Speaking Volumes: Pottery and Words

The relationships between ceramics and text, pottery and words are very old and very new. These relationships may not be too obvious at first but it is my intent to show here that there is a very intimate connection between clay and language, ceramics and the written text, pottery and words and that this symbiosis between the two cultural phenomena is very ancient and profoundly meaningful. Much has been made of the use of words and text in art and in contemporary culture, especially now with new media technologies, but that has always been true of ceramic objects, since the very beginning of recorded history.

The earliest examples of ceramic objects related to language and writing are the clay tokens from Mesopotamia, dating from 8000 B.C. These tokens were part of an accounting system used in exchange and commercial transactions. Each little round clay ball represented a unit of merchandise, i.e. a sheep, a measure of grain, etc. Around 3700 B.C., these tokens were enclosed in hollow clay spheres called bullas, and kept in archives. Their use is rather interesting. When merchandise was moved, a bulla containing tokens representing the quantity of goods (say 10 sheep), was given to the transporter. When the merchandise was delivered, the recipient would break the bulla to make sure that the correct amount of sheep was delivered to him and none was lost in transit. By 3500 B.C., impressions are made on the outside of the bullas to represent the tokens, also called calculis, contained inside. For this reason, the bullas themselves became quickly obsolete, and similar impressions appear on clay tablets instead. By 3000 B.C., these pictographs are simplified into cuneiform, angular signs made by pressing the wedge-shaped edge of a split reed into the fresh clay. Thus a graphic sign for "sheep" is progressively abstracted until it represents a code for "sheep", then the sound for the word "sheep" and then simply the phonetic and alphabetical aspects. It is through such a process that ceramic materials and technologies are at the very beginning of both mathematics and writing.

Writing was first invented to record business activities, and the overwhelming majority of cuneiform texts were written on clay tablets. Not all of these tablets were baked or fired, only those meant for permanent record. The advantage is that unfired clay tablets can be reused, remoistened and altered. Most of the tablets that survived were originally unbaked: they were fired when the archive, the "library" where they were kept was eventually burned down and the record was thus buried in the charred remains of the building where they remained until their discovery by archeologists. Clay was the ideal material for the preservation of these texts, some of which hold the earliest examples of poetry and fiction. It is believe that some texts were written on bark paper, which eventually was completely destroyed. For the Mesopotamians, the idea of a permanent record was very important. Early Mesopotamian cuneiform was thought to be the world's first written language, followed closely by similar developments in Egypt, but recent discoveries show that the Indus valley script, also found on clay tablets in the city of Harappa emerged independently at the same time. Also, three clay tablets have recently been discovered at a site in Tartaria, Romania; they were produced by the Neolithic Vinca culture around 4000 B.C., which may push the earliest date for written inscriptions back by a thousand years.

In Mesopotamia, the achievements of rulers were inscribed on clay prisms or clay "nails", often inserted in the structure of buildings. To this day, this practice continues in Iraq. Saddam Hussein had his name and accomplishments written on the bricks used on all public buildings constructed under his rule as well as on all the reconstruction of historic buildings and sites executed during his rule. This is also true for all other preceding rulers of Iraq before him. Thus a record of construction, repair and

reconstruction of major buildings is embedded within the building itself, sometime over millennia. This makes me think of all those bricks made by Robert Arneson with his name stamped on them. He will probably be thought to have been a very important ruler by future archeologists.

Writing is the most essential discovery of humankind after the still more ancient discovery of fire, and both are closely related to ceramics as an art form, as well as to the contribution ceramics has made to the development of civilization and world culture. If the origin of the alphabet and numbers, of writing and mathematics, is closely related to clay and mathematics, it is interesting to note that ceramics itself as a technology becomes mature at the same time as these developments, with the invention of the wheel, of kilns and of the first glazes. This part of the world that we now call the Middle East not only gave us the earliest written texts, both also saw the birth of pottery and ceramics as a refined technology.

