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The Radical Autonomy of Ceramics
NC! charrsid16021541 ECA Critical Santa Fe

Brief Description:

Ceramics is a radically autonomous art form. It is conceptually different from other art forms and this conceptual difference can be analyzed by the coming together of a volumetric hollow form with a distinct surface. Whether this takes the form of functional pottery or sculptural works, these specific aspects are always operative. Materials are not that relevant. It is how one thinks with materials that matters. Mathieu also argues for a clear, specific vocabulary for ceramics and for the elaboration of a specific, independent discourse to analyze ceramics works, of all kinds. To gain the legitimacy it craves, ceramics need to emphasize and explain clearly what constitutes its radical autonomy within art.

The Radical Autonomy of Ceramics

Today, I want to answer a simple question. What is ceramics? The simple answer is that ceramics is a radically autonomous art form. To be understood clearly and to be written about with clarity, it requires its own conceptual framework. Critical writings on art, on philosophy, on literature or any other mode of creative expression can be minimally useful, but because ceramics is intrinsically so different conceptually from other art forms and disciplines concerned with image or object making, and even more so from fiction, from philosophy or theory, that I strongly believe it requires its own conceptual framework. We also need to use the correct words and terminology, and simple words like ceramics or pottery are perfectly suitable for the task, although it seems everybody is desperately trying to avoid them these days.

Why is this in any way important? Well, if you do not explain yourself clearly and use the right vocabulary, and definitions, and the appropriate conceptual framework, you will be misunderstood. The main reason ceramics is under-appreciated comes from the fact that it is misunderstood. And it is misunderstood since it doesn't explain itself clearly, and it does so, partly at least, by a lack of rigor in using the appropriate terminology and a conceptual system that is relevant and specific! harrsid16021541 . Art now (art making, art theory, art criticism, etc.) happens to be largely uninterested in materials, and even less in techniques, in themselves. Art is concerned with concepts, with ideas and to a lesser degree, it still seems, with experiences. Ceramics is often perceived as material based and devoid of specific concepts and largely invested in experiences, in its making and its reception. Using the wrong terminology, using the word for the material (clay, ceramic) when we refer to the art form (pottery, ceramics) and vice-versa, only fosters this (erroneous) perception. The same problem arises when there is too much emphasis on experiences, as if ceramics was purely phenomenological and had no epistemological premise. How we understand ceramics should have precedence on how we experience it, certainly in critical writings. Yet, most of the time, critical writing in ceramics still focuses needlessly on process and technique, on materials and on biographical information that is not actually that relevant to our understanding of the work. In fact, it greatly interferes with it.

So, what is ceramics? Ceramics is a radically autonomous art form. It is independent from other art forms and distinct for each and every one of them. Somewhat contradictorily, ceramics is also a deeply multi-disciplinary practice that encompasses all other art disciplines, and other non-art disciplines as well too, sometimes all of them, at once. So, how a specific work relates or connects to other art forms can be useful in criticism, yet it remains that the discourses elaborated to explain and analyze other art forms (say painting or sculpture) are of very limited use if not altogether useless. Ceramics remains radically independent from all these other arts, techniques and sciences.

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Concepts:

Ceramics, like any other art, is the result of a conceptual activity. It is a form of thinking, different from other ways of thinking. It is articulated around two main concepts, although they manifest themselves somewhat differently in pottery forms and in sculptural works. When they are manifest in pottery forms, in practical things, these concepts are function and decoration. Function is largely given by form and decoration by surface. If the work is not concerned with practicality or ornamentation, if the work is sculptural in nature, then the equation shifts somewhat to a relation between volume and surface. Volume implies function in pottery forms and surface implies decoration. Any ceramics is predicated on the relationship between a hollow form and a distinct surface, whether it is a functional object or a sculptural work. ! 41 There are a few, very few exceptions to this, but it actually applies to the vast majority of ceramics, from the earliest times to now. It may be imperative that the object also be made of clay, possibly fired clay, but in the end the material is of little to no real relevancy. What matters is that the form be hollow and the surface be distinct. More than clay, this is what makes ceramics radically autonomous as an art form. It always juxtaposes two aspects, simultaneously.

Juxtaposition is a central characteristic of ceramics and of all containers (hollow forms).

Ceramics intrinsically juxtaposes seemingly contradictory aspects, not in opposition but in continuity (inside/outside, form and surface, image and object, etc.). This conceptual procedure is specific to containers. It is one of the most critically important aspects of ceramics as art.

