, glazed, fired and then painted with over-glaze enamels, which would require another firing to fuse permanently the bright colors to the underlying glaze. J.J. Kandler is the more prolific of the two (he lived much longer as well) and his work is more ambitious and polyvalent and he is justly considered the greatest porcelain figurine modeler ever. He specialized in *commedia del'arte* groups as well as elaborate, multiple character scenes, hunting tableaux and mythological or religious set-ups, highly dramatic and theatrical. He also modeled, with J.F. Eberlein (1695–1749), a life size menagerie of animals in porcelain (including a rhinoceros) for the Japanese Palace in the garden of Frederick the Great in Dresden, but now dispersed in museums all over the world. These show the difficulty of using the new porcelain material, highly vitrified and subject to excessive shrinkage and distortion, in the making of large scale works and his large animals exhibit numerous cracks and flaws yet retain a vitality and naturalness that is quite efficient despite their translation in such an artificial, hard, vitreous, shiny and white substance. Porcelain is highly vitrified and at the end of the firing, it is actually very soft and responds to gravity in a phenomenon called pyroplasticity. Figurines, in their vulnerable structural composition, are very susceptible to that effect. Kandler's monkey orchestra, representing in animal caricature various members of the court, is one of his many masterpieces, despite the miniature, diminutive nature of each musicians, 15 cm. high. Animals, like pots but even more so, also provide a direct formal association with human forms but most importantly, animals and their activities are metaphorical for human behaviors and human situations and there are countless examples of animal representations acting as substitutes for humans in all their follies. Figures of animals in ceramics would deserve a separate study, all to themselves. Kandler is also celebrated for his Swann dinner service, designed and made for the director of the Meissen porcelain factory, Count Bruhl, possibly the most over the top set of dishes ever made, now also dispersed in various collections and museums worldwide (see "Food" chapter). On the other hand, Bustelli is at his best in single, animated, torqued and twisted figures of *commedia del'arte* characters, and of mythological allegories of the seasons or the muses. His sensibility is more gracious, elegant and lyrical than Kandler yet both are masters at modeling the figure form in a manner that will create completion only once it receives the added coating of the clear glaze, adding its slim, yet perceptive layer to the overall shape. The over-glaze enamels

painted on the fired glaze surface and fused in another low temperature firing, complete the rich, ornate, sumptuous and ostentatious visual effects. The painters nonetheless make full use of the lush, translucent, luminous whiteness of the paste, as seen through a clear glaze, especially for the faces, hands and any exposed skin which all receive minimal yet very fine painting of soft blushes of pink colors on cheeks.

The original European figures were produced for elaborate dining ceremonial practices in palaces and aristocratic houses, then later also for the bourgeoisie imitating them. Prior to the rediscovery of porcelain in Europe these elaborate, theatrical set pieces for the tabletop would have been made with perishable, impermanent sugar. The figurines were set on “plateaux”, now quite rare. One surviving example is a flat mirror about two meters long, and encircled by a small gilt balustrade on which a large number of porcelain figurines could be set once the surface had been covered with a miniature garden, complete with foliage, tiny edges and walks, mirror ponds and even streams and moving clockwork pieces, that would be put into motion during the celebrations. The nobility also delighted in “sand” gardens as table centerpieces, with elaborate patterns in various colors all dribbled unto the plateau, by a professional *sableur* (sand-man), who sometimes performed his difficult task in front of the assembled guests. He would then cover his creation with a glass sheet to preserve it; on and around this creation, the figures would be placed along with miniature fountains, in imitation of formal French gardens. At first, the figures were made with sugar or cookie dough but these ephemeral *fantaisies* later gave way to more durable and precious pieces of porcelain and at times, even silver. The switch to porcelain permitted more complex compositions, more realistic colors and the reuse of the figurine in new ways each time. Porcelain also gave permanency to these objects and they came to us through time loaded with information about society and usage, mostly around costumes, hairstyles, etiquette and social relations. The composition of the single figures as well as the groups is conceived on a fully tri-dimensional manner and this spatial articulation must be experienced in the round as well. They are meant to be seen close-up, organized on the table in a theatrical setting using numerous groupings around a theme. They were part of a complete table setting focused on an elaborate centerpiece that provided the central motif of the “play” being performed by the organization of figurines. This is how they are really meant to be experienced and the only true way to appreciate their full glory, slowly, over time and in the elaborate social context of banquets. Today, debased versions that do much harm by association to the extraordinarily complex, formally and culturally refined originals, have

subverted in our mind much of their inherent potency to reduce them to the level of knick-knacks and brick-a-bracks in showcases in home collections and even in museum collections. Royal Doulton figurines as sold on the Shopping Channel, are particularly vapid examples of that degenerescence. They are the very embodiment of kitsch in their denial of the disagreeable physicality of the world, in a nostalgic idealization of a past that bears no resemblance to its reality.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the potteries of Staffordshire in England also produced large quantities of figurines for the popular market and these tend to be of great charm as well as very interesting and informative from an historical perspective. Like posters or calendars now, they brightened people's homes at a time when ceramics was the most colorful and cheerful objects accessible to the masses. They come in all kinds of sizes (relatively small, nonetheless) and shapes and they refer, like posters and calendars now, to celebrities, royalty, famous actors, politicians, sport figures and sporting events but also murders and trials and other current events. They show us the social mores of the time, and they often are moralistic about drinking, gambling, prostitution and other vices. They also portray happy family life and Bible stories and other literary references. These ceramic figurines reveal the real economic and social environment of the day and give us access to the intimate lives of ordinary people, before photography. In opposition to the faked artificiality of "Royal Doulton" figurines of today, they reflect the real life of real people, with great freshness and charm, something many contemporary artists have realized in their re-interpretations of the figures, which enjoys a great revival in ceramic art right now. Canadian artist Shary Boyle's porcelain works are a good example, among many, of this hybridation of the classical format of the romantic figurine with disturbing, political subject matter.

Like photography, figurines nonetheless provide for the efficient capture and release of a moment in time, even if often tainted with sugary nostalgia and romantic, sentimental overtones.

Terracotta Figurative Sculpture:

Is a sculpture, whether figurative or not, made with fired clay a ceramics sculpture? By this I mean, is it to be classified under the category of ceramics, with all that implies, or the category of sculpture, both understood as distinct, autonomous art forms. Of course,

like for all forms of categorization, the difference between these two three-dimensional explorations of space in the visual arts can be fluid, permeable, and various hybrids are not only possible but necessary at times. As I have argued before, in my opinion there is nonetheless very little common ground, beyond three-dimensionality, between ceramics and sculpture. Both operate using distinct concepts, ceramics being essentially a form of object making, sculpture intrinsically a form of image making. The concepts at work in ceramics, mainly through pottery and vessel making, are function and decoration. In ceramics sculpture, compared to pottery, function is replaced by form and decoration is replaced by surface. The forms and the surfaces of ceramics sculpture are different from the forms and the surfaces of other types of sculpture. There are also specific differences between a ceramics sculpture and a sculpture made with fired clay. In the case of ceramics sculpture, specific concepts are at work, beyond the use of a material, clay. One more time, the form needs to be generated as a volume, with the interior pressure activating the shape from the inside to the outside. The surface of that volumetric form needs to be distinct from the form, visually as well as conceptually, i.e. the surface is in a conceptual rapport with space and with spatial representation that is distinct and specific from other pictorial representations in other art forms. To put it simply again, ceramics does what only ceramics can do. Of the three conditions necessary for anything to be ceramics (fired clay, volumetric form and distinct surface), at least two must be present for the object to be a ceramics object or a ceramics sculpture. If only fired clay is operating, then the result is a sculpture made with clay (used purely as a material, like any other material used by a sculptor) and it needs to be assessed, analyzed, appreciated, understood and categorized using criteria and standards that are appropriate for sculpture as an art form. This is a crucial distinction and the core of my argument throughout these essays.

This being said, it remains that a variety of sculptural objects in fired clay combine aspects of both ceramics and sculpture and in such case, exceptional nonetheless, an understanding of both art forms is necessary for a complete understanding and analysis of the work to take place.

An effective example can be found in the work of Clodion (1738–1814), a rococo to neo-classical French sculptor who specialized in terracotta (the term means “fired earth” in Italian) portraits and mythological groups, usually modeled quarter size to the human form. The smaller scale itself provides a possible association with figurine groups, and some of his work was produced in editions, in press-molded biscuit porcelain by Sevres. Yet his work remains otherwise firmly grounded in the tradition of sculpture, stylistically

and esthetically. His use of a pink to reddish, unglazed clay to act as an efficient substitute for naked flesh is particularly commendable. Despite the fact that his compositions often include pottery and vessel references, he never himself made an independent pot in his life but participated in the decoration of vases for his brothers who worked in the decorative arts (today they would be interior decorators and designers and would have a show on TV). His training and his stylistic approach to subject matter in its conceptual use of representation in three-dimensional space are all clearly sculpture related.

Other examples are the fired clay sketches (called *bozzetto*, singular, in Italian) that sculptors would make as studies for larger works, from the Renaissance on, until the end of academic training for sculptors, remnants of which still exist and survive (I predict a resurgence in the near future for this kind of structured technical training in art) in various academies in various parts of the world, China being a case in point. From Michaelangelo to Bernini to Rodin, terracotta sketches are the staple of the sculptor's studio, like the sketch drawing is for the painter. Once dried, at times partly hollowed out and then fired, they acquire the identity of individual, discrete objects and can even attain the status of autonomous works of art, depending on the importance of the maker, the degree of finish and the success of the exercise. Here again, *bozzetti* (plural) belong to the domain of sculpture more than that of ceramics yet they remain interesting and informative examples of the expressive potential of clay as a particular tool in image making, one with its own intrinsic potential for significant form.