Most texts from Mesopotamia were of a commercial nature, statements of accounting and transactions, or they celebrated the military or civic accomplishments of rulers. But as tends to be the case, the most moving and informative objects are those related to the daily life of ordinary people with whom we can readily relate. Numerous incantation bowls were made, painted on their interior with drawings of devils and spirits and inscribed with cast spells meant to ward off evil. They were positioned face down to imprison the evil meant to be contained. One also finds letters written on pots or shards, an example being a message from a mother to her dead son asking for his help and support from the afterlife. Many examples of these are in the British Museum or the Louvre. Another small bowl from the Louvre, dating from Egypt in 592 B.C. is written in cursive demotic, which was the written form of ordinary people and everyday affairs, the hieroglyphic being reserved for official and religious documents. Also, papyrus being rare and expensive, ordinary people used shards or discarded pots to write on. For that reason alone, many of their texts were preserved for us. The use of clay and the firing process might also have served some magical purpose to guarantee the efficiency of the spell cast or the permanency of the contract signed. This little Egyptian bowl reads as follows:
"Year 4, second summer month, 20th day under Pharaoh Psammetique, the lady Djetourisphaonkh, daughter of Nesmhat declares to Amenopouh: You have fulfilled my heart with money for which I become your servant. No other man in the world can reclaim me but you. I will not be able to consider myself a private independent person toward you, until I have reimbursed all money, all grain, any other thing in the world, including the children that will be born of me, with all that I own and everything I shall produce, with the clothes on my back, from this day of the year 4, second summer month, from now and forever."
This very simple and ordinary thrown clay bowl, this simple domestic object is also a record of enslavement for debt.

A very different object is the Phaistos disk found in Crete. This 3600 year-old clay disk is impressed with 241 pictogram seals, and it holds the earliest know example of printing. Covering both sides are sixty-one "words" separated by lines and arranged in a spiral form. This Cretan system of writing is yet un-deciphered. So not only does writing find its origin in ceramics, but printing as well, as is the case in China too, a few millennia later.

Greek vases too are often inscribed with text, usually the names of the represented figures painted on the pots, but also unrelated elements like homage to young athletes to whom the vase might have been presented as a gift or as a prize. These inscription complimenting the youth on his beauty often help in dating the vase since these celebrated boys often became important civic figures later on and we can match their names with other dated records. These Greek vases are often signed by the potter who made them and/or by the painter, at times the same person. We find vases inscribed "so and so made

me" to refer to the potter, or "so and so painted me" to refer to the painter. A few vases are inscribed as having been made and painted by the same person or possibly under the supervision of a studio owner. 19th Century connoisseurship has played a bizarre trick on us by attributing the painting on some vases to a fictional artist referred to as " this potter's name painter", the Amasis Painter being a famous example. Many pots are signed by the potter Amasis and all of his production was painted by the same hand which remains anonymous. Instead of attributing the painting on the vase to Amasis himself, a fictive character called "the Amasis Painter" was created! Amasis himself is thought to have been of Egyptian origin and possibly black. It was assumed that the painter had to be another person whose name has been lost to us since the potter couldn't be the painter as well, despite numerous and celebrated examples to the contrary! The earliest signed Greek vase bears the mark of Sophilos, which makes him the earliest recorded potter in history.

Another very interesting use of ceramic and text in Greek antiquity is the ostracon. When a citizen had been deemed unworthy for an action or a behavior, other citizens would pick a pottery shard from the ground and inscribe the name of the offending person on it and depose the piece in a special container reserved for that purpose on the public square. At public meetings, the shards were counted and if a sufficient number of them held the name of an individual, that person was sent into exile. This practice gave us the word for ostracize.

By the first century A.D., we find small, unassuming dishes that are actually Gallo-Roman pottery accounts. These small plates are inscribed by scratching into the clay with a pointed tool, with the content of the kiln as it was being loaded. Potters worked in groups and shared firing facilities. Since the work produced was standardized and stylistically homogenous, a record was kept of the number and type of wares loaded in the communal kiln by each potter. This record on a clay plate or dish was then fired with the load. Before unloading, it was retrieved and each potter was given back the same number and type of objects, not necessarily those he had originally produced. Breakage was accounted for, and the loss was spread evenly and proportionately to what the original record showed. These inscribed accounting plates are very useful to archeologists and historians to determine the number and type of objects made, the name of individual potters and their number in any given community and they clearly demonstrate economic and social conditions as well as their evolution through time. Few pots themselves survived but lots of these unassuming scratched dishes, which were instantly discarded to the trash pile, can be found on kiln sites all over Roman France.

All these records on clay objects have been preserved for us, due to the particular physical properties of ceramics and its potential to contain and preserve not only goods and things, but also time and memory itself. Texts on paper, parchment or other perishable materials rarely survived. The Dead Sea Scrolls were written on parchment. Luckily, they were stored inside pottery jars and sealed under a lid, which certainly greatly helped in their preservation. Otherwise bacteria or rodents, not counting the ravages of weather or light itself, would have long digested them. This need to record, preserve and maintain memory through the combined use of pottery and text can also be found on two 6th Century A.D. Anglo-Saxon cremation urns (British Museum). One is marked with inscriptions in runes, recording the personal name of the deceased, while the other has similar markings, yet they only imitate runes since the maker of that urn was illiterate, yet felt the need to appropriate the power of the written word, even if it was only by erroneous imitation.

Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, one finds countless pots with various inscriptions pertaining to daily life, marriages, births and deaths, celebrations and libations, as well as the names of the makers, painters or the person who commissioned the vessel. Potters always loved to inscribe their names to their wares, and this is often incorporated as part of the design.

Italian Renaissance majolica abounds in inscriptions on vessels, mostly gallant messages to beautiful ladies or betrothal promises. The most common ones of course bear the description of contents on apothecary jars found in large quantities in pharmacies and laboratories. A number of other fascinating plates with sexual contents have been illustrated and discussed by Catherine Hess and myself in the book "Sexpots: Eroticism in Ceramics". Another example of inscribed majolica can be found in the place that saw the rebirth of that painterly technique at the beginning of the 20th Century in Deruta , Italy. The small church of the Madonna del Bagno (Our Lady of the Bathtub) has interior walls covered with majolica ex-votos dating from the 17th Century to the present. These ex-votos commemorate events in the lives of the local people, most of who work in the majolica industries of Deruta. They serve as thanks to God and saints for favors obtained. Examples include exorcisms and a crash between a car and a bicycle. These ex-votos, hundreds of them, offer us a record, through their various changes, stylistically or otherwise, that took place in Deruta over centuries.

In pre-Columbian America, pots with texts are common in the Mayan and Aztec cultures, the two cultures with literacy in the New World. Mayan pots with glyphs often describe the scene represented on the vessel and give us the names and functions of the protagonists. These glyphs are often found as a band all around the rim and this band is called the primary standard sequence and it is the most frequent pictorial element found on Mayan pots. An example would read: " This happened, the surface and the writing on this vessel for (various uses) was blessed. This vessel was made for the holy lord (various names), who holds many elite titles." These glyphs around the outside rim of vessels describe the type of vessel, its content, the name of the owner and sometimes the name of the scribe and/or the painter of the image, but never who actually made it, the potter, although with carved or inscribed vessels the writer and the maker may have been the same individual. Such vessels were used in burials to contain food and drink for the underworld of the afterlife and remnants found in these containers confirm the relationship between inscriptions and contents. In Mayan script, the focus in entirely on rulers and their elite retainers. No mention of lower classes! We can only speculate n the status of potters but it is evident that painters and scribes had a high status since they are often represented on pots. Not the slightest hint of economic or mercantile accounts, unlike the cuneiform of the Near East. But another characteristic of Mayan written records is on the emphasis on mathematical calculations of dates and elaborate calendars of cycles and events in the very distant part, their present and the very distant future since this complex relationship to time was central to their cosmology and their religion as well as to the extremely hierarchical nature of society. The best examples are from the classic period, until 900 A.D. After that time to the Conquest, there are few written documents left. It is believed that there was a shift from limestone or ceramics to bark paper, a material more vulnerable to decay and destruction. Presumably, many texts, perhaps even a majority, were once on perishable materials and objects and thus destroyed for posterity. It begs the question, what will be left of our culture in the future?

Many other historical objects pertain to drinking and libations. These can be found in most cultures, as far back as the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Greeks and the Romans, as well as in the Far East. These are inscribed with all sorts of wordplay, jokes, sayings, proverbs and morals. An Isnik tankard form Ottoman Turkey states: "The world is a banquet. If you pass through it and do not see this, you are a fool." Many other inscriptions refer to political events, kings and queens, the Napoleonic wars, military heroes etc. Many great examples are to be found at the V&A in London. A very interesting example is the seal of the Emancipation Society made by Wedgwood, who was an early supporter and member of that organization, at the end of the 18th Century. It was modeled for Wedgwood by William Hackwood and it bears the message "Am I not a man, and a brother" and the image of a Negro in chain, in black basalt on the white porcelain clay, a very dramatic use of the contrasting clay bodies in silhouette, bringing together formally, in black and white, the conflict between the races. Another group

of amazing domestic wares dealing with contemporary politics can be found in French faience made at the time of the revolution between 1780 and 1800. Most of these wares with captions deal with revolutionary ideals and propaganda slogans, both for the monarchy and for the forces for change.

