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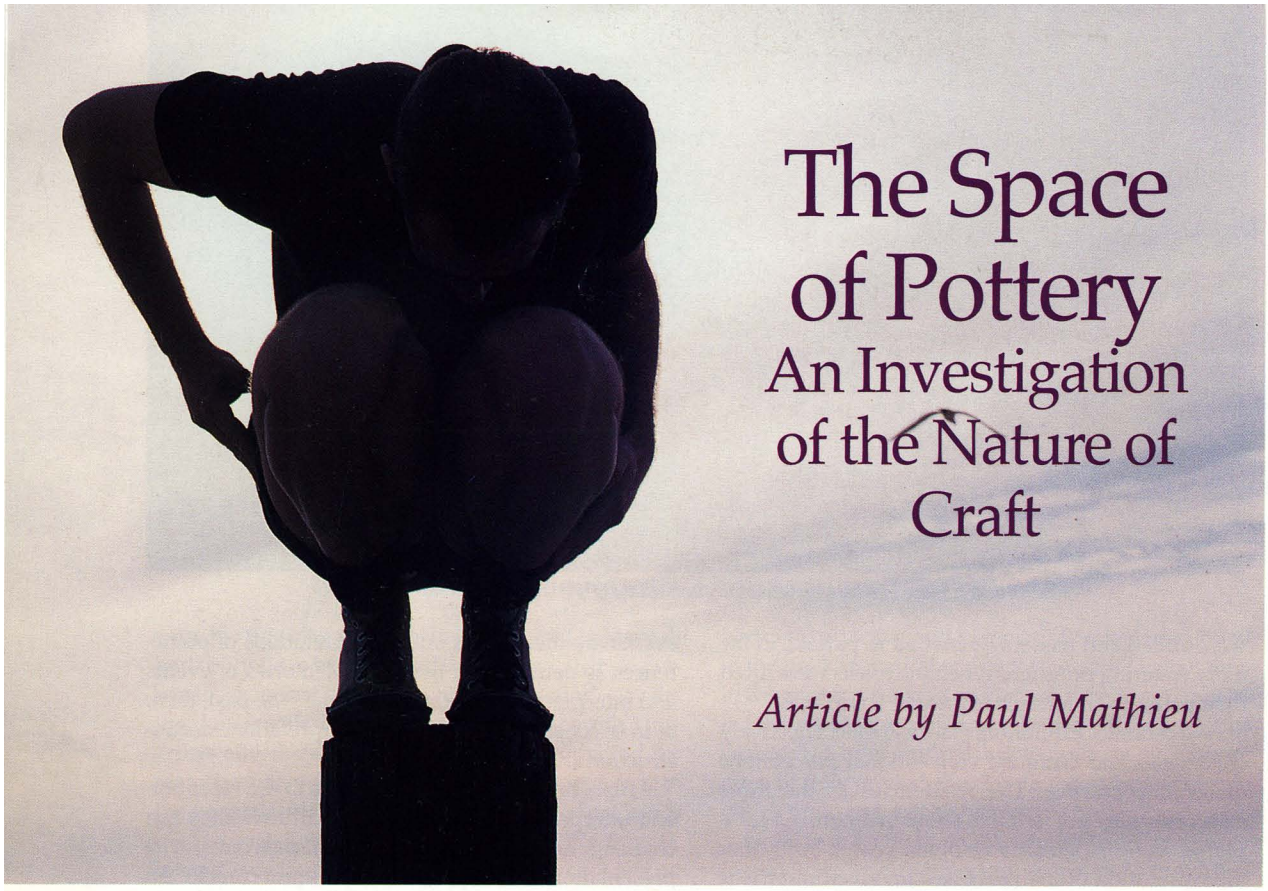


The Space of Pottery

An Investigation of the Nature of Craft

Article by Paul Mathieu

Paul Mathieu. ***Body as Cup***

THE ART WORLD IS SINGULARLY IGNORANT OF CRAFT. It knows only two ways to deal with it: one is assimilation, by addressing its manifestations only when they look and act like conventional art; the other is ghettoisation, by ignoring it completely. This ghettoisation is, in effect, censorship.

Another problem is the obsession of art with categories. Despite recent talk of dehierarchisation, the crossing of borders and openness to difference and otherness, the prevalent categories and taxonomies are still effective. Well, crafts are unclassifiable. They defy categories. In fact, craft is the activity where dehierarchisation, the crossing of borders and categories and differences between the races and sexes are explored the most thoroughly today, as well as historically. The one border the art world refuses to cross is that of craft. What exactly is it afraid of?