Unglazed figurines in porcelain are also very particular. The soft whiteness of the highly vitrified clay conveys flesh and skin much better than the shiny glaze does, the glaze tending to cover up details and removing much information and realism to the modeling. In my opinion, it is actually this artificiality of glazed figurines that is their main esthetic attribute. Yet, very few modelers are sensitive enough to compensate within the form itself for the added layer of glaze that will complete the image. Kandler is a rare example of someone who was clearly aware of this problem and his work shows a sophistication not always found in the work of his followers and imitators. In contrast, by leaving the white porcelain unglazed, the realism of the modeling is greater and closer to what could be obtained with marble or ivory, for example. At times, the "biscuit", which is the term given to unglazed porcelain figurines, will be painted with over-glaze enamels

but in most cases it is left in its pure, white form. The best examples are from Sevres, from the 1750's and are modeled after paintings by Francois Boucher.

In a completely different mode and different part of the world, in India, for certain festivals, elaborate clay figurative sculptures will be modeled and then painted with bright colors, to be thrown into the river at the end of the celebrations, in a ritual repeated each year. I know of only one temple in India with ceramic statuary, the Meenaskshi temple, which has 33,000 figures covering its whole surface, Since they are not glazed but painted, they have to be regularly refreshed and restored, every dozen years or so.

The Contemporary Ceramics Figure:

Realistic representations of the human form in art have enjoyed a revival recently, notably in painting, less so in sculpture actually (despite obvious and exceptional examples, like Anthony Gromley in England), after years of relative neglect throughout the 20th Century. It remains that realism in the visual arts and specifically as it pertains to the human form, retains a certain flavor of unease. Figurative art is still somewhat perceived as academic, based on skill and technique more than expressive imagination and conceptual rigor. In sculpture particularly, highly realistic figurative work is still rather rarely addressed seriously by critics and curators, for a variety of reasons, among them the fact that this approach to image making, where the human body is the focus of the representation, necessitates a high degree of "talent" and skill and the application of techniques basically not taught in most art schools anymore. An exception to this is China and in other "socialist" countries, where art students are still uniformly trained as they were in the 19th Century in the rest of the world, and where admission is highly competitive and reserved for those clearly demonstrating not only exceptional abilities but also the drive, passion, dedication and single-mindedness necessary to become a professional artist. We have seen recently, with the reopening of China (and Russia, too), a lot of representational, figurative art coming out of these kind of art schools, and this is bound to have an impact (positive) not only on the art market, where the impact has been mostly felt so far, but on stylistic developments in art making itself and on the education systems in art schools everywhere.

In the Visual Arts, in another reversal for the art form, expectedly, there is one exception where realistic figuration has been very much alive, uninterruptedly and

expanding in the last century and this is in ceramics (surprise!). Most of the work being produced in figurative ceramics sculpture demonstrates high skill yet most of it also lacks a convincing quality that would make it acceptable and meaningful outside the rather inbred, embracing, democratic yet overall non-rigorous ceramics world, where laxity is the norm and where work is celebrated that would be irrelevant or dismissed elsewhere. It is important to remember that much of that judgment, in art circles, is based on prejudice. Nonetheless, much such ceramics sculpture and much figurative and abstract ceramics sculpture would be perceived, rightfully, as second (or even third) rate sculpture, if judged and analyzed using criteria acceptable and used by contemporary sculpture standards. Yet within the ceramics world, where the very idea of standards is almost non-existent, much ceramics sculpture which would never be exhibited in a sculpture context, shown in a gallery that presents contemporary sculpture, featured in a sculpture magazine, etc., are being made by ceramics “sculptors” who could never be given a teaching position in a sculpture department anywhere, yet are nonetheless embraced by the ceramics world as if they represented the future of the field and the saviors of the practice, when in fact they represent the laxity and immaturity of the art and its endemic inferiority complex. It is my impression that insecure artists who would not be taken seriously anywhere else end up in ceramics programs with lax standards where anything goes, and then act as “luminaries” in academia where they perpetuate this sad state of affairs by teaching others to emulate them. There are notable exceptions to this, yet they are few and far between.

This laxity around standards for ceramic sculpture nonetheless permits the creation of very exciting work, since the *laissez-faire*, anything goes attitude of the ceramic environment often gives permission for exceptional work to be made, work that may not have been made otherwise in the much more restrictive and prescriptive (and yes, conventional) world of acceptable art and sculpture.

The best examples are the work of artists who were trained as potters, whose work is still informed by and engaged with pottery as a valid, relevant form now, and whose practice is deeply informed by ceramics concepts, beyond the material they use, that is to say by volumetric form and by a surface that is articulated as distinct from that form. I am thinking specifically of Akio Takamori and Jun Kaneko, of Viola Frey and Robert Arneson in the USA, and of Philip Eglin in the U.K., among others.

Robert Arneson is a great exemplary example. His seminal work embodies the specific nature of ceramics and of figurative ceramics in the visual arts in the second half of the 20th Century, like no one else. He never wavered from his convictions, so rigorously demonstrated by the scope, breath and depth of his work in ceramics sculpture, that ceramics was a serious, appropriate, particularly relevant art form for the times, uncompromisingly. Of course, throughout his life, critics and writers on art denigrated his work as light, trite, stale, unimportant and too regional to be relevant. The fact that it was often funny, and made fun of itself and of “art”, did not help with his detractors. Humor and lightness are usually seen as irrelevant subjects for serious art. The dedication he put into his studio practice, while being an influential and inspiring teacher, and the convincing, uncompromising nature of his oeuvre as a whole, proves them wrong. He did this in his characteristic manner by making ambitious work that appear, wrongly, humorous and ridiculous, inconsequential and even stupid at times, and by focusing primarily on self-deprecating self-portraits. Arneson’s self-portraits may seem narcissistic, from a superficial reading. In fact, in most cases, since one must admit that the artist goes there at times, they are not at all. The self-image in his work can instead be perceived to represent the other, the average human being, and in many cases it acts as an archetype, to represent everyman and even nobody really, in the guise of the image of the artist himself. Going beyond this superficial impression of funniness and lightness, the work then demonstrate a critical intelligence and reveals a subversive vision of contemporary culture second to none. Novelist Milan Kundera wrote, I paraphrase, that lightness in art is misunderstood and non-appreciated, that the joining together of important subject matter to a light form (be it a novel, or a ceramic object) makes manifest the drama of our existence in all its terrible insignificance. This emphasis on self-portraiture in the work of Robert Arneson creates a focus on the self as representation, as substitute for the other: This is me as a human, and you are me as I am you. The self in Arneson’s work becomes an archetype for all humanity and his own familiar image becomes a substitute for anybody and nobody in particular, not even himself. The self-portraits, the grandmothers and the businessmen of his contemporary and fellow Californian Viola Frey, equally ambitious and equally successful in their own way, operate in a similar way. I want to argue here that the representation of the self in their work acts as an image and has no substantive meaning, in fact. In writings about their work (Frey, Arneson), one finds out all kind of details about their life and this focus on biography and on a personal narrative bypasses any real analysis of the work to focus, needlessly and stupidly, on the maker, instead. In the process, the writers obfuscate the

work almost completely, to such a degree that I consider such writing as an insult to the work and to the artist as well. The work is ignored by this focus on the irrelevant (largely) personality of the maker, however interesting that personality may have been. But that is the quality of writing on ceramics we get now.

Working today and following in their footsteps, Akio Takamori re-imagines the figurative potential of ceramics in his seminal vessels and more recently, in his simplified, abstracted forms that are then more realistically painted, in dripped, calligraphic brushstrokes, to define the features, the dress, the details of the overall figures. These are constructed from memories of his childhood in Japan or re-workings of figures found in representational art, notably paintings by the European masters. Their presence in space, despite their often diminutive size, is as potent as living figures. In contrast to Takamori, whose surfaces are descriptive and to a degree illustrative, as they provide information directly related to the figure itself, Philip Eglin's surfaces on his figurative sculptures (totally and absolutely ceramic sculptures), are contesting and challenging the supremacy of form over surface, in a fight between the two that greatly adds to the dynamism and power of his work. In a very bold and gutsy mixture of the two, Eglin takes significant risks. These "messy" and disruptive surfaces could easily destroy the work and a less brave maker would not dare to add such layers of information to these elegant and deftly made figures. Yet, without their bold and exciting surfaces, Philip Eglin's figures would lose their main operative and singular aspect and their significance and contribution, to art and to ceramics, would be greatly diminished. The audacity of his work consists in articulating so convincingly the conflict form/surface that is so essential to potent ceramic works.

The Contemporary Figurine:

If figurative ceramics sculpture is its own particular genre within ceramics, in my opinion the most interesting work is nonetheless done within the category of the figurine, which has seen a revival of importance lately, all over the world. Much figurative ceramics sculpture seems invested in a stylistic approach to form where personal expression and sensibility is still central, at a time when all visual arts are moving away from such focus on individuality (so endemic within Modernism). If there is a return to skill in art, and to technique in making, it remains nonetheless subservient to a deeper connection to the real world beyond the limited viewpoint of the individual. It is in the contemporary figurine

in ceramics that can be found works that investigate this connection with the realities of contemporary life, with the most efficiency. A pioneer in this type of work was (is) California artist Viola Frey. It may appear strange if not altogether inappropriate to some who are familiar with her work that I would single out Viola Frey as a figurine artist, since her work is recognized and emblematic for over life-size, large scale, ambitious and impressive figure works. Yet her work remains deeply informed by the figurine as a particular genre, at all levels, esthetically, stylistically and thematically. If large, towering figures are her signature objects, she also made other types of works, so many in fact that one wonders how such a short, unassuming and by the end not so young anymore woman could make such quantities of impressive works and of such consistent quality too; being a compulsive, creative maker probably helped. She also had a point to make, working in reaction to a male dominated art world that did not consider women artists, and ceramics either, as valid. She did that forcefully and eloquently in both cases, and partly through her sheer, impressive output. Anyway, these smaller works and groups often include direct references to figurines, junk store found objects, knick-knacks as well as pottery forms (her original training in ceramics was as a potter). But it is also important here to remember that small, miniature even, scale is not an essential or even important aspect of the figurine as a specifically ceramics genre. What is characteristic of the figurine as an art form and constitutes its specificity is its relation to context, as well as the fact (oh! no, not again), that form generated by volume receives a surface that remains distinct from the form, all aspects present in the work of Viola Frey. A Rodin bronze, for example, may also be hollow, but the form of the Rodin, although it may even had been modeled in clay originally, has been generated by mass, by piling up material on top of material, in a very different additive process than the coiled figures of Viola Frey or Akio Takamori. The void inside the cast bronze by Rodin is empty. It is not significant, in itself. On the other hand, the space inside a Viola Frey (or a Takamori, a Philip Eglin), or other figurative ceramics similarly made, is pregnant and conceptually relevant since it is that void that articulates the form. It is not empty but full, meaningful, significant, like the air keeping a balloon under pressure.