This tradition of propaganda revolutionary wares continues in Russia between 1915 and 1925. Imperial porcelain blanks left unpainted in factories were then enameled by communist painters and avant-garde artists in aggressive, bold and revolutionary in their own rights, patterns, images and propaganda statements meant to stimulate the people. The most touching examples deal with war and famine and we find images of food and grain on plates at a time of great scarcity and well as writing such as "He who doesn't work doesn't eat" or again "The reign of the workers and peasants shall be without end", proof again that porcelain outlives revolutions. Political statements and commentary continues to this day in ceramics in the work of numerous practitioners worldwide.

In the Islamic world, script and text play a particularly important role, as does pattern, due to the forbidden use of representation and images by religion. A bowl may hold the inscription "the sacred month of Ramadan", the month of fasting during daylight hours, an inscription particularly appropriate in a bowl used for serving food. Another English plate made by Copeland about 1853 has Arabic transfer prints. They were made to be exported to Indonesia where they were very popular, according to Oliver Watson, curator of ceramics at the V&A. The script is "a rather curious one ...copied from Arabic scripts that appear in China rather than anything Middle Eastern or European, The inscription is Koranic and refers to Muhammad and Allah." I find fascinating such an English plate with Arabic text, made for the Indonesian market, with an inscription copied from a Chinese transcription of a Middle Eastern original! Layering, appropriation, cultural (mis) quotations and globalization are not entirely post-modern after all.
In Islamic wares with texts in a circular format, the text is often chosen for its formal quality as a graphic element that can be organized in the round as much as it is for its intrinsic content. For the same reason, it happens that letters are altered, shortened or lengthened to accentuate symmetry and graphic effect sometime to a degree that creates spelling errors, on purpose. The oldest form of Islamic script is the geometric Kufic character, from the city of Kufa on the Euphrates. This type of calligraphy is often found on buildings since its geometric angularity translates well into glazed bricks and tiles, but it is difficult to read due to its abstraction and extraneous ornaments. It was eventually changed for a cursive script , which was also extensively used on buildings, despite its extraordinary formal complexity. The decorative panel with text is often concentrated at the level of a standing figure, with the abstract geometric pattern occupying the lower portion and the Koranic text inscribed at eye level, to facilitate reading and create a direct and constant contact visually with the word of God.

Writing obviously brings to mind calligraphy, penmanship and certain implements. A Chinese porcelain box from Cheng-te, 1506, is inscribed in Arabic, another example of trans-cultural exchange. It reads: "A fool finds no contentment. Strive for excellence in penmanship for it is the key to a livelihood."

Different inscriptions occur on different kinds of objects. A redware pie plate from New-York, 1801, has a slip trailed decoration that states "Why will you die?" Similarly, George Ohr often added inscriptions on his work. When his friend, the potter Jules Gabry died, Ohr was very shaken and he recorded the sad event several times on different pots: "Jules Gabry, born in France, 1829, suicide in Biloxi's water, August 18, 1897, 68 years, poverty cause." Another inscription by a potter is on a large jar by Dave, December 9, 1860, from Lewis Miles Pottery, South Carolina. Dave was a literate slave. A number of his massive storage jars carry his incised poems "A noble jar for pork and beef, then carry it around to the Indian chief". Dave was an accomplished potter who threw the largest pots known to have been made from Edgefield district. The biggest of his "noble jars" held over 40 gallons.

China and the Orient is also very fertile ground for the use of calligraphy on pottery. Many porcelain wine ewers were made in the shape of characters for happiness or longevity, two very appropriate symbols on objects used for drinking and made with such a timeless material. A contemporary example would be the Ampersand teapots of Adrian Saxe which reinterpret the Chinese originals. Porcelain seals are also very common and they were the forerunners of printing blocks and movable types. Movable types for printing longer texts were actually invented in China by Pi-Sheng in 1041, centuries before Guttenberg in Germany. As you would have guessed, these earliest movable types were made of fired clay.

In Japan, the potter Ogata Kenzan, 1663-1743, often used poetry to decorate his wares, both in his individual work and in his collaboration with his celebrated painter brother Korin. These poems make references to the times of the year when a particular utensil was actually used, or they were playful addition for games, for guessing what poem was hidden under the food, helped by clues offered by the visible painted image. In the 1950's in Japan as well, Kitaoji Rosanjin and Tomimoto Kenkichi both used script on their functional yet highly decorative wares. An example of a Tomimoto plate shows four characters for wind, flower, snow and moon, all about change and impermanency. Their contemporary Sawada Chitojin does the same on his vases covered with inscriptions in old Japanese, mostly decorative and optical in purpose, since it cannot be read by anyone but experts since it is now reduced to abstract signs. The contemporary Japanese ceramist Kohei Nakamura did a room-size installation in 1989, "Resurrection". One wall was covered with a long inscription in English made with ceramic letters dealing with the theme of the installation.

