

The Belkin Gallery at UBC is a conventional, typical institutional space for the display of art, for the provision of the necessary context for the experience of art now. To experience the objects in "Thrown: Influences and Intentions in West Coast Ceramics" in such a context created a feeling of displacement, it provided a shock by combining seamlessly familiarity with newness, warm domesticity within the cold, empty, bland, "neutral" context of institutional display. It made one see the work in a new way, which is after all the point of such an exercise. What has come to be known as "the white cube" is a relatively recent development in the display and experience of art. By presenting artworks in this context, the intent may originally have been to interfere the least amount possible with the operative powers of the art itself but its purposes are manifold and one of its main operations consists in making it clear and obvious that one is having an art experience, if not always an aesthetic one, per se. What I mean to say is that the context of the "white cube" serves as a sign to inform the viewer that all experiences presently taking place there are art experiences, that one is in the presence of art. This semantic experience of the space is necessary since, otherwise, from the things on display alone, one may not be too sure of the kind of experience one is having. The familiar and specific qualities of the gallery space provides the necessary clues to understand the work as art. The other operative aspect of institutional display tells us that what we are experiencing is "good", "significant", "important" art, since a selection has taken place, a rigorous choice has been made by authorities, by experts whose job it is to make these normative distinctions for us. The gallery space not only confers the status of art to the objects it presents, it also implicitly confers importance and meaning.

The experience provided by the gallery space in the exhibition "Thrown" was beautiful and I for one was surprised how well these rather humble, ordinary and unassuming objects occupied the large, imposing space. Placed in large number (to signify the multiplicity aspect of production practices in pottery and the sheer dynamism of these times when pottery making was in its heyday) on simple table-like wood plinths all along the rooms, they combined the commonality of domestic objects with the transcendental art experience one expects in the gallery space. Most of the time in a conventional institutional display context, the objects or experiences on view would be drastically changed by a change of context (say, if they were placed in the middle of a street instead) and in most cases, their meaning would be altered, very often to the point of meaninglessness. That is not the case for the objects on view in "Thrown". These particular objects do not need the context of the art gallery to have meaning, to operate, to be understood and appreciated, to "work". Pots, like most craft objects, carry their own context implicitly. In fact, they are rather out of place in such a gallery context and they would be much more at ease in use in a kitchen or displayed in a domestic environment, for which they were created in the first place. But like any other object in a gallery, this context confers instantly on them the status of art and, implicitly, of "good", "meaningful", "important" art. Otherwise they simply would not be there. And like most if not all art made today, these pots need that context to be taken seriously as art. It is a particular obsession of contemporary experience that clarity of context is now essential for clarity of understanding. The particular physical context of the white cube implies a loss in experience by removing the noise of life but provides a gain in symbolic meaning.

The work under scrutiny here has other, multiple contexts: material, technical, geographical and temporal, among many others. I will let others explore these contexts elsewhere. I am not particularly interested in how, when, where and by whom any of these objects were made. While this is interesting and possibly necessary information for a complete understanding, in the end it remains relatively superficial and at best incidental. I am more interested in why these objects were made, how they operate, what is (was) their role in our culture, what is their meaning, why make these kind of objects at the end of the 20th century in the first place? What is their importance? How do we experience them, what is their phenomenology? Because this is very much work about experience of making first, of using second and now of viewing them, in the particular provided context. This is deeply phenomenological work. Why also is it relevant to experience them at the Belkin Gallery or elsewhere

in similar places, why confer on them the status of art (good, important, significant, meaningful) implicitly?

