CERAMICS AND THE ELASTIC MIND

THE IDEA BEHIND this commentary had its genesis in 1998 when I was a participant at the European Ceramic Work Center in the Netherlands. The Center was and is much like a think tank for ceramics. They study the material and process so thoroughly, and employ state-of-the-art technologies so confidently, that they provide artists and designers whose ideas are not constrained by experience or knowledge of ceramics the opportunity to make their sophisticated ideas possible. For me it was an amazing experience. Working for the first time with 3-D modeling, computerized kilns, and all sorts of commercial clays, glazes, and industrial techniques, I began to see the enormous possibilities of working in an environment that was more like ceramic industry than an art studio. This, coupled with living in Holland – a country that, like many in Europe, has had a long and thoughtful relationship with design – initiated a process by which I began to reevaluate many of my long-held beliefs about ceramics and its relationship to contemporary culture.

In 2002 I had the great fortune of attending "Digital Dialogues: Technology and the Hand," a conference at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts held as part of an ongoing series on the place of craft in various contexts. Spending several intense days observing how artists, musicians, writers, and scientists from the MIT Media Lab could and could not find common ground in their respective disciplines solidified in my mind that there needed to be a far more expansive way of thinking about ceramics, particularly utilitarian ceramics.

Finally, the title of this article refers to a recent show at the Museum of Modern Art, "Design and the Elastic Mind." This remarkable exhibition was curated by Paolo Antonelli, who writes, "The exhibition focuses on designers' ability to grasp momentous changes in technology, science, and social mores – changes that will demand or reflect major adjustments in human behavior – and convert them into objects and systems that people can understand and use."[1]

Last year, after twenty years of teaching in higher education, I left the academic world to pursue professional interests and direct a community-based arts program – the 92nd Street "Y" in New York City. This move, sparked by the experiences I have just mentioned, was also due to my frustration with an inert academic community that seemed unable to address the need for new and innovative thinking.

As Garth Clark, Ezra Shales, and others have pointed out, this insularity and inertia have been all-too-familiar themes within our discipline for too long. The fact is, while we in the ceramic community continue to talk about the same issues year after year, the world is quickly changing. The American Craft Museum has changed its name to the Museum of Arts and Design; American Craft magazine's programming is looking more at the intersection of art, craft, and design. The Etsy web site and the DIY (Do It Yourself) and indie craft movements are becoming more and more popular. Ceramics

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galleries are closing or becoming multi-media because the collectors who appeared after World War II are making fewer acquisitions as their collections fill, and there are few new patrons willing to take their place. This is partly due to many younger collectors not being interested in collecting specific media, but also to the allure of the fine art market and all its trappings.

What, then, to do about this state of flux?

Let me just say at the outset that I am very optimistic about the future, because ceramics is such a remarkable medium, there are so many talented people, and there are so many possibilities that have yet to be explored.

Over the past year there have been a number of exciting developments. They are the exception and not the rule, but they are significant and are occurring more frequently. For example, the artist and educator John Balistreri's work at Bowling Green University with 3-D ceramic printers [see SP Vol 36, No. 2] will offer opportunities to prototype ideas directly in clay and will further the concept of mass-customization in ceramics. Three-dimensional modeling and rapid prototyping are becoming more common in university programs, as is the Dutch company Blaauw and its computerized gas kilns, allowing both for energy efficiency and for work impossible to fire in traditional kilns. The Archie Bray Foundation's interest in biomimicry and devotion to becoming more sustainable and energy-efficient, and the 92nd Street Y's soon-to-be-introduced web-based distance-learning ceramics classes are other promising developments.

As I have said, I am optimistic that these changes will occur; my concerns are more about who will be leading them. Will it be those trained in the medium, or artists and designers outside this body who have little connection to ceramics but who currently seem to have a closer link to the cultural zeitgeist? It is ironic that while at Kohler I met only one designer who had studied clay and industrial design. Almost all the rest were industrial designers without real knowledge of the medium.

There are three ways I would propose changing our current mindset. First we need to think of ourselves in a more expansive way. Potters, for example, could redefine themselves as designers. Paolo Antonelli has said that "good design is a Renaissance attitude that combines technology, cognitive science, human need, and beauty to produce something the world didn't know it was missing."[2] Apple Computers, with the iPod and iPhone, understands this better than anyone, but it seems utilitarian clay objects are perfectly poised to do this as well.

Regardless of what we call ourselves, we need to make objects that reflect our time and place. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke wrote, "A work of art is good if it has sprung from necessity."[3] The question, then, is: what makes an object necessary in the twenty-first century? This is a far more complicated topic than I have space for here, but I believe we need to reevaluate and expand what it means to make things by hand, the constituencies for whom we are making work, and how our work is distributed.

Second, we must get to know our medium – its history, materials, processes, and morphologies – far better than we have to date. How can we, with supreme knowledge, push the idiosyncratic possibilities of ceramics farther than it has gone before? As Albert Einstein said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."[4] For too long our clays, glazes, and firing choices have been too narrow, as we have relied on a familiar vocabulary that has changed little over the last fifty to sixty years. We must question all that we have taken for granted, as if we are experiencing this medium for the first time.