Craft has always been inherently political, open to change and aware of contemporaneity; it still is. What is a potter doing meddling with theory and ideas, anyway? I believe it is essential to confront the art world in the language it speaks, to address the problem on its territory. We must all work together: that is where the work is to be done.

The ideas I want to discuss here come from many sources but especially from two articles I read recently. The first is the comment by the Toronto art critic, John Bentley Mays (1985), in *American Craft*. In this article, Mays justifies his reasons for ignoring crafts, "not because craft or craft-as-art (as I have experienced it) are inferior to art, but because they are NOT art." This kind of commentary truly irritates me because it is too easy simply to state that craft is not art without explaining its true nature. It is lazy as well as fraudulent. The other source of inspiration for me was a lecture given by the French thinker, Michel Foucault in 1967. This lecture, entitled *Of Other Spaces*, analyses certain characteristics of contemporary space. Hence these reflections on the 'space of pottery'.

The element common to all art forms is space. But the different ways that different art forms deal with space is what sets them apart from one another. What then is the space of pottery? I am talking here of pottery in its most simple, essential form, for example, an ordinary white teapot.

But by 'pot' I do not mean simply an object for containment but basically any form dealing with the principle of containment or the articulation of a movable volumetric space through its generative process. I am thinking of the work of Ruth McKinley but also of Viola Frey's large figures or a vessel by Richard Milette. In my opinion, most ceramic sculptures are as much pots as anything else, since they are generated by volume rather than mass, a characteristic essential to pottery. A Rodin bronze is also hollow, but the form has been generated by mass. The void inside a Rodin is empty. It is not significant. On the other hand, the space inside the Viola Frey is pregnant and

conceptually relevant because that void articulates the form. It is not empty but full, meaningful, significant, like the air under pressure in a balloon. The word 'volume' makes me think of its other meaning, a book, which is also an object that contains, transports, preserves, and transmits knowledge, all of which are activities intrinsic also in pottery.

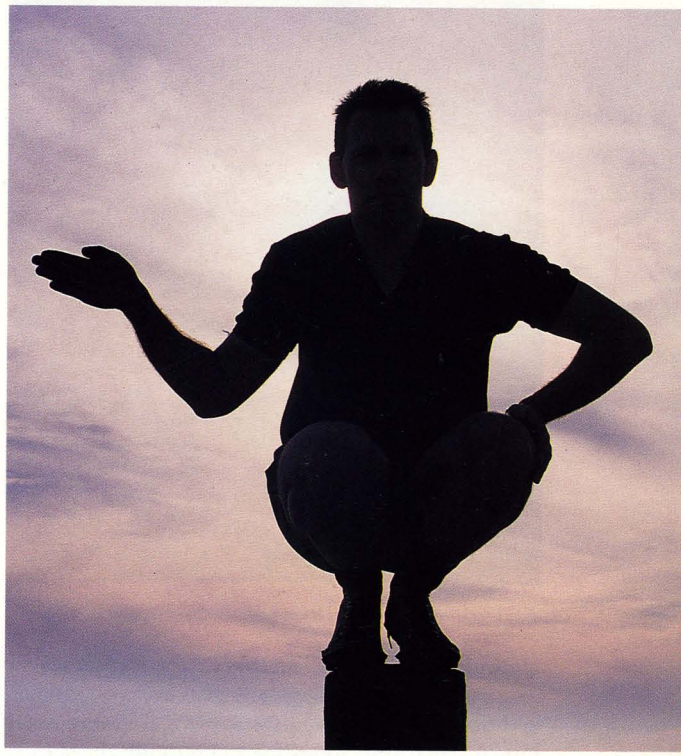
There has been a profusion recently of writings that emphasise the relation of pottery to painting and sculpture, and many ceramists have taken the same position in the making of their work. We have seen Peter Voulkos' plates referred to as 'drawings' and some pots labelled 'still life'. This semantic ambiguity is, on the whole, legitimate and certainly legitimised by the marketplace, but it is my intention here to establish how pottery is different and to bring some understanding of its nature, not only the nature of the objects themselves, but also that of the practice and discipline as a whole.

Michel Foucault was an influential thinker, particularly interested in the relationship between power and knowledge. He investigated 'otherness', that is, the mental institution, the prison and, until his death from AIDS a few years ago, sexuality. Foucault's premise is that the notion of space is central to our time and that "our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down." As examples, he lists private space versus public space, leisure space versus work space, and, what is most important here, cultural space versus useful space. This last category includes the now famous debate about art versus craft.