The main driving force behind the making of these pots, these simple, unassuming, ordinary, humble yet beautiful and robust brown pots, made by hand, one by one, was driven by an utopian lifestyle. While I am aware that I am reducing a complex social context to a simplified and possibly trite cliché, these objects embody an ideal. Their moral imperative is (was) to propose a better world, a different world from corporatist consumerism. Made by hand in a "new age" highly idealistic, they were produced in reaction to the prevalent culture of their days. Yet and very interestingly, they also situate themselves in parallel and often very close proximity to avant-garde practices taking place simultaneously, often symbiotically. In fact a reassessment of the deep relation between craft practices and avant-garde practices in Vancouver and elsewhere at the end of the twentieth century is something that will need to be done in depth eventually and it will shed a potent and very revealing light on both these aspects of art and culture, so often erroneously perceived as distinct and unrelated. As the exhibition "Thrown" demonstrate clearly, it is acceptable to show these kind of works only in isolation, as a separate phenomenon, distinct and disconnected from everything else happening simultaneously. This is a subtle form of ghettoisation, of marginalization and segregation of culture. But I am optimistic that an inclusive exhibition combining both aspects, as we have seen recently for Modernism, will eventually take place and I for one look very much forward to it. At this point, curatorial practices of display and acquisition as well as current theories of culture in academia position them still as separate and disconnected when they are not quite simply altogether ignored, as if the craft phenomenon had never even existed and still did not exist. The pots in "Thrown" while deeply connected to avant-garde practices were also positioned in a diametrical opposition to them. By being resolutely physical, material, tactile in their making and their appreciation and privileging skill, process and mastery, they, inadvertently possibly, contest new art forms of their days which celebrated dematerialization, embraced mediation and new technologies (the work in "Thrown" uses some of the oldest technologies known to humankind), as well as performance art and theatricality. The non-negligible aspect of performance and theatre present in these pots remains largely private and has no real public significance. Yet many similarities and parallels do exist between these craft practices and avant-garde practices. Both were socially informed yet utopian, both were generated within groups in tight knit communities and both used appropriation and precedence to generate new forms. Originality was not always a necessary attribute of the work yet personality (alter egos, personas, etc.) played a larger role in avant-garde practices than it ever did in the craft world, where anonymity has always been historically a rather common if not necessary aspect of the work. Most of the objects in "Thrown" are not signed, maybe simply stamped and their forms are more referential to various historical models than personally original. One recognizes manner within the style while establishing distinction between pots and makers while they ooze authenticity. It remains obvious that both avant-garde practices and craft practices were then, probably more than now, critical of society, critical of institutions, of the art world. Both also contested, ignored or denied the existence of the market as an inevitable economy to propose new modes of exchange as well as new experiences and new forms of understanding. Their nature as multiples added to their accessibility and reduced the originality usually associated with expression in art, and it did so in a positive way, through a healthy emphasis on universality and anonymity.

What is important to realize and acknowledge is that the pots in "Thrown" are at core conceptual in nature, that they are true conceptual art. This is where their meaning lies. Any functional object is implicitly a conceptual object, something that is so often forgotten. The most difficult and complex thing one can do conceptually and stylistically in ceramics has always been pots. Pots are by far, with the possible exception of the brick, the greatest contribution ceramics as a distinct and specific art form

has made to culture and to civilization. This remains true today. There are two main concepts at work in these pots, like in all pots ever made: function and decoration. Functional objects in ceramics are tools, they act on the world in three different ways. First, practically, usually as containers in combining in a non-hierarchical fashion binary oppositions (see my essay on "Object Theory" in ...). Second, semiotically as signs, encoding meaning and esthetics. Third, and this is too often forgotten, as archives, of time, of knowledge and of experiences. Ceramic objects are instant fossils and of all man-made archives, ceramics is still the most efficient. It is cheap, non-recyclable and even in its fragility as a shard or a fragment, it retains this archival potential to communicate important cultural information. Thus, one of the main cultural function of ceramics and pottery is to act as an archive. This has always been true historically and will continue to be so in the future. This is how the objects in "Thrown" find their most potent reason to exist. On the other hand, images work as signs only and not at all as practical, functional tools and contrary to what we have been lead to believe, not very well as archives either, never for very long anyway. Ceramic objects are conceptually much more complex than images, since they alone operate on all three levels, the practical, the symbolic and the archival, fixing time, memory, knowledge and experience with skill, something too easily forgotten or ignored. Interestingly enough, both these important concepts (function and decoration) which played such an essential role in historical culture have largely been forgotten or dismissed by modernism (if we make an exception for the concept of design, itself largely a modernist construct, which by definition embraced function yet also largely denied decoration as valid) and still are by most contemporary art practices. Modernism denied function since it negates the false precept that art must by definition be useless and denied decoration for its connection to beauty and seduction when art must on the contrary shock and confront, by necessity, the decorative being perceived as trivial and excessive, superficial and superfluous, when art must be deep, profound, necessary and essential. Interestingly enough, if the objects in "Thrown" are quite obviously and proudly functional but are much more discreet as decoration. Was this function utilitarian in a practical way or mostly contemplative and esthetic, like other art objects? Probably a very interesting and complex hybrid of both (how many of them were actually used is another interesting question. How many still are, especially now that they have been granted the status of important art ...). Yet few of them are decorated or even decorative in an obvious way. They have a specific and very characteristic aesthetic presence close to minimalism stylistically but obviously distinct and it is important to note that the basic principles, at the level of aesthetic anyway, of modernism and minimalism have always existed in pottery making and other craft practices. But this is a debate for another time. The aesthetic presence of these pots is classical in feel, with multiple historical references, with a strong sense that certain forms and shapes are ideal and perfect and that their basic structure need not change radically over vast expanses of time. The emphasis is on volumetric form and less so on surface, on these unassuming yet beautiful, deep, dark, brown glazes. To refer here briefly again to the historical context, these brown glazes first appear in Tang (618-907) China at the very beginning of truly glazed high fired stoneware and thus the genealogy of these objects extend in time directly, and in an uninterrupted manner, for 1500 years or so. How many contemporary phenomena, within art or elsewhere, can make such a claim? Of course, their more direct ancestry is the Leach aesthetic (England 1930-1970's) combining aspects of Chinese, Japanese and English pottery sensibilities in the middle of the 20th century and within the major developments of Modernism. It is interesting and important here to note that the Leach movement of which these pots are not only a part but a major contribution, was a true international movement and these types of pots were made (and are made still) all over the world and all over Canada of which the BC contingent is a very important part, partly for its more or less direct connection with the Leach pottery in St-Yves but obviously also because of their exceptional qualities as representative of the type. These pots can only be understood in the light of this global movement the way Vancouver Photo-Conceptualism, for example, can only be understood and appreciated in the light of its International manifestations. I wonder where photo conceptualism in Vancouver would be now if it had been treated