In China, artist Liu Jianhua makes highly decorated and decorative large porcelain plates, holding in their visually functional space images of women, in various states of dress and undress, new types of Goddesses, with deliberately missing body parts, like broken Antique marbles. The large scale of the familiar plates (as much as half meter in diameter) removes them from the domestic space and contextualizes them as frames to

reinforce the power and nature of both the plates and the figures as images as well as objects. In order to get a modicum of interest and respect in the art world, a strategy often used consists in scaling-up the work, to monumentality, if possible. This use of impressive scale has been clearly demonstrated by photography, for example. It doesn't always work convincingly, though. In Liu's work, while being realistic and believable reproductions of actual dinner plates, their extreme size reinforces their effectiveness as images, and the plate here is an image of a plate the way the figure is the image of a female body. A first, superficial reading could imply a rather sexist viewpoint on the representation and objectification of female bodies, dismembered, passive, in various states of undress. But the intent of these critical choices is actually political and social commentary. The allegorical intent is to imply connotations around the potential of dress and fashion to embody economic conditions and social systems, while the plate itself is the potent metaphor for consumption and consumerism i.e., capitalism and consumer culture, both invading China at a fast pace. The implied preciousness of the objects and their exquisite craftsmanship (made collaboratively by experts in the porcelain studios of Jingdezhen, mostly by female factory workers for the painting and decorating) makes them highly desirable. We are invited to vicariously touch and caress their bodies with our gaze. The dress style itself, the chongsam, was in style in 1930's Shanghai and acts here as a symbol of capitalism. For us now, the dress may reflect a post-colonial society and the new utopia of post-communism unifying leftist revolutionary ideology with capitalist consumerism. The nostalgia creates a further distance from the sexual connotation based on surface and exterior appearances and the dress also embodies the skin as is the porcelain itself, as a referent to skin. The absence of arms and heads is not just a metaphor for passivity and powerlessness but acts also as a strategy to de-personalize the figure, to deliberately ignore the self. Here, skin and face are re-absorbed into the white, brilliant, smooth material itself, porcelain, in a gesture that is at once desiring and bordering on violence (sexism?). Skin as material, skin as plate, skin as dress, skin as flesh, skin as power.

In contemporary Cuba, artist Esterio Segura uses the naked, sexualized female figure as a substitute for his own beleaguered and repeatedly vanquished country. His figurine groups are modeled in white earthenware, a more common, more readily available material in Cuba and less prized, more proletarian and egalitarian. If porcelain is a particularly aristocratic material, originally anyway, the figurine, as familiarly understood and experienced, has now become a particularly petit bourgeois genre. Segura's still

clearly reference 18th Century European Rococo porcelain models and the white earthenware is semiotically referencing porcelain. The female figure represents Cuba as a “mulatta”, an hybrid combining the black and white races, whose dark skin is contested and denied by the whiteness of the material. In itself, this color reversal implies obvious commentary around skin, race, and social position. The mulatta is engaged in graphic copulation with a male father figure clearly recognizable as Karl Marx. These elegant, beautifully and skillfully modeled figures are presented on mounts that incorporate an etched plate, the matrix for prints on paper, holding pornographic images inspired by Japanese ukiyo-e wood block prints. By bringing together different materials, techniques, processes, concepts and ideologies, styles and geographies, these figurine groups develop complex ideas around gender, sexuality, race, culture imperialisms and political subjugation.

In the 1980's, Jeff Koons commissioned large, figurative porcelain sculptures (in Capodimonte, Italy) that were made by expert modelers in factories, under his guidance and his precise specifications and exacting standards. These large-scale figurines (for their referent and their esthetic is clearly that of the figurine) often include reference to nakedness and sexual situations and fetishes, but never blatantly graphic as his other work in glass and photography. His “Michael Jackson and Bubbles” is said to be the largest porcelain sculpture in the world. Porcelain, we all know, is the highest ranking material in the hierarchy of ceramics, much as terracotta is perceived as superior to plaster in the sculpture genre. Since porcelain is considered the material of the highest echelon for ceramics, by making the largest porcelain sculpture in the world, Koons was also therefore, by extension making the best ceramic sculpture in the world, which may explain, partly its phenomenal monetary value. The problem is that the object suffers from obfuscation of truth in art institutions in order to maintain its status and confer legitimacy by ignoring embarrassing facts, as is so often the case in the obfuscating art context. When exhibited or catalogued, “Michael Jackson and Bubbles” (there is an edition of three) is listed as being made of porcelain. This is only partially true. It is almost impossible to fabricate, dry and fire such a large porcelain object and avoid warping and cracking in the process. When Kandler tried with his menagerie of life size animals, the pieces cracked, warped and deformed substantially and logically. The same happened at Capodimonte with Koons's work. Anyone familiar and sensitive to ceramics surfaces can see clearly that the object had been spray painted with white and gold paint and covered with a clear plastic coating that imitates a glaze rather poorly in fact. All of this maquillage is

necessary to cover repaired cracks that were unavoidable in these circumstances. In fact, the thing has been camouflaged to such a degree that it could actually be made with any other materials, but porcelain. Only the roses stuck on the base retain any ceramic quality whatsoever. So the label for the object while exhibited should read not only “porcelain” as has always been the case exclusively and presently, but also: “epoxy bonding, white and gold paint and clear acrylic coating”. Of course, this would destroy the aura and mysticism implied by “porcelain” as the embodiment of purity and preciousness, so essential to the perception as well as the monetary value of the work. I doubt this necessary correction will ever be made by museum curators considering the lack of rigor and the depth of their ignorance. Anyway, I am probably the only one who cares.

Other artists to consider:

British sculptors Tony Cragg and Anthony Gormley who frequently use clay and ceramics in their work. Also Mary Frank, Giuseppe Penone, Thomas Schütte, Ah Xian, Jean-Pierre Larocque.

The Figure:

Akio Takamori, Doug Jeck, Judy Fox, Philip Eglin, Judy Moonelis, Kukuli Velarde, Marilyn Lysohir, Beverly Mayeri, Sergei Isupov, Michael Lucero, Richard Shaw, Stephen Schofield, Sally Michener, Adrian Rees, Marian Heyerdahl, Cristyl Boger, Susan Low-Beer, Jun Kaneko, Robert Brady, Ann Roberts, Carmen Dyonise, Johan Creten, Georges Jean-Clos, Esther Shimazu, Tracey Heyes, Neil Brownsword, Trudy Golley, Mo Jupp, Imre Schramel, countless others all over the world.

The Figurine:

Ann Agee, Russell Biles, Carole Windham, Pepon Osorio, Marco Paulo Rolla (with his broken figurines with a skeleton inside!), Lazlo Fekete, Richard Slee, Michael Flynn notably his contemporary interpretations of Harlequins, Patti Warashina, Rebecca Warren, Brendan Tang, Liliane Porter, Janis Wunderlich, Cynthia Consentino, Jaime Hayon and his new figurines for Lladro porcelain in Portugal, Shary Boyle in Canada as well as Joe Fafard and the forgotten or ignored yet very important work of Patrick Hurst, and also new works by Mark Ryden, Barnaby Barford and Justin Novak with his “Disfigurines”. These are some of

the best examples of very exciting contemporary uses of the figurines in ceramics, a new interest that is constantly growing.

And keep in mind Walt Disney studios, which issues numerous porcelain figurines of all of their characters, all the time.

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 the 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. Visual art is often described as distinct from other forms of human expression by being concerned with pure form. 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 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 purity and emptiness is a form of denial 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 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 functional objects still find constant resistance to be seriously and legitimately included within the art category.

When sexual representations are included in the equation image/object, the problem complexifies. Objects and more specifically functional ones, 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.

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 is also what Kundera meant when he stated the 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 similarly psychological. 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 these 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 intentional gesture of exploding the modeled image remains speculative, like so many of our interpretation 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, 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 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.), 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 Touareg use fired clay bed posts that are clearly phallic in form.

The Moche of pre-Columbian Peru:

From around 600 B.C. to the Spanish conquest in the 16th 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 any 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, and they 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, 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 itself an interesting fact considering the universal distribution of most, if not all, 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, usually more subtly, with spouts everywhere in the world. 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, who 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 sex. As I suspected and was expecting, 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. There are pots adorned with vaginas as well, carved or painted on the conventional pottery form and rather bizarre yet fascinating anthropomorphized penises and vaginas, where the genital organs by themselves are given human form.

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 this 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 and 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 but 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 19th 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 amazing, clinical and precise 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.

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 and 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 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 was solid, as is usually the case, the new version is usually hollow. 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. 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. 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.

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 a male issue for the 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 on Greek pots. Many other vessels show scenes 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 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, 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. And if one can write endlessly about sex, it is still difficult to 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 35 years ago, 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, can be found pots shaped like breasts or adorned with nipple-like protuberances (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 England 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 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. 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 in the 19th Century, he was then basically forgotten to be rediscovered only in the mid 1970's. Ohr is arguably America's greatest potter – and I will go so far as to state, the first truly original American artist, 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, 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, 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 a erect phallic shape, glazed in menstrual red. The folds and twists of his 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 token 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 it were 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, if 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 and 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 revisionists 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 to address 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 actually, a context that is, unfortunately, unmentionable, except in passing, 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 interpretation of the 18th Century bourdalou, a vessel made at Sevres for used in church at Versailles for the relief of women during the too long sermons of a long winded priest, Abbe Bourdalou! 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 refer 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.