In this category of cultural as opposed to useful spaces, he is interested in spaces "that are in relation to all other sites, while they contradict all other sites." These spaces are of two main types. The first he calls 'utopias', which are not real spaces, but basically unreal spaces (a category including the objects our culture usually refers to as works of art); the other he calls 'heterotopias' (or other spaces), which are real spaces where "all the other real sites that are to be found within a culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted." These 'other spaces' follow five basic principles.

The first principle is that all cultures create 'other spaces': they are universal. These other spaces are "privileged, sacred spaces reserved for specific purposes." They are of two main types: crisis heterotopias like hospitals, boarding schools, or the motel for the honeymoon; and deviation heterotopias such as psychiatric hospitals, prisons, or retirement homes.

The second principle of heterotopias is that their function is determined by context and that it changes with time and culture. His example is the cemetery because although all cultures have places that serve



Paul Mathieu. ***Teapot.*** *1990*

the purpose of cemeteries, this function is different in each culture and also changes as the culture changes.

The third principle is that heterotopias juxtapose, in a single place, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. The theatre and cinema are perfect examples: in a real room, a seemingly three-dimensional image is projected on a flat screen, and the action may take place in another place, another time, another world. Shopping centres and gardens are also in this category since they bring together objects and species from all over the world, and so do carpets when they are representations of gardens that can be moved in space.

The fourth principle is that heterotopias are linked to slices of time, either in its accumulation, like museums or libraries, or its transitoriness like fairgrounds or holiday resorts. In our culture, fairgrounds have also become permanent. Disneyland is a good example.

The fifth principle is that heterotopias command certain rituals: "They suppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable." For example, baths or saunas in certain cultures demand a certain ritual in order to gain entrance, cinemas and theatres require tickets and reservations, the prison requires culpability for crime.

Now, the function of these 'other spaces' is to create "a space that is other, another real space as perfect,

Paul Mathieu. ***Ritual: Urinal***

meticulous, and as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled." Mirrors are both utopias and heterotopias, since they show real spaces in an unreal space, but, according to Foucault, the ship is the heterotopia par excellence, "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea."

Well, ships are vessels, and so are pots, since both are meant not only to hold and contain, but also to move and displace their contents.

Let's go back to our categories and principles and see how they apply to pottery.

First principle: universality. All cultures make pottery. In the first category, crisis heterotopia, we had the motel room. A ceramic example could be the toilet bowl. (The bathroom itself is an interesting ceramic space. To use the language of contemporary criticism, it is site-specific as well as an installation since all the diverse elements that compose that particular space are distinct yet in relation with each other.) In the second category, deviation heterotopia, we had retirement homes. A ceramic example could be the vessel, this hybrid object where function has been transcended. I do not mean this in a derogatory way: I simply see vessels as the domain of the individual, the way prisons or psychiatric hospitals are for persons who do not fit with the norm (that is, tradition).

Second principle: change with context and culture. Thus a simple porcelain urinal can become one of modern art's most famous objects, Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* or a simple bowl can become a priceless work of art.

Third principle: juxtaposition. Pottery is probably the prime example of this principle. In a pot we find the exterior in complete symbiosis with the interior, the three-dimensional form with the two-dimensional surface, the cultural with the practical. Of all art forms, pottery is probably the only one where these seemingly contradictory aspects are so intimately (and literally) fused.

Fourth principle: relation to time. This principle also applies especially to pottery. The process of making pottery is totally dependent on time in a way significantly different from other processes and techniques. It is a diachronic activity taking place at different times, with drastic changes in between. Each step is transitory, and after the firing these changes are irreversible. The completed object becomes 'eternal', for its nature as ceramics cannot be reversed.

Cooking is a somewhat similar process but its results, contrary to those of pottery, can be, if not reversed, at least totally transformed. Clay is also totally transformed; after firing, there is no longer any clay but a new material with new properties. Of all art materials, is there another that transforms itself so completely? Of course, plastics. And they have also replaced clay in its long-privileged role. Pottery accumulates time and preserves it. For that reason we know of certain vanished cultures through their pots because they retain their identity through time. Our culture also has transitory pottery, the throw-away cup in paper or styrofoam. What will remain of our contemporary culture?

