Critical Writing – Art & Ceramics

A paper written & presented by Altair Roelants at the 2012 Australian Ceramics Triennale

Introduction - ACT Presentation

Speaking from a background in art history and the visual arts, my critical writing on ceramics comes not from the perspective of a practice, or necessarily a deep understanding of the medium, but from a fascination with ceramics as objects, their history and place within our visual culture and everyday lives. And because of this accountability, how their form, function, circulation and representation can tell us so much about ourselves, and our past, and how this has enabled ceramics and clay to traverse so many artistic and theoretical disciplines. And of course aesthetically, as beautiful and challenging objects to look at, hold and write about – as it appears to me, that there is an inherent poetics to ceramics that language can be sympathetic to.

So it is through this art historical lens that today I will be touching upon some of the benefits and differences of critical writing on ceramics in relation to other visual art forms.

A Personal Introduction to Ceramics

Coming from a country that historically is obsessed with chinaware - ceramics have always patterned my life. In my childhood anywhere that I could possibly look for ceramics I would forage or scavenge. My first memories were in my Nanny’s garden in East London, which was always riddled with shards of blue and white china. These, alongside other finds in the graveyard of the Oxfordshire village where I grew up, or later along the coastline of New Zealand, I used to collect and proudly display in flimsy plastic yoghurt holder containers rescued from supermarkets.

For me, as probably with many young and old imaginations alike, there has always been something magical about these lost ceramic pieces. As John Carswell writes in Blue & White: Chinese Porcelain Around the World ‘The shards of blue and white china break into history, break into the earth – the singular object becomes many and spreads out from its origin to unknown places’.
On another personal side note, while researching for this presentation I rediscovered that my father’s grandfather - Joseph Roelants (1881-1962) - was a well-respected Flemish decorative tile and ceramic painter. There is a museum dedicated to his wares near his hometown of Antwerp – The Roelants Museum at St. Bernard Abbey.

**Art History – Writing on Ceramic Objects**

As Edmund de Wall discussed at his recent talk at the Sydney Writers Festival “with objects begin a story”...

Ceramics and writing are key ways of defining who we are – there is a commonality between words and objects, both delineate cultural space and trace history, one through words and one through forms.

Ceramics popularity and longevity as a utilitarian object tells us much about our global social history - feeding into endless avenues of enquiry such as international exchange, trade and maritime routes; economy, production and consumption; architecture, building and infrastructure; politics and national identity; religion and memorial; culinary history; art, design and fashion, and the patterns of our every day routines.

In an art historical context, ceramics was one of the first mass produced and affordable decorative art forms and possibly the first globalized artistic product. This mass appeal enabled ceramic objects to bridge the divide between classical and popular art, the wealthy and the working classes. And long before the photograph, television or Internet – ceramics potential as a decorative, functional and subversive object was realized to circulate ideologies and social expectations within our domestic and public spaces. A famous example being the Communist propaganda adorned chinaware of the Russian Revolution.

To cite Edmund de Waal again, and a wonderful excerpt from his book 20th Century Ceramics that was originally taken from a 1928 Soviet Young Communist League Paper titled ‘What do you want from a plate?’ which goes on to say ‘In the ‘parade’ of objects there are no non-combatants...plates and cups, i.e. things we see daily, several times a day, which can do their bit for the organization of our consciousness – these occupy an important place. We demand that a plate should fulfill its social function. We demand that the role of everyday objects should not be forgotten by our young...artists and the bodies in charge of our industry’.

© 2012 Altair Roelants
Such historical insights remind us that when comparing ceramics with other mediums, there is no other art form that exists in such abundance outside of the art world, as an object that is functional rather than purely spectacle.

Because of this duality ceramics have come to appear not only in our living rooms and galleries but also in a lot of art criticism that depict the world around us. My first critical engagement with ceramics were as visual signifiers in 17th century Dutch genre painting in which the placement of exotic blue and white china and common earthen wear, depicted people’s nobility, status and class aspirations or lack of - for example in the paintings of Johannes Vermeer, Peter de Hooch and Nicolaes Maes. Ceramic object’s relational capacity and glossy surface was also used as a reflective device to imply the viewer within the moral context of the scene. Since this initial foray, even if not directly addressing them, ceramics have surfaced in numerous ways within my writing on the visual arts – including collections and museum studies, domesticity and feminism, theories of memory and trauma or more generally within art – as a reoccurring player in still lives, a ‘ready made’, within contemporary sculptural and installation practices, or simply reflecting art historical aesthetics and trends on the surface designs.

And for me this seems to be a part of ceramics intrigued – beyond the image – it is the object that seems to reflect who we are and in a somewhat global capacity.

**Ceramics - Objects of the Everyday**

As I mentioned previously, in the context of critical writing my own interest lies in the realm of ceramics as objects specifically in relation to their function and circulation in the everyday.