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 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 cute 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 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. Combined with 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 amazing resilience to time, all 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.

By bringing 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 distinct 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 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.

Other artists to consider:

Marian Heyerdahl, Hans van Bente from Holland, Lin Ligu from China, James Victore "Dirty Dishes", Tulipe Enterprises, Hannah Wilkes, Pierre Charpin and CeramX, Cynthia Rowley's Dirty Dishes for Fishs Eddy, and Simone Leigh from Brooklyn with her vessels and sculptures with multiple breast forms. Also, Matthias Ostermann, Cindy Kolodziejcki, Mark Burns, Johan Creten, David Furman, Dean Adams, Sally Michener, Gary Willimas, Kathy King, Esterio Segura, Matts Liederstam, Matt Nolen, Kevin Stafford, Leopold L.Foulem, Richard Milette, Ken Price, Penelope Kokkinos, Marek Cecula, Vipoo Srivilasa, Tanya Batura, Hugo Kaagman, Daniel Neish, Kevin Petrie, Cary "Candyass"

Leibowitz, Howard Kottler, Anne Davis Mulford, Jeanne Quinn, Jack Thompson, Ann Agee, Janot Blackburn, Akio Takamori, Ryosaku Miwa and Linda Leighton among thousands all over the world.

Chapter Fourteen

Death: The Fragmentation of Time; The Past, the Present and the Future.

“ We are like an ignorant shepherd living on a site where great civilizations have flourished. The shepherd plays with the fragments that pop up to the surface, having no notion of the beautiful structures of which they were once a part.” Alan Bloom.

I will argue here that this last theme, “Death”, is possibly the most important of all in ceramics as it encompasses all the others, interestingly enough. For that reason, death has made appearances all through the other essays, in various forms. Much of the material I will cover here has been addressed before, and like the cyclical nature of time, there will be repetition and reuse of many aspects of ceramics already analyzed. Yet by bringing this material again together, as a whole, another, deeper meaning may surface. It is important to keep in mind that most ceramic objects that came down to us from historical times were originally funerary in purposes and that they were preserved not only due to the particular properties of permanency of the ceramic material itself, but by being buried in the ground as offerings in tombs and left largely undisturbed. Since it is often stated that museums are another form the cemetery takes, one could say that the main purpose of the objects “buried” therein, “in museums”, is still funerary and a culture that takes place mostly within museums and institutions, is a dead culture. A lot of the art we now produce goes straight to the museum or in its extension, the private or corporate collection and only really operates there, on life support if not actually dead. Art in a coma. Our

propensity to uncover objects from past cultures to place them in museums may eventually lead to their actual, real destruction... since the protection the museum offers is tenuous at best. What museums represent are actually the first places to be pillaged when empires fall. Pompeii was preserved intact for 1500 years but it has been deteriorating rapidly since it was discovered and uncovered and there are now talks to rebury the whole place in order to preserve it. I doubt this will ever be done, unless Vesuvius takes charge one more time and reclaims his rightful ownership and reburies the place. Most of the culture we now produce does not need to worry that it will eventually suffer the same fate, since most of what we now produce has no lasting power, physically or otherwise. The museums of the future may be very empty places indeed.

The true material of ceramics is time itself, and a reexamination of its archival nature and potential may offer a renewed sense of meaning and provide further possibilities for inquiry. Even more than architecture, or even mediated, "time-based" technologies, ceramics exists in time more than in space. Ceramics is the art of time, and not finite time at that. The process of making pottery and ceramics is totally dependent on time in a way significantly different from other processes, techniques and art forms. It is a diachronic activity, taking place over different times, with drastic changes in between. Each step is transitory and, after firing, the changes are irreversible. The completed object becomes "eternal", fixed and permanent, for its nature as ceramics cannot be reversed. This particular relation to time is specific to ceramics and constitutes one of its main cultural characteristics.

The experience of ceramics, and of objects in general, is of low intensity but it is very long lasting (potentially, eternity). This is evident within ceramics history in the extensive and continuous record we actually have, since the very beginning of what is called civilization. This temporal nature of ceramics comes with collateral effects. You can either have an art that has great power but only for a short time, like most if not all of contemporary art and all forms of image making, when the powerful experience they provide can be fickle and easily dispersed, or an art that relies on a subtle, light and barely perceptible effect that is released slowly, that operates almost invisibly, but does so over a very long, long time. Ceramics is of the second type. Ceramics embodies stable continuity and it is a reason why it is found in all cultures throughout time, where so much of it probably still resides, sealed up, in the invisibility of the tomb.

If in its physical nature ceramics is fragile and can be easily broken, it is nonetheless permanent and even in shards, it can act as a memorial for the real life of real people, their desire, their struggles, their hopes, as it embodies the passage of time, the fragility of life and the reality of death. In that sense, ceramics is related to the inexplicable, the uncontrollable as well as the unknown. It is used so often in funerary rituals everywhere since it is so clearly connected, in its origins, in its making, in its physical nature and in its various uses, to daily life as it relates to the afterlife, surrounding the mysteries of death as they are connected to the cyclical, returning rhythms of seasons in nature.

The ceramics we are now making are not doing a very good job in fulfilling this responsibility and they have largely lost touch with this connection between life and death. We have now somewhat severed this deep, ancient connection between ceramics and death, a connection we may consider reestablishing again. Whether we do so willfully and intentionally, it remains that what will be left of our passage here in these present times, in the near or distant future, is nonetheless the ceramics we presently make. Scary thought.

In our world, there has been a small yet tangible resurgence of funerary and ritualized objects in the wake of the AIDS crisis, for example, which brought to the forefront again the relationship between life and death and between sex and death, Eros and Thanatos. Many of these objects are in ceramics, for obvious reasons, even if this is done intuitively more than deliberately, as was probably the case historically as well. A memorial to 9-11 in Greenwich Village in New-York City, consists of ceramic tiles mounted on the wire fence around the playground for a public school. Each tile represents one of the dead who perished that day. These kinds of ceramic tile memorials are very common everywhere whether they are connected to death or to other important or ordinary events. They may one day be the only things left to remind us of what happened somewhere, someday. They tend unfortunately to be rather poor, esthetically, but then, the esthetic dimension has but completely disappeared from our world.

If the objects in this book are not the "Art of Now", they will certainly be the "Art of the Future". Very few other art materials, if any, can make that claim. If ceramics is fragile (like life itself) and can be broken easily, and most historical objects are found in fragments and as shards, and as often in the refuse pile and in dumps than in tombs, ceramics is at the same time almost indestructible. It always leaves a trace.

Historical examples:

Historically, ceramic objects were often related to funerary practices and rituals and this is the main reason why most historical ceramics are found as offerings buried with the dead in tombs, from the poorest to the wealthiest. Even before the advent of ceramic technology in the late Neolithic, bodies that were to be buried were often covered first with a coating of iron rich ochre mineral, which is a natural material often used later in the making of ceramics. This intensely chromatic coating, yellow to deep red in hue, actually serves as a clear indication that the body was buried following a clear ritual and these ritualistic burials are the first, earliest examples of funerary practices among humans.

Ceramic replicas as tomb offerings:

Very often, pots for funerary purposes depict various aspects of the life of the deceased or expected life in the beyond. They serve as substitutes for real things, to accompany and serve the corpse in the afterlife and provide the necessities for survival after death. They also often depict the funerary rituals themselves. Probably the earliest connection between ceramics and death comes to us from the pre-historic Villanova culture from Europe. Their potters made funerary jars shaped like buildings, to house the deceased in the afterlife. China, in its particularly deep connection with ceramics in all of its aspects, also demonstrates the use of ceramics in burials from very early on.

The Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Chinese and most meso and south American pre-Columbian cultures, all made ceramic architectural models of buildings, and replicas of tools, of textiles, of furniture, etc.), to be used as substitutes instead of the real things, in tomb offerings. They are not always, rarely in fact, realistic representations of the originals, yet they retain, in form, in color, in texture, even often in scale (although miniature examples are also very common, for obvious reasons), sufficient aspects of the source to maintain the operative power they carry, as implements for the use of the dead in the afterlife. Transferring these objects and materials into ceramics, when they usually were not in that material at all to begin with, provides them with a resistance to time and a permanency they would not have otherwise. There again, we find a symbiotic relation between ceramic objects and death in its rituals and its expectations, connected to transcendent time and eternity. Interesting examples, among many, include Chinese Han and Tang dynasties funerary offerings of ceramic vessels imitating bronze containers, in

both form and surface, bronze being expensive and rare, thus reserved for the wealthy and the powerful, while the green glazed pots based on bronze prototypes could be used as substitutes for those on the lower echelons of society. It seems that these ceramic imitations provided permanency and resilience to time (advantages for objects meant to be buried in the ground and operate for eternity) but also embodied the potency of the originals, whether it be a rare and expensive material like bronze, or a common, ordinary and cheaper one, like cloth, fabric or wood or even food products like fruits and vegetables and livestock of all kinds, in an actual form of trans-substantiation. This substitution of materials also deterred tomb robbers who would then be uninterested in the ceramic objects, worthless as commodities yet potent symbolically for those making the offerings to the deceased. I will speculate here that the distinctive Tang pottery vessels and ceramic objects, with their colorful glazes so different from the domestic wares of the culture, may have been glazed in such a fashion to clearly distinguish them from objects meant for the purposes of the living and thus prevent their pilfering from tombs, to be then used in daily life. They didn't expect that we would desecrate these tombs to transfer their contents to museums and to serve our needs for ornamentation and display of wealth and taste, in the name of scholarship. I actually approve of such practice, as long as we also get to desecrate the museums one day and recycle all this material in yet a new context once more. This transference of value from the material itself to the idea of the material and its symbolism is a characteristic of art's potential for transference of value, something here again probably first found within art practices in ceramics as well.