The other critically important aspect of ceramics as art is time. Ceramics is in a specific and very particular relation to time. For one thing, it is very dependent on time in its making! . It also demands to be experienced slowly, in various times and the final product is exceptionally resistant to time. The very material of ceramics is not clay. The material of ceramics is time itself.

An aside on clay:

There is no clay in ceramics. Clay has been completely and irreversibly transformed by firing. The new material, ceramic, is physically, chemically, esthetically and conceptually completely different from clay. Why then do we see “clay artist” (as if the artist was made of clay...), “clay art”, “clay conference”, “clay museum”? In fact even “ceramic museum” is erroneous, unless it is made with bricks and that is the point being made! It is in fact a Ceramics Museum, a place to exhibit ceramics, works of art made with ceramic (the material), which makes them ceramics (the art form). ! rchWhy even “ceramic art”? Why not simply “ceramics”, with an implicit

understanding, through context, that it is obviously art. One can also too often see on exhibition labels, the material listed as clay? There is no clay in ceramic or in ceramics. The proper materials to list would be “ceramic” or again, earthenware, stoneware or porcelain but not clay, ever. Unless, of course, the work is not fired but then if the work is not fired, it is not ceramic or ceramics, either, but it can nonetheless be articulated around ceramics concepts, concepts specific to ceramics. There is no more clay in ceramics than there is wood in paper or oil in plastic.

On obfuscation:

Ceramics is presently engaged in an exercise of legitimization. It desperately wants to be taken seriously. This is why we are all here today. In order to be taken seriously, ceramics has made use of a few strategies in its criticism and theories. One of the most pernicious consists in the use of various legitimizing discourses coming from philosophy, from literary and art theory, mostly. For example, Relational Aesthetics is very popular right now. Instead, it should develop its own, independent discourse, like photography did. The other pernicious strategy consists in conflating itself with sculpture: Sculpture/Ceramics, same thing. Sculpture, of course, is an umbrella term for all kinds of things, including ceramics, if so you wish, but this inclusion is unconvincing and inappropriate, since it excludes too many things. This assumption is based on the rather pretentious premise that sculptural works are inherently better than other types of ceramic! s. For something to be taken seriously, it has to be labeled sculpture. I argue that ceramics is conceptually different than sculpture. Of course, today, anything can be art and anything can be sculpture, but it doesn't make it good art or good sculpture. To define a work of art as ceramics or as pottery, means something specific. It is meaningful, it is critical, in itself. If you want a simple and easy solution, call what you do sculpture and call yourself a sculptor. It will do the trick, in the current lack of rigor endemic in academia, in art, in criticism and yes, in ceramics today. But it really doesn't fool anyone. I would rather call myself a potter, and an artist, and convince others, through the quality and relevancy of my work, that I deserve the moniker of artist. To conflate sculpture and ceramics is a grave mistake and will lead nowhere, since the premise is fundamentally faulty. For argument's sake, I will state that, beyond tri-dimensionality, ceramics and sculpture have basically nothing in common, no more than photography and painting can be confused as one and the same. There are other art forms out there also concerned with tri-dimensional space, architecture for example, yet no one would confuse sculpture with architecture, although an hybrid of the two can be exciting. An hybrid of ceramics and sculpture can be exciting too, of course, (in fact, hybridity is a central aspect of ceramics) but why this conflation of ceramics with sculpture, pretending they are the same thing? For a simple reason: legitimacy. By associating with an art that has legitimacy, ceramics appears to acquire legitimacy, instantly. This is dangerous, since it is pretentious. This situation is particularly endemic in art criticism and in curatorial practices, where pots are called sculptures, potters are labeled sculptors, etc. This is not only false and condescending, it is insulting. The recent show “Dirt on Delight” was replete with such stupidity and lazy thinking, making manifest the insecurities of the field. My friend Léopold Foulem calls this state of affair the Al Jolson syndrome, people in black face pretending to be black. Ceramics today, especially in criticism, suffers from the Al Jolson syndrome. This state of affair is endemic right now, especially within the ceramics sphere itself. Art critics and curators think they are doing these works and these artists a favor by such nomenclature, calling ceramics forms “sculpture” and

ceramics surfaces “painting”. They also think that such a position permits to actually make sense of the work and understand its meaning! s1 , fully. They are wrong in both cases. Their position is one of obfuscation or to be more direct, bullshit.