Ceramics physically exist within, and mirror, important moments of our collective and individual lives – some examples include the great Victorian tea ceremonies; historic milestones; religious and family celebrations such as the plate smashing at Greek weddings; national celebrations – for example the bone china made for the Jubilee which was seen on every mantle piece in England and personal memorial. Ceramics then, however grand, decorative or hand-made will be part of that moment or at least its functionality will be implied within it.

Ceramics proximity to the lived experience also means that they can act as depositories of memory by capturing the memory of a momentary action or event in the very object
through their propensity for touch, circulation and display. Thus they retain a certain sense of this as the memory, or our imagination of it, becomes imbedded in the object itself. Subsequently there is something undeniably human about ceramics - we can relate to them and often on a personal level.

Ceramics historical legacy as an object in the world is something that can be carried through within contemporary criticism and practices - because of this functionality, and far-reaching cultural value as an object outside of the arts, it has the potential for a criticality that is closer to reality, thus telling us stories about people, places, cultural trends that are unintended or overlooked. To recall an art historical example as John Boardman argues in his book *The History of Greek Vases* the art of antiquity was ‘essentially functional, but exercising functions forgotten today or served in other ways’ which ‘has more to teach us about ancient Greece...than any other art from, including sculpture’

Ceramics deep-seated familiarity enables contemporary ceramic practices to be accessible, understood and relational even in their most oblique form, and I would argue more so than their contemporary art counterparts, which are often still hemmed in by theoretical, curatorial and institutional frameworks that can be intimidating to audiences. Similarly this familiarity opens up the possibility of creating dialogues between different cultures, places and languages – as many of us recognize clay or ceramic objects, but we don’t necessarily share the same visual literacy, speak the same language or have access to digital technology and online communication.

A fabulous example of a participatory artwork that utilizes clay and the familiarity of the ceramic object was the recent work at the 18th Biennale of Sydney: *All our relations* by Bangkok based artist Arin Rungjang’s *The Living are Few but the Dead Are Many* (2012). For this first time ceramic project Rungjang collaborated with orphans of the Rwandan genocide to explore their experiences through pottery workshops at a ceramic factory in the capital Kigali, using the process of working with clay and individual interviews, to tell their stories. In a moving display, the earthenware vessels were exhibited alongside honest video portraits of the participants – using the act of making and sharing, as the artist says to ‘contemplate how we perceive commonality not difference’. Rungjang extended this dialogue within the local context, through related activities with disadvantaged children here in Sydney.

© 2012 Altair Roelants
Since the early twentieth century the found object has been employed as a critical tool in conceptual art to break with notions of authorship and to devalue the art object itself. Ceramics naturally lends itself to notions of the ‘found’ due to its utilitarian nature and durability – ceramics does not have such a clear journey in life (just look at the piles found in charity shops), often diverging off entirely from the original use and intention vested in it by the maker, by circulating in the spontaneity of the lived experience.

This quality of found ceramics offers a huge narrative potential that can be extracted in the critical and subversive act as contemporary artists and writers, can reinstate this complexity by thinking about important socio-historical moments through the object and our physical relationship to it, and mobilizing the dormant narratives that lie there by enabling a transference of time and place. To briefly look at an example I wrote about in the capacity is Mark Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* (1999). Dion’s project consisted of two weeklong excavations on the bank of the river Thames in London. At low tide, Dion and a group of volunteers searched the riverbank collecting both old and contemporary objects of interest. They were then identified, sorted and cleaned in two on site tents. The found ceramic objects included clay pipes, decorated shards of delft ceramics, an abundance of blue and white shards, tin glaze ceramics and more recent pottery. The final collection was exhibited at The Tate Britain in a huge wooden cabinet that mimicked a ‘wonderkammar’. As one critic wrote ‘what it’s knobs and catches belie however, is that the spectator may open up the myriad draws and cases of this cabinet of curiosities to enter different realms of time and space’.vii

In this light, I go back to my love pottery shards, as Neil MacGregor of the British Museum wrote in his fabulous book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* in the section on Kilwa Pot fragments found on a beach in Tanzania “Broken bits of pot have told us more than almost anything else about the daily life of the distant past’.viii

Mark Dion’s *Tate Thames Dig* utilizes the capacity of found remnants of pottery and other objects to break from the selection process and the notions of what we collectively choose to see and document, drawing the past into present by mobilizing the stored collective memory and history in found objects and waste, and also the possibility within this of unearthing counter-narratives and memories, while simultaneously using the river to symbolically reflect upon the future.
Ceramics & Touch

Another element to ceramic objects that differs to other art forms is touch.

As everyone in this room will know all too well, historically the molding or shaping of clay begun with the hand – the palm, thumb, fingers and side of the hand - so it is explicitly linked to the curves and print of the human body. This direct physical engagement with the material is very much part of the process (and the enjoyment of) and the finished ceramic piece. Other artist’s engagement with their work is often navigated through a tool – whether a brush, pencil or indeed computer software.

This notion of touch extends to the owner or audience - the ability to handle the ceramic object enables us to potentially play a role in constructing it’s meaning as we physically engage with the object, changing it’s original significance through use and display. For example, by putting a ceramicist’s vessel amidst a selection of domestic pots we can reinvent the narrative of the form as it becomes lost in its role in the world of objects. While a painting, even if placed out of an art context, still remains grounded in the picture plain - as the viewer is always drawn into visual cues and patterns to search its surface for meaning and the arts cannon it exists within.