Fifth principle: accessibility and ritual. The relation between pottery and ritual is well known, and it is in this quality that makes pots "privileged, sacred places reserved for specific purposes," like the object that will probably best define our culture in future archaeology, the toilet bowl, and that other ritual object, the coffee cup. But Foucault (1970) writes that they "suppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them, and makes them penetrable." Obviously pots have lids and spouts, but pots are also accessible because their vocabulary of forms – lip, body, foot, handle, and so on, refers to the human body. There is little distance between a pot and a body since pots must be touched to be experienced. We all know that touching is art's ultimate taboo. But at the same time, pots are impenetrable, difficult to understand. Their phenomenology is quite familiar and obvious, yet their epistemology is hardly accessible.

Foucault (1970) expands on this notion of impenetrability in his book *The Order of Things*, by comparing, on the one hand, utopias and representational visual art with, on the other hand, heterotopias and representational pottery whose purpose is not solely to represent life but to participate in it. He writes: "Utopias afford consolations: although they have no real locality, there is nevertheless a fantastic untroubled region in which they are able to unfold... Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly

undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this or that, because they shatter and tangle common names, because they destroy syntax in advance, not only the one that constitutes sentences but the less apparent one that 'holds together' (side by side and face to face) words and things.

"This is why utopias permit fables and discourses, they run with the grain of language and are part of the dimension of fabula; heterotopias... desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the possibility of language at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences."

I believe that is the reason why pottery finds itself outside discourse, art criticism, and other institutional manifestations and why the ceramic aspects of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* are never considered: they are unmentionable. Of course, that is not the point of Duchamp's work. But it is my point. Why is it so seemingly easy to write about art and so difficult to do so about crafts? Most texts written about crafts are technical, historical or subjectively philosophical. It is difficult to comprehend them otherwise. These objects are not easily deconstructed by theory and discourse. In our culture, since art is justified by theory and discourse, crafts can easily be ignored and rejected or, at least, their meaning misunderstood. This silence about craft functions like censorship to create a prohibition.

Recently we have also seen an amazing proliferation of images of pots in contemporary art, especially in painting and sculpture. Numerous examples come to mind. Look at any art magazine. More than simple subject matter, these images (and an image can be three-dimensional), these representations of pottery do something extraordinary. They introduce heterotopias into the realm of utopias in a way similar to what happens, in reverse, when a landscape or figure is represented on a pot. Is the image of a pot on a pot a homotopia or a space representing itself?

The reason the art world has such difficulty in dealing with pottery (and other related practices) is not that pottery is not art. This opposition between art and craft is unnecessary and unproductive, although there is a difference. The opposition stems from our habit of polarising and opposing everything (black and white, good and bad, right and wrong, and so on). This smacks of morality and is quite useless. What is important to define is the grey zone where everything merges. In the field of art, craft is a heterotopia. It occupies a different space, another space, from the utopian practices of other art forms.

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Paul Mathieu is a ceramic artist living in Montreal. This article is extracted from a talk given at the symposium, *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft* which was held in 1994 under the auspices of the Canadian Museum of Civilisation and the Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft. Paul Mathieu prefaced his talk with a statement: "I feel honoured to be able to present my ideas here at the Canadian Museum of Civilisation, an institution that wouldn't have an example of my work in its collection because what I do isn't traditional enough. What tradition, may I ask? I am a potter, and what I do is craft; I have no problem with those words which belong to a long history that has no reason to envy any other craft or art. If you go across the river to the National Gallery, you see numerous examples of historical crafts, in metalsmithing most notably. When I go to such places, I feel that I am not welcome, that I do not belong there since what I do isn't welcome. Why are historical crafts acceptable and contemporary crafts almost totally rejected and ignored? I wonder if I'll have to wait another 100 years like Morris and de Morgan before what I do belongs there. How many curators from the National Gallery are present here today? Why is that? Why is craft ignored? That is the question I will partly answer today. At a symposium held by the Craft Association of British Columbia, Doris Shadbolt also proposed an answer. She said, 'Craft is about the qualities that current art [theory] denies ... The theory-dominated cerebral climate which dominates today's art will change sooner or later and then there will be a powerful expression of reactive response. And a reaffirmation of the importance of the crafts will be at the centre of that response.' I applaud such far-sightedness, yet wish she had preached by example, too, and had included a few pieces of Emily Carr's pottery in the retrospective she had organised for the National Gallery a few years before. Actions speak louder than words."

The *Space of Pottery* is also the title of a 26- minute, award winning documentary by Richard L. Harrison and features the work, creative process and philosophical perspective of Paul Mathieu. It is available from the University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, Berkeley, California,