with neglect by institutions the way the work in "Thrown" has largely been so far? As an analogy, a place where this type of work has had a very dynamic presence is Australia where examples of these types of objects can be found in all art institutions all over the country all the way to their National Gallery, something that is not going to happen anytime soon in this country I am afraid.

If I do not want to expand here on the material, technical aspects of these pots it remains important to note how incredibly difficult and demanding it is to make these kind of objects, with their perceived simplicity and directness, in an experimental context and in a place where a precedent in tradition did not exist. These pots are highly experimental in nature. They may be perceived as traditional but what they really are is experimental (and conceptual), and as experimental and as seminal as anything else taking place in culture at the time. The amount of technical and material knowledge, real or instinctive, necessary, the understanding and often building of equipments and tools needed, to say nothing of the economic difficulties in marketing such products in an environment with no infrastructure, no professional gallery (to this day there not a single serious place in Vancouver for the exhibition and marketing of objects of this type and keep in mind that the only cultural institution in the city with a national mandate, the Canadian Craft Museum, closed recently without anyone seemingly noticing ....), in a place with no real market outside cheap giftware, no institutional support of any kind (to this day it is almost impossible to find examples of these kind of objects in Canadian art institutions except for very limited and sketchy holdings regionally, something that amount to nothing less than a national shame. To paraphrase First Nation artist Brian Jungen, to be an artist in craft practices in Canada, one must address at some point the fact that the art gallery is inaccessible).

These pots, which were not so much the result of an individual activity but were instead deeply connected to a certain idea of community, are, in the end, in so many ways failures. Ideologically, their utopian roots and their reactionary foundation lead nowhere and the world around simply continued its march without so much as paying attention, if simply to turn these kind of products into (cheap) commodities. They also failed socially since the practice of these types of craft in the world we live in is basically unsustainable and largely perceived, again erroneously, as irrelevant and they failed economically since the market (again, in the absence of institutional support which could have lifted the field to another level of pricing) has no need for these kind of objects, beyond their limited use as markers of social status and particular taste in domestic displays. Obviously, the present world has no need either whatsoever for these kind of objects in a practical, functional way. All these failures may simply explain why so many of the makers represented in "Thrown" eventually gave up being potters and changed their practices to other activities. The few who were able to continue often held a teaching position and basically subsidized independently their pottery practice and this partly explains why so few of them are still practicing potters now.

If these pots failed so miserably ideologically, socially and economically, they succeed admirably aesthetically. The aesthetic experience they provide for us, deeply sensual beyond the visual, is still profound. They remind us that some experiences are universal and timeless that we all have them and always had them and, hopefully will always have them. They are not grounded in the now, in the fleetingly and impermanent contemporary but instead connect seamlessly the past with the present and the future. Due to the particular properties of ceramic materials, an extraordinary permanency and resilience to time, these objects like all similar ones preceding them act as the memory of humankind and they will embody for us in the distant future the particular time with now live in, again, as archives. That is not only their potential but their responsibility. The pots in "Thrown" are made with mastery and confidence and their operative power remains in their display and their whole existence is justified by the aesthetic experience and the critique they so effectively provide. This important, seminal exhibition at the Belkin Gallery demonstrated this with sensibility and rigor and I salute the foresight

and courage of its curators.

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