A Subversive Balancing Act
Critical Writing on Ceramics

The Critical Writing Panel at the 2012 Australian Ceramics Triennale – Subversive Clay

Article by Altair Roelants

Amongst the clay spattered exhibitions, demonstrations and speakers, the critical writing panel at the 2012 Australian Ceramics Triennale – Subversive Clay took this public opportunity to address what is right and wrong with critical writing in the contemporary ceramics field. As primarily a visual arts writer I was delighted to join fellow panellists Dr Damon Moon – writer, curator and exhibiting artist; Dr Peter Wilson – ceramics practitioner, educator and writer; Moyra Elliot – New Zealand based curator and writer specialising in ceramics and panel chair Vicki Grima – ceramist, Editor of The Journal of Australian Ceramics and Executive Officer of The Australian Ceramics Association. As I introduced my own talk speaking from a background in art history...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. Consequently I have written this article in conversation with the experience and dedication of the panellists, whose papers raised some key themes, alongside an acute awareness of the issues at stake and what changes are needed to re-imagine this field of critical writing in Australia.

An important drive behind such a discussion (particularly a critical one) is to define what this ‘good’ ceramics critical writing should look like and attempt to do. Indeed the definition of this critical act is one that counteracts the assumption of negative judgment or comment. Rather, as each panellist described, critics should attempt to be objective, descriptive, informed, engaging, entertaining, imaginative, analytical and be contextualised. The writer should draw on research and theory and have an understanding of the material clay and the techniques that form it. Elliot also emphasised that a different style of writing was needed for ceramics, being inherently different to fine art and the critical discourse that stems from it. But above all the panel stressed the need to develop a strong critical voice in writing on contemporary ceramics by fostering honest, accessible and well ‘crafted’ texts that express...
opinion and engineer an act of conversation between the artist, artwork and reader.

This question of quality and honesty appeared to be fundamental, as in a small, specialised, material-driven arena, it appears there are not enough writers who write about Australian ceramics from beyond the walls of ceramics itself. Many of the published text we read are by ceramics artists and while this offers advantages of insight into the practice, it does not necessarily denote a good writer. The unease of this juxtaposition was reiterated by each of my fellow panellists. As Grima outlined, many of the submissions to The journal of Australian Ceramics are by artists and while she certainly does not suggest artists should not or can not write, she “struggles” to find quality texts and “would like to find more good writers about ceramics”. As Moon reiterated “just as it would be unreasonable to expect someone to be able to make an accomplished piece of ceramics without some training, skill, aptitude and almost no practice, it is no wonder that a great deal of writing about ceramics by ceramists simply falls short of the mark”. Wilson suggested that ceramics’ internalisation results in a personal obligation “to respond positively to the body of work”. Elliot voiced similar concerns, although she highlighted that a small core of international critical writers and online support networks are emerging and that positive changes are underway.

In contrast, while we are certainly seeing a merging of roles across the arts (as artists turn to curating, curators turn to writing, dancers turn to choreography, actors to direction) in most other art forms the critic is often entirely removed from the artistic act. In fact now probably the biggest ‘critic’ is the audience themselves in the form of endless blogs, online publications and social commentary which, as Grima stated, “is immediate…democratic…anyone can be involved”. These shifts are diminishing the authority of the critic across all forms of cultural criticism including areas such as literature, fashion and food. As through social media, the value attributed to acceptance and praise is being placed increasingly in the lap of the public. Although this is not to say we do not still need skilled writers in all these fields – we do and maybe even more so. Such questions made me wonder whether the field of ceramics could use its current position to its advantage by developing a new criticism that exists within a practice, as don’t we best understand and are able to express what we know well?

Popular culture’s manifestation within the arts frames another interesting point of conversation: the contrasting art historical and economic structures that shape ceramics and the subsequent effect on the writing, coupled with a self-awareness of what the outside art world thinks. As Wilson addressed, critical writing on ceramics may have experienced the same categorisation as the medium itself, being “relegated to a minor part of the world of art criticism” being assumed to be “merely decorative” an art form that “cannot express ideas”, the overall theme and conclusion of his paper being that “ceramics needs a Robert Hughes as an advocate”. Ceramics classification is in line with its roots as a mass-produced object that is functional, domestic and often feminised and frequently does not garner high price tags. Similarly, Elliot explored the economic frameworks alongside the alternative and supportive craft networks that shape the ceramics community and its critical writing. Both of which are starkly different to the competitive hierarchies of fine art, writing being at times the promotional tool within this market driven cycle. These characteristics that inform ceramics autonomy have never sat neatly within the wider art world or its critics which (particularly in the contemporary era of biennales, branded artists, infamous collectors and blockbuster exhibitions that provide huge boosts to economies) often favours these glossy self-referential mirrors “as the economy of art closely reflects the economy of finance capital”.