In America, ceramist Steve Freedman, now living in Hawaii, is probably the artist in clay who has used narrative text in the most consistent, sustained and efficient manner. He often cuts letters and texts from the walls of large thrown or cast vessels, rendering them non-functional, unable to contain or to hold anything but meaning, in the void left by the missing letters and the opened, pierced interior space. "All the important possessions of my race and my ancestors can be contained within these two vessels", reads a pair. Another states: "Pretend that these spaces can be filled with this translucent viscous substance, thus closing the doorway to places YOU CAN NO LONGER GO, THINGS YOU CAN NO LONGER FEEL, but may wish to view from time to time." These vessels at times carry poems by the surrealist artist Kenneth Patchen or by Vietnam War veteran Grady Harp, who collaborated with Steve Freedman on a series of vessels for their installation War Songs. Other pieces yet have text that is so abstracted, fragmented or altogether jumbled that it simply reads as a decorative motif and has become impossible to decipher. This interest in language, poetry, history as well as the preservation of memory, the containment of space and time and meaning is something that connects the work of Steve Freedman to the much earlier poetry on clay tablets of the Mesopotamians.

Wu-Min is a contemporary Yi-Ching potter from China who also uses poetry to add meaning and content to his otherwise technically superb yet conventional and traditional teapots. In his The Modest Gentleman series of 1996, he has transformed the domestic object into a bamboo tank form, changing the menacing war machine into an unthreatening, fragile toy and functional utensil. The title of the series itself, The Modest Gentleman, makes me think of the Chinese student stopping tanks in their tracks on Tienamen Square. The poetry carved into the clay is composed by Wu-Min himself and refers to the power of small gestures, the modesty and humility of the ordinary in the face of adversity and the intrinsic worth of everyday events.

The work of New-Yorker Ann Agee embodies also perfectly all the ideas I discuss here. In her work of 1991, realized at the Kohler factory and residency in Wisconsin, she recorded portraits of employees,

along with information about their lives, their interests, their work at the factory, etc. From these plates and large tile panels, much can be learned about the working conditions of these people and the times they live in. These objects will eventually serve as a historical record for future archeologists and as such will provide valuable information about ourselves now. This potential for ceramics to record, contain, preserve and transmit time is not yet irrelevant. Along with the millions of toilets and sinks made at Kohler, these objects of Ann Agee will act as our testament.

Canadian artist Baco Ohama uses text obsessively in her room size installations, dealing with her identity as a Japanese Canadian as well as other issues regarding gender, culture and difference. She rolls long coils of clay by hand and laboriously "writes" words with them. After firing, these fragile and vulnerable pieces are carefully pinned to the wall to reconstruct the original text. Different colors of clay are used, brown, white or black for skin tone, red for Japan, to reinforce meaning. Confronted with these ambitious and overpowering pieces, we are made aware of the intensity of labor, the amount of time invested and the vastness of feeling they represent. This intense identification holds the spectator in place and this pause provides the time for reading and for communication to take place. Then, the work is disassembled and probably now difficult if not impossible to reconstruct, like so much impermanent contemporary art. This symbiosis of permanency and fleetingness, of solidity (materializing thoughts and sounds) and temporality, and this layering of conceptual intent with intense personal content are also emblematic of the times we live in.

Anne Kraus's work of the past twenty years pushes the limits of the narrative scene and loads it with psychological tensions. The captions written on her vessels are descriptive, yet deliberately incomplete and confusing. "ROAD'S END, TURN BACK, One Cold Autumn Morning I Wished You Luck and Watched You Go. What Do You Hope To Find Out There". These sentimental vignettes play a mostly formal role, to animate the space, to decorate the object, as do the other patterns and colors. The usual hierarchy between text, image, pattern, color and object itself becomes flattened and irrelevant in an over-determined jumble of seductive materiality and skill.