I believe that if you look at art that has endured in clay, it is work that is crafted with the highest degree of skill, by artists whose knowledge of the medium is unparalleled and who use this information to support sophisticated and important ideas. Kathy Butterly, Kirsten Morgin, Ken Price – and even Jeff Koons with his piece "Michael Jackson and Bubbles," which shows his absolutely uncompromising demand for perfection – are great examples. Curiously, while Koons may not work in ceramics, he was smart enough to go find the Italian craftsmen with the technical expertise necessary to realize his vision exactly as he wanted, and that in itself is something that should be celebrated.

Finally, we are entitled to nothing. If there are people outside the field making smarter and more beautiful work in clay than we are, then we have no one to blame but ourselves. It is incumbent upon us to have the discipline, intensity, and honest introspection to be able to constantly reevaluate what we are doing and ask what changes are necessary to make our work better and more relevant.

Let me be more specific about this process of reconsideration and reevaluation that I am suggesting. To begin with, I think we need to look closely and perhaps challenge some of our most basic assumptions. The romance and nostalgia that have surrounded the idea of the handmade, while central to our discourse, need to be reevaluated. We need to research coolly and dispassionately how the sense of touch, for example, can articulate new, meaningful and relevant solutions in utilitarian objects.

Further, the ways in which we work also need to be reconsidered. Traditional techniques and tools such as the slab roller or the potter's wheel, while familiar, are just a few of the options now available. Industry and technology offer the ceramics community a myriad of new opportunities, thus allowing for whole new vocabularies in form and surface. Three-dimensional modeling, the reductive process of CNC milling, and other forms of rapid prototyping are examples of such natural tools for expanding the vocabulary of form in clay. Most important, however, they provide opportunities to create three-dimensional objects likely impossible any other way.

Beyond specific investigation of materials and processes, perhaps a larger and more important question is, what are our problems in the twenty-first century? I believe that Modernism holds some answers, as it was originally a utopian movement to create a better world. It held that technology could be a means of social improvement and that the machine was a symbol of that intent. These principles were frequently combined with social and political beliefs that held that design and art (certainly utilitarian objects fall into this category) could, and should, transform society.

The first thing that Eddie Rama, an artist-turned-politician, did in 2000 when he was elected mayor of Tirana, Albania, was to paint the drab Soviet-style architecture with vibrant color and patterns, giving the old world a new identity and imparting a sense of ownership to the residents commensurate with their freedom from the former Soviet Union. Since then he has worked with architects, landscape architects, and designers to change the way citizens interact with the space in which they live, making it a far more habitable place.

Ceramics in particular has the potential to enact this kind of change. In 2007 the Cooper Hewitt Museum mounted a show called "Design for the Other 90%" that included several simple but profound solutions for major problems in developing countries, based on the nature of ceramics as a material. For example, the Pot-in-Pot system, designed by Nigerian Mohammed Bah Abba in 1995 and produced by local potters, "consists of two pots, a smaller earthenware pot nestled within another, larger one, with the space in between filled with sand and water. When that water evaporates" through the porous clay in the hot dry climate, "it pulls heat from the interior of the smaller pot," keeping cool the vegetables and fruits that are stored within. "In rural Nigeria…one of their biggest problems is the

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inability to preserve their crops. With the Pot-in-Pot, tomatoes last for twenty-one days, rather than two or three days without this technology."[5]

Revealing information is what the bone china cups of British designer Laura Bethan Wood are all about. This product challenges the assumption that use – represented by scratches, discoloration, or wear and tear – is damaging or bad. Designed to improve through use, the inside of the cup is treated so that it is deliberately susceptible to the staining that results from tea drinking. The more the cup is used, the more the pattern is revealed.

Perhaps the greatest promise for ceramic art lies in the nature of ceramic materials as they relate to ideas about phenomena. For example, the artist Dan Flavin, whose work in light and color is well documented, ingeniously employed those ideas with stacked dinnerware. The color from the underside of the plate above is reflected to the white surface of the piece below; reflected color then becomes a glazed surface.

Vincent De Rijk, a Dutch designer, has combined disparate materials to address the phenomenon of translucency. For his "Kom BV Vases," the interior bowl-like form is ceramic while the exterior is a synthetic resin. These two materials have been fused together to take full advantage of the brilliant ceramic surface and the translucent nature of the resin. They are beautiful forms that work together but also suggest something else, perhaps the rings of Saturn.

The work of the designers KleinReid, in particular their Hawthorne series, addresses surface in ways that reflect their sophisticated knowledge of the medium. With a substantial amount of the vases' bottoms left bare, the dripping movement/action of the glazes is highlighted, providing an opportunity for gravity and its vital relationship to glaze to be a focus of their investigation. It is curious that of the many designers that I have become familiar with, they are among the few to take on surface as a serious part of their investigation. This, I believe, has to do with the difficulty of learning about ceramic surface versus form, and it is a great example of why the very best work will be made by those who know the medium most thoroughly.

Finally, while I have provided just a few examples of new and innovative approaches and solutions in ceramics, there are many others to be seen. In fact, at the time of writing this article, "The Object Factory," curated by Marek Cecula, opened at the Museum of Art and Design in New York City. With brilliant investigations into material, process, ergonomics, and conceptual ideas in ceramics, the show provides, I believe, a validation of what I have talked about. We share an incredible medium and there are extraordinary opportunities ahead, particularly if we look at it with a renewed sense of wonder and an elasticity of vision.

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5. Description of the Pot-in-Pot cooler system retrieved from Cooper-Hewitt's web site, http://other90.cooperhewitt.org/Design/pot-in-pot-cooler