Pre-Columbian ceramics:

Countless pre-Columbian ceramics traditions use ceramics for funerary purposes and there as elsewhere, these objects were preserved for us by being buried underground in tombs. A fascinating example can be found in pre-Columbian south America, where a large proportion of Moche pots show skeletons and cadavers engaged in sexual acts; skeletons with erections, masturbating, receiving fellatio from living females; two tumescent male skeletons mutually masturbating and skeletons engaged in anal sex, both with living female and even male partners. The connections between these objects and sexuality has been analyzed closely in the preceding chapter. Suffice to remember here that reversals of all kinds are very important in many rituals and reversals are still an important part of the Day of the Dead festivities in Latin America.

The Mimbres and Anazazi pre-Columbian cultures of southwestern United States, roughly between 500 and 1000 C.E., produced thousands of pots found as funerary offerings in tombs. These bowls (and bowls are by far the most common form) were “sacrificed” during the rituals of burial by punching a hole through their base, which is never flat, by the way, in order to release their spirit and remove the object from the space of the domestic, making sure that they would be left undisturbed with the dead, with a “kill” hole, ostensibly releasing the power and energy accumulated through use during life. That is, one more time, until the most recent excavations of looters and archeologists! I have visited the house of a wealthy collector in Phoenix, Arizona whose large bedroom was lined with a continuous shelf, all around the room, holding actual Mimbres and Anazazi pots, one next to the other. There must have been hundreds of them! In historical times, these “sacrificed” bowls were placed upside down over the face of the deceased, providing a channel, a passage for the soul to escape the body and travel to the afterworld. In the cosmogony of the Mimbres, the heavens were seen in the half spherical shape of the sky as defined by the horizon and the sky was imagined as an upside down bowl, and after death, the soul of the dead traveled to the other side of that bowl, to attain the afterworld, from which they were thought to possibly return. The very form of the bowl, upside down, represented the universe. These bowls are equally remarkable for their complex and very beautiful graphic qualities, with the image painted in black on a very distinctive white background (in many cultures, including in ancient Greece, white is often the color of mourning), in a strong contrast of binary opposites found in rituals everywhere. Mayan graves in the Yucatan have also been found with funerary furniture, including strategically placed ceramic plates, also with a “kill” hole, and covering the face of the dead. In many such burials worldwide, there is often clear evidence that pottery was deliberately smashed at the time of burial, rather than broken later while interred. The actual meaning of such smashing of pots in the ritual burials remain unclear and may have varied from culture to culture, but the practice is wide-spread and can be found all over the world.

Attic Greek pottery:

Again, as with the Moche, most Greek pottery was preserved since it was used by the Etruscans of central Italy, who collected vast quantities of it for that purpose, as offerings in their tombs. For the Greeks, these objects were part of everyday life, often used in gathering among men around food and wine (the symposium) or again as prizes for

winning athletes at the Olympic games. As a trophy, Greek Attic pottery was presented filled with olive oil, which was actually the really valuable part of the prize! Although the Greeks had specifically funerary pottery, these were most often placed as effigies in the cemeteries, directly on the ground in which the body was buried. Later, they were eventually discarded in ditches after a while, once their role was completed or relevancy terminated, in their now severed connection to living relatives. These effigy vessels, often of quite large size, often have their base pierced, again to detract them for being used for other purposes. It is the Etruscan who subsequently used domestic Greek pottery, the beautifully painted and decorated vases we are most familiar with, for funerary purposes. They would acquire them on the secondary market, after their usefulness or their style, their fashion, had become irrelevant for the Greeks. This export–import of vases, shifting purposes and meaning in the process, is an early example of cultural exchange and globalization. Anyway, for that reason, most important Greek painted pots were found in Italy from the 17th Century onward, when a rage for archeology swept Europe. Their discovery was basically responsible for the emergence of Neo–Classicism in European decorative arts, remnants of which are still with us today. When Greek vases were first discovered in the Etruscan tombs of central Italy (Etruria), they were first thought to be Etruscan in origin, most logically, and it took a while for scholarship to realize that they actually were Greek and had been acquired, collected and imported by the Etruscans who were great admirers of all things Greek, to serve as offering in their funerary rituals. Contrary to the Greeks who buried their dead directly in the ground, and at times with a separate compartment to receive goods, the Etruscans built elaborate stone chambers and underground structures in which to place their dead. These solid constructions found in vast necropolis were decorated in frescoes with pleasant scenes from the life of the living and fitted with utensils and furniture to serve the dead in the afterlife. Greek attic vessels were an integral part of these furnishings and their presence in the stone mausoleums of the Etruscans of Central Italy, protected them for our present enjoyment. The Etruscans also built life–size fired clay coffins in which the corpse(s) were deposited. The most spectacular and beautiful ones have their cover modeled in full relief with images of the deceased, usually a couple, husband and wife, represented as if at a banquet, while the inferior part of the “coffin” represents the long couch on which they recline. These large, ambitious and elaborate terracotta coffins and sarcophagus are among the most beautiful, moving and celebrated artifacts of the Etruscan culture. They certainly are the best examples of ceramic coffins to be found anywhere. The burial chambers would also contain other ceramic objects called “canope jars”, which contained the viscera of the

deceased when the corpse was embalmed, a practice also found in Egypt, or the ashes if the body had been cremated. Canope jars for the “storage” of internal organs are also common in Egypt, like embalming, of course, but Egyptian examples are usually made of alabaster. Burial jars, often reusing a discarded domestic utensil, were also used to contain the ashes and broken bones of cremated bodies. Such cinerary urns are also found in some Greek burials as well, as they will be found in Celtic Europe later. I know of one interesting contemporary example of a “Mourning Urn with Poem”, made by Afro-American folk artist Georgia Blizzard (1919–2002), now found at the American Folk Art Museum, in New-York City.

Celebrated potter Adelaide Robineau (1875–1929) is supposed to have made her famous “Scarab Vase”, in the Egyptian style then in vogue, for the specific purpose of containing her ashes after her death. Large pots are also often used to contain whole bodies. Such a corpse, placed and buried in a large pot, is positioned in a foetal posture and the vase then becomes the uterine space of the mother. In death, the body is thus ready to be reborn. It is necessary to keep in mind here that in many cultures, vases are considered as manifestations of the female deity, of uterine power, as they hold, protect, preserve and excrete substances for the nourishment of life and the continuation of existence. In such objects as vase, if the exterior is oriented toward life, the dark interior is located on the side of death.

In ancient Athens, the cemetery was located next to the potter’s quarter of the city, in an area called the Keramikeos, from “keramos”, the Greek word for potter’s clay, a name that is at the origin of the word “Ceramics”. There are often direct connections between cemeteries and potter’s quarters or potter’s fields, many of which can be found in the Bible for example. Recently, a development near downtown Los Angeles uncovered such a cemetery, whose only remnants were a few bricks with Chinese characters on them. These ordinary bricks had been marked with the names of Chinese workers who had died there. Later, their remains were dug out and returned to China, but we know who they were from these bricks, which acted as grave markers and are the only remaining historical trace of their life. Stoneware grave markers were very common all over the American South in the 19th Century. They were cheaper than stone monuments and very resistant to weather, as well. The pottery manufacturer Sir Henry Doulton, of “Royal Doulton” fame, is buried in an all-ceramic mausoleum of red terracotta bricks and tiles, in Norwood Cemetery, in London.

Some special practices can also be detected in Athenian funerary practices in the use of different shape for male and female burials, but these probably simply reflect domestic usage rather than gender specific rituals, and we find pots used mostly by men in male burials and vessels used by women on female burials. There is one specifically and uniquely funerary shape in Greek pottery and it is called a "lekythoi". It is a very distinctive shape, based on the basic shape of a perfume container that would have been used by athletes to anoint their bodies after exercise. The lekythoi is larger in size than the perfume bottle on which it is, loosely, based yet it was also used to contain perfumed oil to be deposited with the corpse in the tomb. Since perfumed oil was very expensive, some particularly large lekythoi have a false interior space at the top so they would appear full while containing just a very small quantity of the precious liquid. This can only be revealed with broken vases or on x-ray photographs! Miniature vessels sometimes of ritual shapes, as we have already seen with other cultures, were also used by the Greeks to serve as dedication and sometimes as grave gifts in place of larger specimen of clay or metal. Lekythoi are often painted over a white ground, white being the color of death and mourning in ancient Greece and they often represent sleeping figures or Death carrying the corpse to the grave. This particular representation evolved into the design of the dead hero being carried by his companion from the field of battle, leading eventually to the Pieta in Christianity.

Many Greek funerary vessels have sexual and phallic attributes, and sexuality and phallic themes were considered by the Greeks to be particularly appropriate in a funerary context. All these diverse and complex objects reaffirm the permanency of ceramics to speak of transcendence and communication across time and space, beyond the fleetingness and obsolescence of texts.

Other examples:

In Egypt, votive objects related to funerary practices were often made with Egyptian paste. The practical, functional pottery of the Egyptian always remained unglazed, while many funerary objects and vessels in ceramics are made with the self-glazing "Egyptian paste", which is also bright, shiny and colorful. Funerary vessels in Egypt are usually made of stone, often alabaster, when intended for the rich, while they are made with simple fired clay for the poor. This is another clear example of different ceramic technologies

used one for the living (unglazed pottery), the other for the dead (self-glazing Egyptian paste), as we have seen in Tang China with three color “sancai” wares, reserved for the dead.