It could be said that Richard Milette from Montreal is the anti Anne Kraus. If her work is overwhelmed with fictions and narrative impulses, Milette's work operates around a resistance to and a deconstruction of narratives, and as such implies a critique of history, more specifically art history as a fictive form of narrative. The text on his faithfully reproduced Greek vases consist of simple words or even fragments loaded with potency, LOVE, RAPE, TORTURE or even FUCK, SCUM etc. If all kinds of interpretation of meaning are possible, the paucity of information creates a resistance that prevents all attempts to rationalize. In VENGEANCE or JALOUSY, from 1997, the panels positioned on the sides of classical Greek prototypes may make direct references to the narrative panels found on the Greek originals and the classical faux marble background reinforces that association. Yet actually, the text materializes the negativity of narration, making it impossible to define the content of these objects and/or images in a fictional manner. The content is elsewhere in a conceptual approach to making. In an earlier piece based on Renee Magritte The Treachery of Images, Richard Milette articulates this resistance more graphically. The statement THIS IS NOT A PIPE brings to mind that this is not a pot either, but the materialization of an idea, a physical image. In his work, Milette deconstruct the potential of ceramics to be simultaneously surface and form, history and culture combined. Contrary to most hand made ceramics, this work is not about clay or plasticity or the intrinsic beauty of materials; it is not about technique, or even skill (although the objects are superbly made), or glaze recipe or firing processes; it is not about personality or biography either. It represents instead the investigation of the nature of ceramics within the larger context of art and its histories. Other works combining the seminal Greek forms with parts from other stylistic periods, like Meissen or Sevres, push these ideas even further. On these pieces the panel is filled with a fragmented text, arbitrarily chosen. Any attempt at

clarity of meaning or storytelling is frustrated. The juxtaposition of the Greek vase and the Rococo faux porcelain lids (these objects are made with earthenware) adds to the intent. This sophisticated analysis of the specific concepts of ceramics by creating hybrids of different periods, different styles, different materials, challenge the accepted hierarchies and orthodoxies; they contest and critique the conventions of interpretation imposed on us by art history and connoisseurship. On other work still, the expected black and red figures have been changed into arbitrary abstractions confusing even more the negative/positive shifts existing on black figure or red figure Greek Vases. They fool the mind into creating identifiable images and question our incessant need for meaning and rationality. They force us to question everything else we may have learned before.

Matt Nolen's work operates at the exact polar opposite. It is overfilled with narratives, meaning and didactic references. The captions are always used to reinforce images and forms. 12 steps Decanter and Wedding Urn are covered with quotes and directives related to abstinence and the rituals of marriage. The forms and images are illustrative while the texts are prescriptive and descriptive. That is where their power and efficiency lies. They are commentary and witness.

Edouard Jasmin from Montreal was an urban folk artist who worked with clay, in itself a rare occurrence. His work is also descriptive and prescriptive. Sentimental memories of his childhood are presented in naïve and fresh details. He sometimes uses language with exuberance and excess. In Pronunciation Lesson we see the teacher at the board pointing at letters, and a panel with French puns on language. Another panel shows the position of the mouth and lips for each letter of the alphabet. Jasmin's intuitive sense of composition, of color and the inventive narration all add to the endearing charm of the object. Edouard Jasmin started his ceramic work after retirement and worked until his death some years ago. Near the end of his lfe, his work became popular in Toronto and then New-York, and he felt the need to translate everything written on his work to accommodate his expanding market. At times, this accommodation is pushed to extremes; the French and English texts end up taking up most of the available space, leaving hardly any space for the vignette, which should be the central focus. Yet the final effect is all the more funny, efficient, and brilliant for that reason.

I am concluding with a series of books. Takako Araki from Japan has been working with the Bible form for many years. Books are containers of language and like pots they transmit and transport knowledge and history; they preserve and transmit time and memory. The first books were written on clay, and they came to us through millennia for that reason. Maybe someday all that will be left of the Judeo-Christian tradition will be the scorched and incomplete fragments of the Bible to be found in Takako Araki's work. Robert Arneson likewise made his Book of Secret Glaze Recipes permanently closed and impossible to consult. Another name for book is volume. Volume is also the defining factor in pottery, and by extension in ceramics as a whole. Volume is what makes containment possible. Here again, there is a close connection between clay and language through volume, at the semantic level. The open ceramic books of Takako Araki embody permanency and decay simultaneously, and they remind us of the transience of authoritative statements, dogmas, codes and beliefs. Nevertheless, if I wanted to pass some knowledge, some record, some trace to the future, I would do like the Mesopotamians and fire it on clay.

Ceramics is the memory of humankind.

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