

Civic Ceramics: Shifting the Centre of Meaning Dr. Natasha Mayo and Melania Warwick
Essay published as part of the 'Ceramics Reader' ed. Petre, K. and Livingstone, A. 2017 pub.
Bloomsbury Academic

The title 'Civic Ceramics' refers to a growing number of practices that concertedly 'shift the center of meaning' from the artwork itself, to the activity of a viewer's interaction, investment and sense of ownership over it. From work that explores the thematic overlaps in ceramics knowledge and studio skill base with its use in society, to practitioners employing ceramic practice as part of direct social engagement, the mapping of coordinates between 'civic' and 'ceramics' enables clear identification of a growing and increasingly innovative movement.

This essay attempts to uncover some of the approaches that are pushing ceramics to the forefront of participatory engagement. It also seeks to explore how we might better account for these emergent and diverse practices that are reawakening the discipline's particular resonance as a politically and culturally responsive material.

Background

At a glance, it can appear that ceramic practice arose fundamentally in response to the need of society and *then* repositioned its profound material sensibility, technical knowledge and ergonomic concerns within more philosophical debate. In following this trajectory, any backward glance can be seen as a threat to what Jorunn Veiteberg describes as the 'visibility' of craft¹.

The discipline was not however theoretically bereft before this point of departure. Historical reticence or 'silence' within the wider field of craft simply caused many of its concerns to be overlooked². The correlation between ceramics and society provides perhaps one of the field's most integral and authentic debates.

The correlation of 'Civic' and 'Ceramics' equips us with both a framework for interpretation and a mode of practice for examining, at a more nuanced level, the boundaries of the 'intervening space' between the discipline and the community. More than this, it can enable us to identify practices that are creating a virtue of this previously opaque area, by pulling into view the unusual or

simply forgotten connections that lie between the community and traditional and contemporary ceramic practices.

In fact, once an investigation of ceramics' connection to a community is undertaken, any previous sense of their separation can become extremely difficult to maintain; from hair dressers' straighteners to spark plug insulators, from catalysts to sensors, ceramics can be found almost everywhere you look and sometimes where you can't. This connectivity persists in all manifestations of studio ceramics to a greater or lesser degree, offering potential dialogue to expand or deepen any imposition we might make upon its form.

It is not surprising therefore, that many high profile, international 'gallery' artist's such as Claire Twomey, Stephen Dixon and David Cushway are developing respected practices engaging with dialogue that reconnects ceramics with the community that shaped it. Participatory art is no-longer relegated to the margins. As Hal Foster states: 'in the social expanse of everyday life, the possibilities for participatory art are endless'³.

Definition of Terms

Before continuing, perhaps we need to more clearly define our terms when speaking of 'participation' in art. A common distinction is drawn between 'Participatory Art Projects', and 'Participatory Art' (per se). This distinction usually separates participation in contemporary art practices – such as events-based practice at biennales or contemporary gallery commissions, with social engagement-based projects – such as those working within public, community or socio-urban contexts, often sponsored by local government⁴.

Such distinction fuels the art as 'social therapy' versus 'authentic art' argument, the assumption that Participatory Practice is unable to withstand the critical evaluation of 'art world' critics, specifically because its value is lodged in the interaction between participants (and whatever products or benefits that brings) as opposed to the artwork itself⁵. This is where the relationship between the artwork and its 'point of meaning' has been historically problematic⁶.

Whilst it is well understood that the artistic and cultural life of a society is heralded as a 'barometer of its health' the impact of art that speaks directly to or with society is often met with scepticism. This is in part due to the problem of measuring its transformative capacity; whilst elements of an 'aesthetic encounter' are historically and socially determined, it would be impossible to establish with any certainty the root cause. This in turn, has resulted in methods of critiquing such practice that rarely reflect the complexity of its 'transformative rhetoric' and instead fall back onto more basic arguments.

So what method of analysis should we apply to artists such as Twomey, Dixon and Cushway without omitting or trivializing the strident participatory aspect of their art? The nature of participation, as Kester suggests requires 'new ways of thinking'⁷.