In China as well, underground tombs and burial chambers are often lined with ceramic bricks and tiles, embossed with scenes of hunting and gathering as well as erotic images. Elsewhere, ceramic coffins are found in many places, as we have already seen with the Etruscans: Life size sarcophagus in Israel, made like big pots cut length-wise to make the lid, and decorated with a low relief generic portrait of the deceased; six legged coffins from pre-historic southern Arabia; the colorful, decorated glazed tile coffins often found in Islamic mausoleums. Cremation jars are also common just about everywhere, in Neolithic Kansu China, in the Neolithic Jomon culture of Japan, in pre-Inca Peru as well, where they here again sport a modeled image of the deceased, as do other vessels with figurative representations, the first true example of portraiture found in the New World. Funerary ceramic vessels have a special place within most cultures, as they tend to exhibit excessive forms, which may mirror the exaggerations of ritual funerary behavior worldwide. Cypriot funerary vases from the Neolithic are particularly extreme in that regard, with their exaggerated phallic attributes and complex constructions of multiple parts connected by passages between spherical shapes. These unusual and extraordinary objects served as a source for totally different esthetic (and ritual) intentions in the ceramic work of Madame Ramie and her student Pablo Picasso, in Vallauris, France in the 1950's, both reworking the exceptional form for different needs. Ceramic vessels also served to preserve the Dead Sea scrolls, in one more example of ceramics particular cultural importance and role.

Replicas of buildings, even at times whole villages are also found, in miniature, obviously. The size of these buildings relative to the size of the figures around them, their shape, their style, function, decoration as well as the materials, methods and techniques used in their construction can all be deducted from these replicas. Beyond their esthetic value, these representations of architecture and buildings in ceramics, often including scenes of religious or civic rituals, provide critical and important information about specific aspects of life in the times and cultures that would be lost otherwise. The best, most detailed and most beautiful examples are from China. I particularly admire the tall clay jars and vessels found in Song period tombs, surmounted by elaborate depictions of paradise, which include temples and palaces surrounded by mythical animals, gods and

goddesses and other spiritual beings. Architectural models are also very common in pre-Columbian America, especially all over Mexico. The historical connections between these two geographical areas, though migration, may explain this common use of architectural models in their burials.

Ceramics and Violence:

Under the industrial esthetics, we have seen how ceramics and death are also closely related historically in various ways to war and weapons, bombs and armor. It may be interesting to review this material here, again. The Chinese were the first, as the inventors of explosives, to fashion hollow ceramic bombs filled with sharp, cutting porcelain schnarpel. Closer to us, many types of bodily armor worn by soldiers now are composed of numerous high fired ceramic plaques inserted into special vests and, due to the fact that the specially devised ceramic material has the strength of steel yet is much lighter and will not retain heat readily, both obvious disadvantages of metal, they will stop bullets from penetrating further into the target. Armored military vehicles also take advantage of these properties of ceramics to reinforce their shell and protect their content. Likewise, the CIA has now developed a totally ceramic gun with ceramic bullets that, while being as strong as steel, cannot be detected by metal detectors and can thus be secretly introduced into secure areas. Needless to say, the secret of their fabrication is highly guarded, least they fall into the hands of terrorists.

Ceramics tends to have been used mostly for peaceful purposes and for the betterment of humankind, for life more than death. Metal for example has a much more violent and destructive past (Cars and the internal combustion engine have been responsible for the destruction of more of the natural world than any other human invention!). It could be argued that ceramics is the cultural material, a material invented by and for humans, which has contributed the most to positive progress in the advancement of humanity. Its ubiquity and absolute familiarity often prevents us from realizing this simple fact. But without ceramics, the world would be a very different place indeed and a much less pleasant, and beautiful one, at that. All the broken objects and shards that resulted from all these objects are but a record of the violence of life and of history.

It remains that ceramics has been used to foster violence and hatred as well, and the crematory ovens of Auschwitz would be impossible without ceramic bricks. As would crematoriums used for the incineration and disposal of dead bodies, otherwise.

Rituals in life and in death:

In our appreciation of ceramic objects, we generally prefer to consider those objects made for religious or political rituals over those made for the simpler, ordinary needs of domesticity. Those made specifically for funerary needs tend to be very appealing since they present an appearance loaded with symbolism in both their form and their surface, which makes them esthetically more complex and more seductive. Funerary objects are also better preserved and can often be found in excellent condition after being buried in the ground with the dead, while ordinary pots for daily use, even the ornamental and decorated ones, but even more so of the bare and simply practical ones, were eventually broken or just discarded and tossed away on the refuse pile, where they were broken, if that was not already their condition to bring them there in the first place. Very often, pots made for funerary purposes depict various aspects of the life of the deceased or expected life in the beyond. They serve as substitutes for real things, to accompany the buried or entombed body in the afterlife and provide the necessities for survival after death. Many funerary objects are connected to food for these reasons. In pre-Columbian Moche ceramics, most if not all food staples of the culture can be found represented in their funerary ceramics, and this material provides very useful information for anthropologists on the diet of these long gone people and civilizations. The organic plants and animals themselves may not have provided the information that the ceramic objects still contain and transmit through time. Nonetheless, the fact that they were used as offerings in tombs is an important aspect of their role within these societies. In Mayan ceramics, ceramic vessels were used in burials to contain actual food and drink, probably an important part of the funerary rituals but also provided for the needs of the underworld and the afterlife. Dried, encrusted remnants found in these containers confirm the relation between the inscriptions found on these vessels and their content.

Yet, it remains almost certain that ceramic objects used in rituals of all kinds had a purpose and a meaning that was essentially religious, mystical and spiritual, establishing nonetheless and at the same time a social link between people's life in their community as it related to the inexplicable, the uncontrollable in the real world as well as in the afterlife,

in funerary rituals surrounding the mysteries of death as they are connected to the cyclical rhythms of seasons in nature.

On glazes and death:

Glazes in ceramics were used for their esthetic, possibly even symbolic potential, much before they were used for function alone. The earliest examples of glazed ceramics are found on small, lidded boxes of the Ziwiye culture (7th Century B.C.E.) of early Mesopotamia. Very few of these exquisite boxes were produced and all are found as offerings in tombs. Figures of horses, also made with glazed ceramics have also been found with them. Rapidly, the secret of their fabrication was lost, maybe due to the fact that it did not find practical applications, which may have helped in preserving it. These small, lidded boxes may have originally contained some precious substance that needed to be protected, since the lid can be secured and attached to the base by a system of pierced “hinges” held together with a material, probably organic (like rope), now long gone. The surface of these exquisite little boxes is covered with abstract patterns and figurative motifs in bold, complementary colors that are so graphically modern that they would be totally believable as recent, contemporary objects, if made today, instead of having been made 3000 years ago. This actually often happens with very old objects within the history of ceramics, whether they were intended for daily life or funerary needs, like the equally exquisite and shockingly modern, funerary black vessels of the Longshan culture in Neolithic China. On Ziwiye boxes, the use of glazes is much more esthetic than necessarily practical and no functional, domestic object from that time and that culture is covered with a glaze. The motifs on these boxes are obviously symbolic and they transcend decoration and ornamentation to engage with a meaning that retains much of its universality and potency. On one of these boxes, the figure of a fallen warrior, possibly dead or dying, and holding a spear is reminiscent of a similar image found in the caves of Lascaux. I am reminded of watching TV personality Sister Wendy who, when visiting these parietal caves in south-western France, exclaimed with her blunt yet so perceptive manner: “There is no progress in Art. It begins right at the top!” Well, the same is true here and these small funerary, lidded boxes, glazed with a new material and a new technique, are as good as anything else ever made since in ceramics.

Another example of the use of “glaze” almost exclusively for funerary purposes is found in “Egyptian paste” wares, where the self glazing clay body provides a rich, brilliant,

glassy and colorful surface for funerary vessels and other small objects while ordinary, quotidian, functional Egyptian ceramics always remains unglazed. Egyptian paste is also used to make jewelry but here again, even if the results may have been worn during the life of the wearer, they were placed with the dead body in the tomb.

In Tang China, vast quantities of funerary wares were made, also to be buried with the dead as offerings. These funerary wares were almost exclusively fired at low temperature and they usually are (partially) covered with very bright, brilliant and colorful glazes called “sancai” or three colors, made with lead oxide and various metallic ores for color, iron for yellow and brown and copper for green, much more rarely cobalt for blue. These colored glazes were new at the time and they provided a very contrasting palette from the dark, comparatively drab and rather mundane if beautiful in their own, much subdued way, high temperature stoneware glazes of everyday, practical and functional objects. This polarity of effect may even be part of the reason each occupied such a specific place and space and Chinese culture of the Tangs, one for the living and the other for the dead, one for the people, the other for the elite, one for the poor, the other for the rich. It is important to remember that Tang sancai three color glazes are reserved for funerary purposes exclusively and even dishes and other “functional” pottery forms were made exclusively as offerings in tombs. This is lucky for the Chinese, since lead glazes are highly toxic and would have eventually poisoned the user if used on a daily basis. I would speculate that the obvious and drastic differences between the domestic wares and the funerary wares in Tang China may have existed as a deterrence for tomb raiders and robbers, since that distinction prevented these objects to be used out of context and they could only be operating within their specific domain, one for the living, the other for the dead. I hope you can still follow me, despite all these obvious repetitions.

On molds and lifelessness:

Molds, it is too often forgotten or not considered even, imply an esthetic loss. To transfer a form, any object into a mold in order to reproduce it in multiples, implies a quantitative gain but a qualitative loss. Molds imply a diminution, a reduction of life and when one uses a mold, going from the original to its reproduction, a minor death takes place. The form coming out of a mold is but a remnant of the original, a ghost form of sort, if not, in some extreme cases but not unheard of, a corpse, a lifeless form. This effect, rarely used intentionally, unfortunately, is particularly evident with cast made from

life, for example when a face-mask is taken from a living subject. Ah Xian, the Chinese artist now living in Australia, often uses head and shoulder casts made from live models, male and female. These casts avoid this impression of lifelessness by being painted all over with very decorative Chinese patterns. These patterns re-shift the focus of our perception from the exterior aspect to the inner life of the figures, as if we were witnessing the thoughts or dreams of the represented subject. Nonetheless, an impression in clay, or any other material in fact, taken from such a mold will usually appear lifeless, dead even. Bernard Palissy also made molds and casts from dead animals, snakes and frogs and transferred them into complex compositions in large platters. In fact, Palissy probably invented this method of casting objects from life and transferring them to clay, as he was a pioneer in the use of plaster for such purposes. Like Ah Xian today, his work as well avoids the pitfall described here by repositioning the figures in a credible yet totally artificial context, actually a totally ceramic context, the context of the plate and the context of the materials used, namely clay and glazes, which at all times remain integral to the visual experience and never fall into pale imitation. One is always deeply aware that one is looking at a ceramic object, and this impression is even clearer when handling it. The tensions between life and death in Palissy's work are multiple; the various creatures are obviously poised to attack and devour each other and the realistic portrayal coming from life casts create an effective transition from live form transferred into a mold while in its morbid state, to be then modeled in clay and represent life again. This creates a definitive yet subtle feeling of abjection, when a live subject becomes an object, similar to a corpse recognizable as human but now eliciting a sense of unease. His followers in the 19th Century, with technical brilliance and impressive material control, achieve an almost absolute realism but in the process get closer to a frozen, deadly result. They are not nearly as successful in creating a world where imagination wins over reality, which is always so evident in the work of Palissy. This is a lesson that still needs to be learned by many contemporary ceramic artists, who fall into the same trap.