It is Roland Barthes who wrote that the bourgeois critic, when confronted with a new, unfamiliar phenomenon has one of three possible reactions: ignore it completely, acknowledge it but deem it irrelevant, or associate it with another phenomenon, already familiar. In all three cases, such criticism misses the point of the work completely. This is the situation ceramics faces all the time. It is ignored, it is dismissed or it is confused with sculpture (or painting), with which it has basically very little and, often, nothing in common. By making a hollow form with a distinct surface, artists working in ceramic and in ceramics THINK differently than sculptors. No sculptor would ever conceptualize two conflicting spaces! rsid16021541 (form and surface) that way and no sculpture operates on these conceptual premises either. This is why ceramics is almost totally absent, rightfully, from the histories and theories of sculpture (and painting, obviously). Of course, due to the multi-disciplinary nature of ceramics, the analogy Ceramics/Sculpture is not totally untrue of course, but it is so incomplete, so inoperative in criticism, that in the end it is useless. This is also true at the level of conception, when the work is made, by the way.

I could also cite numerous examples where a ceramic surface is referred to as painted or as painting. Same problem. A ceramic surface cannot be painted and even less painterly, since no paint is present. I have never seen a ceramic surface that even looked, remotely, like paint. In modern and contemporary art, it is paint surfaces that borrowed from the ceramics formal vocabulary (the brushstroke, the drip, etc.), ! 6021541 not the other way around. Why not say “glazerly” instead since glaze surfaces do not look, feel, behave or in any way refer to paint? A glaze surface is also radically autonomous from other material surfaces, physically, formally, esthetically and above all structurally and conceptually (by remaining distinct, conceptually, from the support). In painting, the support is purely structural, it remains basically irrelevant conceptually, as does paper, in photography. The form in ceramics is not just a structural support, it is as conceptually essential as is the surface. A ceramics surface is different from any other surface and a glaze, for example, also enables the artist to THINK differently, in a specific way. ! chIn fact to make ceramics, one must think in two radically different ways, once with the form, then with the surface. Other artists do not have to deal with such conceptual complexity. The contribution ceramic forms and ceramic surfaces, and their interaction, have made to art history and to esthetics is unique. It is specific, and radically autonomous.

In order to be, finally, taken seriously, ceramics and pottery need to acknowledge and embrace their radical autonomy. We need to re-appropriate the meaning and value of these words (ceramics, pottery, potter, pot, etc.) and the specific concepts they imply and celebrate them anew. I am not too optimistic this will happen in the current climate of pretence and obfuscation. I, am a potter.

If ceramics was for the longest time largely concerned with function and practicality and generally understood to be confined to the domestic sphere where it served various essential roles in the real life of real people, this functional, practical role for hand made ceramics has been superseded by industrial, mechanical means of production, which has made the handmade

largely obsolete. Handmade objects are now the recipient of symbolic meaning implying status and taste more than actual function. It remains that ceramics has also always been used for expressive means, for display, for esthetic enjoyment and for rituals that transcend the domestic toward the political, spiritual and religious needs of communities. This is not so true now, anymore. Expressive, original ceramics today is more part of a market economy than any form of transcendence, except possibly for the maker (and possibly, the owner), although therapy and catharsis of a very special nature (for the maker and the owner) also seem to be one of the main reason for their manifestation, So, if ceramics, hand made ceramics, as art, plays no truly significant role as a functional object or even as a personally expressive outlet anymore, as it did historically, what role can it possibly play now and into the future? My answer is that due to specific material properties, ceramic is not just a physical material or even a cultural material, but it remains, above all, as it has always been, an archival material. The ceramics we now make will last a long, long time. They will be witness to and evidence of our times. Ceramics is the memory of humankind. This is not only its potential but, above all, its responsibility. What will the ceramics we now make say about us as a society, or about the maker as an individual, in the future? What ceramics should we make now in order to transmit such information? What needs to be transmitted? What is irrelevant? This is still ceramics historical role, its ultimate function and its ultimate meaning.!

Paul Mathieu is a potter. He also writes regularly on issues related to art and to ceramics and his essays have been published, worldwide, notably in his book “Sexpots: Eroticism in Ceramics”. He teaches ceramics, among other things, at Emily Carr University, in Vancouver, Canada. His new book-length series of essays on the history of ceramics “The Art of the Future” can be downloaded for free, text and images at www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture. He can be reached at pmathieu@ecuad.ca and his work and researches can be seen on two websites www.paulmathieu.ca and www.ceramicsresearch.ca

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