A more progressive approach to understanding the rise in participatory practice in the field of ceramics would be perhaps to question how these practices redefine or transform our understanding of aesthetic experience. And how do they challenge preconceived notions of the object of art?

Case Studies

Let us examine dynamic examples provided by Keith Harrison and AJ Stockwell, both of whom engage with dialogue created by the overlap between studio and society. In 'Michael Hamilton', Harrison courts the absurdity that can be found in the life/art juxtaposition, appropriating domestic electrical systems and portable appliances to conduct live firings of Egyptian paste in a living room! This intervening space is also inhabited by Stockwell in 'Bad Teeth' exploring replicated processes in conservation and dentistry. Stockwell creates video of porcelain paste being used to conserve a porcelain cup and runs it concurrently with the dialogue of a patient undergoing a procedure in a dentist chair.

The significance of these examples for contemporary ceramics debate is two fold: 1) the artists necessarily establish a thorough appreciation of the nature of both contexts in order to succeed in their assimilation of them, 2) the perimeters of ceramics vocabulary was necessarily stretched through its engagement with another field. For example, Stockwell's recognition of the connectivity between use of porcelain paste in conservation and dentistry enabled a far

wider exploration, as well as consolidation of her 'expertise' in ceramics process. The same is true of Harrison's exploration of the sensory experience of firing when set in relation to the domestic sphere.

These artists are a new breed of ceramicists, with a plurality of skill base that extends far beyond their own studio in order to facilitate movement between personal and wider social concerns. Such artists are in fact offering living examples of a generative approach to ceramics practice, with projects necessarily responding to context and need as well as retaining concern with contemporary ceramics debate. The benefits for the ceramicist are multifold, extending their engagement with their social and physical environment and mapping previously uncharted areas of knowledge.

Harrison and Stockwell's respective practice undoubtedly widens our appreciation of the remit of ceramics but are we missing something richer contained within these examples by simply accounting for them through conventional methodology? My account tells us very little about the complexities and contradictions of the actual performance of the work. I have simply acknowledged the role of the artist in focusing our attention on certain hidden relationships or correlations in our routine lives so as to challenge our normative assumptions. The actual response of the viewer may in fact bear little or no resemblance to this schema. My conventional critique has of course abstracted the practice from its participatory element.

If participatory and collaborative art practices shift the center of meaning from the artwork, object or event, to public interaction or dialogic engagement, we must do the same in accounting for them. This must be the case particularly when dealing with projects in which the viewer or participant has the potential to reshape and transform the work over time.

A fuller account of Harrison's practice would address the actual rather than the hypothetical experience of participants in the project – the actual experience of entering the living room and the emergent awareness of both the familiarity of the firing methods and difference the work offers in regard its contextual and sensorial impact. To be inclusive of its participatory element would require me to be more attentive to 'agency and affect' – to ways in which the site prompts particular response. I would need to be more attentive to my own and other signals through language and utterance, gesture and movement.

In accounting for participatory arts practice Kester demands that the various contributing factors of a project be gathered together in order to understand how their varying proximities impact upon the meaning of the work and its impact on participants. He terms this engagement 'a field-based approach' whereby analysis arises from inhabiting a space for a substantial amount of time, with attention to the social conditions of space, discursive, haptic, and temporal rhythms of the events that take place there.

The assertion is a simple one, that any thorough analysis of art practice that engages with participatory elements, however marginal, demands in itself a level of participatory engagement to review. Here the theorist or critic becomes, in Kester's terms, 'a genuine interlocutor in the unfolding of a given work, rather than a gray (or perhaps more accurately, white) eminence'⁸. Participatory practice requires a far more nuanced understanding of how an artwork is received.

Traditionally art and art theory is monological; analysis deals with the transformation of materials and intent by an artist, received by the perceptual capability of a viewer – both according to a single consciousness. Once this process becomes social, the 'aesthetic' is considered more as a form of knowledge relevant and communicable amongst a collective, or spheres of understanding. Art practice becomes about the social articulation of aesthetic experience.