Figurative effigies:

"I looked at the face of the Earth and there was silence. All mankind had turned to clay." Noah, in the Biblical Flood story.

Figurative ceramics sculpture again is most often found within a funerary context (surprise!). Thousands upon thousands of funerary pots and vessels have clear, descriptive

anthropomorphic attributes and are shaped like human (or animal) bodies. They are often incredibly beautiful, complex and sophisticated in their combination in continuity of a pottery form and a figurative representation. Here again, it is the numerous pre-Columbian cultures that provide the best, most amazing examples. A full analysis of these objects would require a whole new, independent study, another book in fact, one that doesn't yet exist... My favorite objects of this type are the Chanquay culture effigy vessels from Peru, with their standard, familiar pottery jar form, with a very schematic modeled face over the "neck" of the pot, and often with protruding ears adorned with metal, possible gold earrings and usually now missing. The rest of the figure is simply suggested with four bold, black curved lines, one for each limb, over the whitish ground of the pottery form. The simplicity of the confident gesture conveys the wholeness of the figure with an amazing economy rarely seen to such efficiency.

In a totally different mood and intended result, I want to remind the reader of the Xipe Totec figures from the Toltec culture of pre-Columbian Mexico, who combine life and death in the most extraordinary, shocking and gruesome manner imaginable.

Even farther back in time, some of the earliest portrait representations were found in the earliest layers of the ruins of Jericho, in Palestine. Actual human skulls had been unearthed by the following generation, after some time spent in the ground to lose their flesh and muscle. They were subsequently remodeled with clay, on top of the actual skull in order to capture the likeness of the ancestor. These portrait heads based on the original skull of the ancestor were then placed in altars within the homes of their descendants, to be rediscovered much, much later by archeologists.

And from the very origins of human representations as well as ceramics, we remember the early ceramic figures from Central Europe, these numerous representations of highly sexualized Goddesses, often found exploded deliberately. Breaking is often an integral part of rituals that use ceramics in their manifestation, and this is true from the origins of civilization all the way to today, as we will see soon. As I had mentioned at some point before, if in an action movie (Westerns are particularly fond of the gimmick but not in any way exclusively), a pot is prominently featured in a scene, it will most certainly get broken before long.

Of course, one of the most celebrated and famous example of figurative funerary ceramics, also eventually broken, is the army of Emperor Qin, from 200 B.C.E., found in Xian, China in the early 1970's. These 6000 soldiers, infantry men, archers and charioteers with horses, all commanded by generals, have made their appearances a few times already in these texts, as have Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi, the unificator of China, who destroyed and burned all books written before his rule, to make time start freshly with himself. Chinese rulers and emperors before Qin's times would have been buried with living subordinates (and live horses too), in order to serve them in the afterlife, a cruel practice also found in some pre-Columbian cultures, another possible cultural connection between the Far East and the New World. It is Emperor Qin who started the fashion to replace the sacrificed victims with ceramic effigies instead. He will be followed in this tradition by his successors for a long time, but no one, as far as we know, will ever equal, let alone surpass Qin's ambitious and impressive mausoleum. One of his followers, Jing Di was a beneficial ruler, remembered as the antidote to the belligerent Qin. He lowered taxes, made peace with his neighbors and followed in the Taoist principle of "doing nothing against nature". He also left an important tomb, Han Yang Ling, also near Xian. Likewise, it contains an impressive quantity of diminutive figures of soldiers and attendants, all with serene, peaceful posture and features. During the Tang dynasty, tombs of rulers and dignitaries would be filled with figurative miniatures of musicians, acrobats, court attendants with horses (the rightly celebrated Tang horses), charming fat ladies with small lap dogs, soldiers as well as people representing various crafts. These tombs were "protected" by larger, yet not quite life-size, fierce guardians, anthropomorphic monsters brandishing swords as well as winged sphinxes and other mythical creatures. In Japan, similarly life size effigies in ceramics surrounded the funerary tumuli of the Haniwa culture.

Broken and altered pots:

"There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." Leonard Cohen

If ceramics were not so breakable, it would in fact be the ideal, perfect material and just about everything would be made with it. Fragility is the possibility of ceramics, its end goal and ultimate condition. This "flaw" of ceramics defines both its essence and its responsibility. As I have just mentioned, breaking is often an integral part of rituals that

use ceramics in their manifestation. This practice of breaking ceramic objects can be experienced throughout history, and even today. In pre-Columbian America, ceramic vessels were often deliberately broken or pierced with a whole when used in funerary rites, to release their spirit and remove them from the domestic world, the world of the living. There or elsewhere, offerings in temples and on altars or in tombs are also found deliberately broken and smashed. Sometimes two identical vessels will be deposited as offerings in a tomb, one will be kept intact, while the other will be broken, on purpose. Why? We do not know for sure. Even today, in many places, in Mexico and elsewhere, at times of rituals and passages, ceramic pots are made and used for specific food and beverages and then broken against a wall in a precise and rigorously enforced ritual combining violent gesture, loud and clear noise within social catharsis, that is also enjoyable for the whole community, actors and spectators, and probably very pleasant for the local potters too, who must, gladly, provide all these new pots to be subsequently broken and smashed. Such a particular event can be witnessed yearly next to the Cathedral in Oaxaca, Mexico, on Christmas Day. In Naples, Italy, it is also the tradition to throw all old broken, cracked or useless pots through the window at the strike of midnight on New Year's Day. It is best to avoid finding yourself on the street at that particular time. In India, ritual pots play an important part of death ceremonies and potters make and supply them in great numbers, for that specific purpose. They are each broken after use. On the tenth day after death, a pot is broken to release the soul into its next life. Households also replenish their earthenware vessels at the time of death and various sets of pots are acquired, used, broken and then replaced during the mourning period. The malevolent spirit of a dead relative can also be lured into a clay pot by a priest and trapped there by mantras. This pot, obviously, is not to be broken. In a more mundane, daily context also, in India, yogurt bought on the street in a single serving is presented in a thrown pottery tumbler, to be thrown (!) away after use. This prevents their reuse and serves a sanitary purpose, while providing constant work for skilled potters. The same could be said of small, wheel thrown lemonade jars used in downtown Mexico City, by the thousands, every day.

In sub-Saharan Africa, special pots are made for medicinal purposes and the use of healers. They are deliberately misshapen and full of warts and "cancerous" protuberances. The sick patient will purchase such a pot from the witch doctor and then throw it away, getting rid of the sickness or affliction in the process. It is believed that if someone, human or animal, finds such a pot and only just touch it, they will be infected with the

same sickness in their turn. This taboo again prevents these pots to be reused and it provides the potter with endless business.

Marek Cecula has also modified plaster molds by carving concave shapes within the interior space of the mold, so that when clay objects are produced from these molds, teapots, cups and saucers, then appear as if suffering from tumors and cancers. These unusual yet so familiar objects become metaphorical of the multiple fears we experience in contemporary culture, an intrinsic aspect of much of Cecula's work in ceramics. Recently, he has been making very challenging works in a series called "In Dust Real". He appropriates standard dinnerware forms in an European porcelain factory, then stacks them in haphazard piles and stacks, to fire them at very high temperature in a wood kiln, to cover their surface with heavy, gritty ash deposits, partially melting over the forms and fusing them together, now joined as a unit. Again the poetic yet political intent is to capture a particular moment and mood in the wake of 9/11 and the apocalyptic age of terrorism at the turn of the Millennium. His previous "Scatology" series explored likewise our paramount fear of death coming together with puritanical, obsessive attitudes toward sex and bodies, sickness and death, particularly today in the midst of the AIDS crisis and other contemporary scourges. John de Fazio, Mark Burns, Therese Chabot and many others explore similar themes in their work.

I will single out Daniel Kruger from Germany, who uses photography with sophistication and seduction in his otherwise conventional (I am using the term descriptively here) ceramics. By transferring photographic self-portrait images of nude boys to porcelain plaques attached to flower vases, he affects a series of critical changes and transformations. The progressive transfer from flesh to photograph, from photograph to print in a magazine, from paper print to digital ceramic print, all these passages from warm flesh to hard, cold, fragile clay, all serve to immortalize these innocent yet confrontational images of human fleetingness and the immanence, fluidity and fragility of beauty. This connection with photography, an art form that has been connected so many times by so many others to death in its particular relation to time and to memory, provides another example of the interesting yet unrealized and even less explored symbiotic potential between photography and ceramics.

Shards and fragments:

In the Amazon rain forest, tribes reconditioned the soil for planting and gardening by manufacturing large quantities of fired clay pots, made specifically to be broken and mixed with the soil to improve its qualities and fertility. In this instance, broken ceramic objects are directly and intimately connected to the continuity of life.