A related effect on the development of critical writing on ceramics that was addressed are the restrictions of print publications such as format, length and fees and the lack of coverage in mainstream media. This issue was expanded upon by Moon who outlined that apart from academia the majority of this critical writing appears in ceramics magazines
which, while offering many opportunities, the form of an article, short essay or review does not necessarily allow in-depth engagement with the subject highlighting the benefits of such genres as narrative non-fiction12 and the strength of the critical curatorial text.13 And I would add that this niche further disconnects ceramics to a specific pool of writers and does not extend its scope beyond this readership. This could also be said of the ceramics audience, who often (and understandably) are looking for writers and texts that have knowledge of the technical aspects of practice, rather than critical opinion and analysis. In comparison ceramics’ small footprint in the mainstream press is in contrast to the 1960s and 1970s when, as Wilson explained, reviewers “were sympathetic to the pottery movement and the creative activity that stemmed from the craft movement which manifests itself through the studio pottery”.14 The media’s focus reflects cultural shifts in general. The ‘idea’ of art (which is infamously hard to define) has been assimilated into our contemporary and digital popular consciousness far more readily than the skill and material based medium of ceramics, appearing in arts magazine, as well as enjoying regular spots in mainstream press including feature articles, essays and a large online presence. Similarly, art is utilised in advertising and design campaigns, as well as government, community and education strategies as the aesthetic ‘recycling arm’ of business and consumer goods.15 It would appear then, in the age of digital publications and 3D printing applications that both the materiality of the written word and the object are jostling for attention.

Returning to my own paper: I feel this self-conscious but highly creative and skilled space within which ceramics exists (and that is one removed from fine art) is the medium’s strength and what naturally lends itself to good critical writing. As I discussed “ceramics historical legacy as a functional object in the world” with a “far-reaching cultural value as an object outside of the arts means it has the potential for a criticality that is closer to lived reality” and less tied to theory and the motivations of the art market and, thus, more subversive. As a writer there is the potential to side-step the theoretical frameworks that we are often cornered into when writing about visual art, rather taking one of the many entry points to explore this diverse medium which is offered through ceramics form, material and places next to us in the world. Subsequently, ceramics can “tell us stories about people, places, cultural trends that are unintended or overlooked” rather than the frequently homogenised and rehashed messages of art. I also believe that, while contemporary practices can use it to their advantage, “ceramics in someway resists the digital – as a medium it will always hold a connection with the earth bound substance of clay or, essentially, it is no longer ceramics”. In contrast, many other art forms (including writing) can exist in and are, in some cases, being superseded by the virtual and digital world. Addressing the questions of accessibility, again “ceramics’ deep-seated familiarity enables contemporary practices to be accessible, understood and relational even in their most oblique form”. This attribute “opens up the possibility of creating dialogues between different cultures, places and dialects” which can be adopted critically by both ceramists and writers.17

Finally, I believe both the challenges and pleasures of this art form can and should be harnessed to nurture an exciting and independent body of critical writing on ceramics. As it appears to me, it is a balancing act between educating writers and readers about the wonderful world and language of ceramics.  

Endnotes

1. The critical writing panel was titled “CRITWRITICALING: a discussion about what’s write and wrong about critical writing on contemporary ceramics”. It was held on Sunday 30th September, 2012.
2. Roelants, Altair. ACT 2012 presentation “Critical Writing – Art & Ceramics”.
3. Elliot, Moyra. ACT 2012 presentation “The Economics of the Critical Article or the Circuitous Route of the Woolzlem Bird”.
4. Grima, Vicki. Opening presentation as chair of the panel.
6. Wilson, Peter. ACT 2012 presentation “What Robert Hughes might have said!”.
7. Elliot, Moyra.
9. Wilson, Peter.
10. Elliot, Moyra.
12. Also know as creative non-fiction.
14. Wilson, Peter.
15. Stallabrass, Julian.
16. Such as social history, collective memory, culinary history, the narrative potential of found objects, personal biography and the implication of the material clay itself.
17. All quotes in this paragraph taken from Altair Roelants ACT 2012 presentation “Critical Writing – Art & Ceramics”.

Altair Roelants is a freelance arts writer from London who relocated to Sydney in early 2010. She is currently writing for a range of national and international arts publications about Australian contemporary visual art and ceramics. Altair has worked in the visual arts for more than a decade collaborating on a broad range of artist, exhibition, text based and community creative projects.