If we shift the center of meaning further still toward community based practice, we discover more about how appreciation of craft's social, participatory nature might enable us to better critique ceramics practice in more general terms.

In 'Transnational dialogues in contemporary crafts' ceramist Stephen Dixon, along with other researchers from Manchester, worked with the people of Dhal Ni Pol, Ahmedabad, India, to address the decline of traditional Indian craft skills, in jeopardy through globalization and the speed of market development⁹.

The group sought to raise local awareness of the Pol's unique and endangered architectural and cultural heritage. They first documented their everyday rituals, then began to encourage a new daily ritual around a notional 'doorway', resulting in a series of ceramic installations, temporary site-specific artworks, films and events reflective of the particularity of Pols 'social aesthetic'.

This new ritual was intimately connected to the Pol's everyday and at the same time different, allowing objectivity and enabling the inhabitants to witness their own 'social aesthetic identity' emerging before them¹⁰.

Conclusion

Whilst the center of meaning radically shifts in each example given in this essay, displaying variable dynamics between craft and its particular social community or constituency, each shift uncovers the discernable connectivity of ceramics to society. The Participatory aesthetic can be seen as returning craft to its origin but not merely by engaging with a community, it recognizes the capacity of craft to motivate exchange and cohesion between those who engage with it, both in regard to making and interacting with it ¹¹.

Far from posing a threat to the academic vantage point of contemporary ceramics, this 'backward glance' in fact offers a potential means by which to articulate the potential of crafts aesthetic as something more powerful than traditional monological practices. The participatory aesthetic - as plural, fluid and open to risk - can offer us a means by which to better appreciate how craft contains forms of knowledge relevant and communicable amongst a collective, as opposed to remaining discrete and singular.

¹ Jorunn Veiteberg *Objects in Transition: The Ceramic Art of Kjell Rylander* Ceramics: Art and Perception No. 61 2005.

²See Andrew Jackson, 'Against the Autonomy of the Craft Object', in *Obscure Objects of Desire: Reviewing the Crafts in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Tanya Harrod, London, Crafts Council, 1997, pp.284–291, p.285. This notion of crafts 'Silence' is understood as referring to the lack of published account of ceramics historical movements and development. This ties in with Veiteberg's reference to crafts 'visibility' and concerns regarding any loss to its contemporary foothold as a now well theorized and published discipline.

³Foster, Hal. (1996) 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge: MIT Press

⁴ Belfiore and Bennett (2010) *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History*. Pub Palgrave Macmillan

⁵ Kester, G. (2013) *The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism*, e-Flux

⁶ Claire Twomey (2015) Conference Presentation, Consciousness/Conscience, for Fragile? Conference at the National Museum Wales

⁷ Kester, G. (2013) *ibid.*

⁸ Kester, G. (2013) *ibid.*

⁹ Dixon, S. (2010) Conference Presentation, Transnational dialogues in contemporary crafts, for the Applied Arts/Transnational Collaboration conference, M.M.U

¹⁰ It's interesting to note how an aesthetic experience can become individualized and revealed through participatory practices, to the point where it has the potential to be 'owned and unique' as opposed to generalized and diluted as common perception may have it.

¹ Irvine, J. The James Irvine Foundation, explores the various progressive stages of Participatory practice as follows: the official start of participatory arts, is referred to by Irving as 'Crowd sourcing' where the audience is involved in choosing or contributing financially to an artistic product - art exhibitions by community artists or theatre based on community stories come under this rubric. The second stage is co-production, and perhaps this incorporates AJ Stockwell if not in final production then in the pooling of knowledge and conceptual development. This stage often involves an exchange of creative energy between an arts organization and its public. Harrison's involvement of the public as both audience and completion of context also finds a position here.

The third and most participatory stage occurs when audience members substantially take control of the artistic experience. A professional artist may design the experience, but the outcome depends on the participants. Stephen Dixon and Claire Twomey's practice lies here.