There has been much talk, much discourse and writing, much spending of saliva and ink, a lot of it idle, in the last few years about various deaths. We have been presented with the death of history and the very old, endlessly re-packaged and re-sold “end of times”, and also the death of art, the death of photography, the death of civilization, the death of death... Of course, what is usually meant by this expression “the death of...” is not so much that this particular phenomenon is definitively over, never to be seen or experienced again, but quite simply that a clear, definite change has happened in our relation to it, what philosophers call an “epistemological break”. In that sense it is dead, ready to continue in an altogether quite different and new form. Are we now experiencing the death of ceramics too? In many minds, this has already happened and many would see no issue if ceramics, as a physical and as a cultural material simply disappeared and ceased to exist. Usually, the embarrassment they feel about ceramics, and this is especially current in certain quarters of the art world, stems from the simple fact that ceramics reminds them too obviously of the shortcomings of their own practice, by opposition. They would rather see it go away, it would greatly simplify things. Sometimes, by the behavior of some within the ceramics sphere itself, I think that this particular line of thought can be found within the practice as well... Of course, it is my belief that if contemporary art finds itself in a deep existential crisis right now, even if, so it seems, it has not realized this quite yet, a solution may actually be found in practices like ceramics, deeply material by necessity, yet profoundly conceptual as well and so deeply imbedded in all aspects of culture. The demonstration of this reality has been made with clarity and evidence by a continuous history spanning 30,000 years, as demonstrated in all kinds of ways, here, I hope.

Recent ceramics history has seen the proliferation of a particular phenomenon, which is emblematic of this crisis, within contemporary art and within ceramics as well. A large, and growing number of artists, mainstream (conventional) artists as well as ceramics artists, make use of broken pots and shards in their work. There are numerous reasons for this and my analysis of this current and complex phenomenon remains fragmented and incomplete, as well. I see it at this point as a form of excess, something

always quite present, one would almost say intrinsically, in ceramics forms and objects and in pottery making. By breaking and shattering ceramic objects or incorporating in their work references to broken ceramics, in the form of cracks and shards or fragments, these makers (or destroyers, in some instances), explore another potential for the material and for the art form, one articulated around the very idea of fragility and incompleteness. Both of these are, of course, potentially metaphorical of the actual state of the present culture in all its anxieties.

Among a long list of examples that will no doubt be added to for a while, I will single out Fluxus artist Yoko Ono, who broke a blue and white Chinese porcelain vase in front of approximately 200 people, in a performance at the Whitney Museum in New York. After uttering a few words about how much she loved the vase and would miss it, she wrapped it in a black cloth and smashed it with a hammer. Her intent was to express feelings of loss at the death of a friend and the realization that the friend lives on in memory. Yoko Ono then asked the public present to take a shard and to return with it in ten years, at the same place, to reassemble the vase. The fact that this destroyed object is a ceramic object, a porcelain vase, is not irrelevant for many reasons. The fragility of the material, its historical connection and (relative) importance, its connection to memory, to time as well, all serve the purpose and intent of the gesture in ways no other material (or object) could, with the same efficiency. Of course, it brings to the fore other issues as well. Why is it acceptable to destroy this object, the work of another artist, when it would not be quite as acceptable and much more problematic if it had been a painting, for example? In that case, would the museum have allowed the destructive event to take place, at all? Why is it that a different standard, a different value system so often exists for certain types of objects?

In China, Ai Wei Wei, possibly China's most famous contemporary artist, revisited this performance in a very different form and with a very different intent. Using an actual Han dynasty jar, he arranged for three photographs to be taken (these things are always documented in photographs, which tend to become the actual artwork, in so many ways). The first shows the artist holding the vase, the second shows the vase in mid air as it is being dropped and the third shows the vase broken on the ground. Here the intent is more clearly political and critical in relation to Chinese history as it, possibly, relates to ceramics both as a material and as an art form that is so specific to that culture. Ai Wei Wei also painted in red a Coco-Cola logo on another actual Han dynasty jar and in more

recent works, he has dipped more ancient ceramic jars into a thick, gooey, pastel paint color to alter their visual quality as well as their meaning through a change quality of surface, from old to new, from obsolete to current, and in context as well, from then to now, from there to here. My favorite among his very diverse interventions (he was a consultant and collaborator for Herzog and de Meuron's "Bird's Nest" Stadium at the Beijing Olympics), is a very recent installation where he presents antique blue and white porcelain pots, one on the gallery floor, the other on the ceiling, held in place together by a long bamboo stick connecting the two, in a relationship of threatening precariousness. How long before these get broken too? As the work of a celebrated famous artist, whose work is commercially very successful and expensive, they probably will be protected and preserved, for a while. For how long, though?

Korean artist Yee Souk Yung has recently (2006) exhibited an installation, "Translated Vases", of large, new, yet fragmented vessels reconstructed from broken found ceramic pots, glued together with epoxy covered on gold leaf. In China, Li Xiaofeng, makes wearable dresses and jackets, for male and female wearers, assembled from shards of broken blue and white porcelain, sewn over leather garments. The porcelain fragments are so well fitted together as to give the impression to have been custom made for the task, while they are in fact from Chinese pots from the Song, Ming and Q'ing dynasties. In Bangladesh, experimental filmmaker Runa Islam made a movie titled "Be the first to see what you see", showing an expressionless woman drinking from a ceramic cup, then smashing it, in slow motion, to the ground.

Outside ceramics directly but nonetheless connected to it beyond materiality, the work of British sculptor Rachel Whiteread explores absence and disappearance in a different way. By materializing the void within and around other forms and objects, a house, a chair, a table, a bathtub or even a library (for the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin), she presents us with a "ghost" of the removed source for the work. Her process reminds me of the archeologists who, while digging in Pompeii, when they would hit a hole in their excavations, would then fill it with plaster before completing the dig to reveal the rematerialized form of one of the human (or even animal) victim of the tragedy, from the empty space left underground by the decomposing body. Another precedent for her work can be found in an early piece by Bruce Nauman, where he "cast" the empty space underneath a chair, materializing that void. Precedence matters to a degree, but in the end it is not so important whether one does anything first, what counts is what one does with

an idea. And Whiteread has pushed Nauman's idea much farther than the very original yet unique gesture of the American artist.

In France, artist Jean-Pierre Raynaud built his house and completely covered it inside and out, including all the furniture, chairs, table, bed, etc., with standard, industrial white ceramic tiles. Here again, the color white is altogether pure, perfect, industrial, mechanical, impersonal, and funerary, an impression stressed by the black grout line between each rigorously identical tile. Once the project was completed, a project he self-funded with the sale of his artwork, usually featuring the same ubiquitous square, white tile and also the equally, possibly more ubiquitous terracotta horticultural pot, he totally destroyed the house with a bulldozer. The destruction of the house, in which he lived during construction, was an integral and essential part of this conceptual yet highly physical and material project.

Canadian installation artist Ann Ramdsen collects ceramic dishes of various types that she then breaks and reassemble in a very obvious way, with all the joints stressed by colored epoxy oozing between the cracks, in a reverse, deliberate "archeological", restauration process. The results are then sorted according to various taxonomies, like they would be in a museum and presented on storage shelves. This process of repairing broken ceramic objects has an actual name in museology, "Anastylosis", which is the title of her project.

The 1980's paintings of Julian Schnabel, ostentatiously painted over broken dishes mounted over large wood panels, combine the domesticity and familiarity of ceramic dishes within another context where their unexpected if efficient presence becomes essential.

Montreal artist Richard Milette, whose seminal work has made a number of appearances throughout these essays, has also explored in various ways the principles of anastylosis in his work, in direct reference to the institutional practices of museums. His intent is critical of the political workings of institutions in which art and art history operates and it also provides a feeling of destabilization for the viewer who must then reassess his or her position toward integrity, fragility and incompleteness when confronted with ceramic objects, physical condition being often a very important criteria and standard used to establish value, esthetic or monetary, in art appreciation. The work,

completely hand made by the artist, is presented, seemingly broken and incomplete, with missing parts, and holes on the body, as an archeological find in a museum display, as if located at some hypothetical point from the distant past or in the distant future. This reflection on time, death, permanency and transcendence (the will to leave a trace of one's own passing on earth) is intrinsic to clay as a material and ceramics as a process, and it constitutes one of their essential aspects.

Within the field of ceramics again, figurative sculptor Robert Arneson, using bricks bearing his name impressed in the clay, built self-portrait monuments in an advanced state of collapse and ruin. These "broken" sculptures are again an efficient commentary on the vanity of history and of the potential for ceramic materials and ceramic forms to transmit these ideas like no other material or art form could, and not only now but up and down in time as well.

Within the figurine tradition, Marco Paulo Rolla, with "Oracle" from 1999, shows a pseudo-historical, traditional broken figurine, lying on its side in pieces, with a porcelain skeleton inside. In Hungary, Lazlo Fekete has reassembled broken figurines with contrasting, contesting surfaces, to comment on, here again, on contemporary states of mind within consumer society.

Other ceramic artists of note who have investigated the shard efficiently recently in their work include Australian Stephen Bowers, who paints trompe-l'oeil shards within complex, highly decorative surfaces in his large platters and Kate O'Connell, from England, who makes actual plates shaped like broken shards, where a shift in scale, from small to large enough to be operational as an actual plate, is a necessary attribute of the conceit.

And in Design too:

Even contemporary designers are playing this game now. Is this reflective of "the Death of Design"?

Tjep Design makes "The Do Break" shock proof ceramic vase lined with rubber inside, so that even if you drop it or break it, it can continue to be used in this altered form, its integrity as a tool being maintained by the other material holding all the broken

pieces of the exterior shell together. Every ceramic object eventually breaks, it is intrinsic to the very nature of the material and it should be considered by the art form as well. Not only can “The Do Break” vases be used again but it also gains in beauty as the cracks multiply to form a pattern unique to each vase. As they say of their work: “Any lover’s quarrel is now an improvement.” Other designers, quite a few actually, already make integral ceramic objects, vases, plates and dishes that only “look” broken or cracked and whose “faked” defect is in the integrity of the form itself. These kind of objects could only have been made now and they reflect all the anxieties and neurosis of the time we live in, like all other ceramic objects that preceded them did for their own times, for their makers and their users.

This is it for the essays based on Esthetics and Themes. Before the end, more now on an essential aspect of ceramics, Reversal.