Similarly, in a gallery context the notion of touch when talking about the art object is severely frowned upon - culturally we are trained to look at pictures, where we learn to use objects. Subsequently when exhibited contemporary ceramic objects can suggest these gestures, these expectation of us, through their form. This relationship can also make us consider how we move in the space around them. Relaying this to a quote from my Goldsmith’s College lecturer Gavin Butt’s introduction to After Criticism that explores performative arts writing - this engagement means ceramics can highlight ‘the importance of the critical encounter with the object and the agency which we might (re)discover there’.ix

And it is because of this social resonance and desire to touch I believe ceramics in someway resists the digital and will continue to do so. While contemporary practices can utilize digital media in exciting ways, they will always hold a connection with the earth bound substance of clay, or, they essentially are no longer ceramics. In contrast a painting, drawing, video or performance can exist within the digital and virtual world and in some cases, such art forms are quickly being superseded by this rapidly evolving medium. As I discussed in my The Journal of Australian Ceramics review of HYPERCLAY, such shifts towards the digital ‘raises some interesting questions regarding the gallery experience and art object, when

© 2012 Altair Roelants
exhibitions move more into the virtual realm and further from the experiential or the material. And this is true of our future audiences, who will probably relate more to their iPhone than they do their grandmother’s teapot. Although, when speaking to an expert from University of Sydney’s Museum and Galleries, the demand for experiential learning is huge and growing - it seems the children of today are still yearning to touch objects, so maybe this shift to the online world will throw the doors open to ceramics even more.

*Writing about the Material – Clay*

As well as the form and functionality of ceramics - it is also the material of clay that makes critical writing about it so positive and very different to other art forms

As is discussed in Louisa Taylor’s *The Ceramic Bible* as a material it’s always shifting from something that is soft – to something of permanence and that offers hundreds of variations for the ceramicist to use. Plus the endless technical stages, processes, and tools that bring clay to life, many of which provide elements of spontaneity and are largely unknown until after firing. And as a writer, the terminology certainly keeps me on my toes – often driving me to check on numerous occasions with featured artists if indeed I’ve got it correct! Subsequently, clay has the ability to take on the look of other natural and man-made materials, as well as having these material incorporated into its surface often without falling into the realm of mixed media. Its surface can also reflect and draw in light, implying the surrounding environment and audience into its form.

Interestingly in relation to other art forms - the object and subject is always very much grounded in the material and process. In contrast, paint is often devalued as a material in favor of the image itself. The aim sometimes is to paint so the viewer no longer perceives the material such as in the refined hand of a photo-realist painter or Trompe-l’œil canvases. Similarly in immersive digital and installation practices – the artistic environment can aim to eclipse the real world within which the audience stands. Clay then, while remaining grounded to it’s material, has the ability to escape a strict definition of appearance and in doing so can be subversive by simultaneously retaining it’s identity but by employing disguise and mimicry, both of which are historically used as subversive tactics.

Another important point I like to draw on when thinking critically about clay, is that it’s drawn from the Earth but with a myriad of commercial and industrial uses that have come to shape not only our private but our public spaces. As Ronald Rael discusses in his book *Earth Architecture* ‘Dirt—as in clay, gravel, sand, silt, soil, loam, mud—is everywhere. The
ground we walk on and grow crops in also just happens to be the most widely used building material on the planet... currently it is estimated that one half of the world's population—approximately three billion people on six continents—lives or works in buildings constructed of earth. When applied critically, this means that there are connotations in clay's very material—as it is loaded both socially and historically and with international understanding, and also has implications within current debates surrounding the environment, sustainable practice, living and green architecture.

Because of this role, clay more readily than many other visual arts forms can hold within its material the conceptual rather than just being illustrated through its exterior form and decoration. This enables ceramic practices to respond to both the natural and urban environment, in a tangible and physical sense. An example that I wrote about in this context was Chicago based artist Charlie Schneider, whose projects explored invasive species in Australia and man's patterning of the land, through the use of clay slip ‘wallpapers’ decorated with striking motifs of animal and plant invasive species on man made structures in specific urban and rural locations - such as the impressive work Dam Wallpaper #2 (Datura Inoxia) on the dam at The Fowlers Gap Arid Zone Research Station in rural NSW.

A Brief Conclusion

Critically writing about ceramics can diverge off into endless strands of reference such as the imaginary, fictitious, relational, historical, memory and autobiographical. But importantly, and going back to my childhood fascination, ceramics can be beautiful and surprising objects - which is what I think makes them a pleasure to write about and why I keep finding myself returning to them.

---

2. The paper Soviet Young Communist League Paper was dated 28th July 1928.
6. Quote taken from Arin Runjang www.bos18.com

© 2012 Altair Roelants

“Quote taken from Ronald Rael www.eartharchitecture.org