

## The Depreciated Legacy

Paul Mathieu

When nature disappears from the planet tomorrow, who will notice?... Where are the great poets now? Have they vanished, or have their voices only grown inaudible?... But if man has lost the need for poetry, will he notice when poetry disappears? The end is not an apocalyptic explosion. There may be nothing so quiet as the end. (A1)

I am quoting these words from a book by Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, a book that has had a profound influence on me. If Kundera mentions the end of the novel, he is not the only one to have reflected on teleological possibilities at the end of this millennium. Recently, we have been served the end of science and history, the end of painting and representation, the death of the author and the death of discourse. I for one am actually looking forward to the death of discourse on discourse. Something I might be guilty of doing here myself. This death syndrome isn't a new phenomenon. When photography first appeared a century ago, the death of painting was predicted, and now with the advances in digital imagery, there are talks of the death of photography. Can we envision the death of ceramics, the death of pottery soon, which so many people seem to want, herald or foster? Ceramics has after all been so far the most CONSTANT expressive activity of human kind. Has it finally become irrelevant? Kundera writes:

But I don't want to predict the future paths of the novel, which I cannot know. All I mean to say is this: if the novel should really disappear, it will do so not because it has exhausted its power but because it exists in a world grown alien to it. (A2)

Of course, when we speak of the end of something, it never means that the phenomenon ceases to exist. What is really meant, is the end of a certain way of understanding something, it is the end of a certain type of discourse about something. The actual phenomena, science, history, painting, ceramics, discourse itself, continue to exist. But there has been what is now called an epistemological break or a paradigm shift: a new way of understanding. Is there a need to start understanding ceramics in a new way? And a need to start talking and writing about it in a new way? Maybe there is a need for the end of ceramics after all.

Another writer, Jeanette Winterson, in her book *Art Objects* states:

The novel form is finished. That doesn't mean we should give up reading 19th century novels, we should read them avidly and often. What we must do is give up writing them.

Shall we give up making 19th century craft? The literature available on ceramics is still firmly grounded in the 19th century. Most books about ceramics are either technical (how it is made) or historical (when and by whom it was made). Besides some superficial philosophical musings (Leach, Yanagi, etc.), nothing else. The history of ceramics has been written from the viewpoint of connoisseurship, that is to assign attribution and confer value on objects. This form

of expertise and scholarship is at the level of "The Antiques Roadshow". Yet, that is all we have. It reduces the whole field to commerce and the forces of the market and any other intrinsic value these objects have remains unaddressed. They are never explained culturally or aesthetically or ontologically, why they exist in the first place.

At the most basic level, ceramics is the memory of humanity. Yet our culture doesn't need pottery and ceramics. We live in a time of impermanence, of obsolescence, of transitoriness and expendability, of the throw away. The role played by ceramics and pottery historically (to preserve and contain time) has been taken over by photography, the most fleeting and impermanent medium. *and now with digital technology* Yet we need pots (and I think that all ceramic objects are pots at the metaphorical and conceptual level). We need pots for the future, to create a link with the past. In a culture where everything becomes obsolete instantly, where everything exists to be discarded, including art, what will be left of this culture, and it is a global culture not a local one, will still be the ceramics objects it produces, as has always been the case. And the pots we are making, the vast majority of them, are not doing a very good job.

Interestingly enough, contemporary criticism and cultural theory has recently been focused on a number of cultural aspects that are central to ceramics as a practice. More and more one hears that there has been a failure on the part of art history and institutions in general to address the significant contribution of certain practices. What is generally meant by that, of course, has to do with the neglect and exclusion of race, gender, and sexuality by history and institutions. There has been reassessments of the contributions of women, of pre-historical societies, of subcultures to the mainstream, yet there is still amazing resistance to specific practices and histories, including craft (most of which, interestingly enough, is the work of women, prehistorical societies and subcultures). This might be partly due to the resistance of craft practices to engage with contemporary discourses; and there is a prevalent anti-intellectualism within the craft community. This baffles me, considering that contemporary theory is obsessed with marginalisation and difference, with silence, invisibility and censorship, with métissage and hybridation, with inter-culturality, inter-textuality and interstitiality (the space between), with the role of the body and the relationship to reality and the role of technology on aesthetics, all aspects central to all craft practices. The simulacra of Baudrillard, the hyperreality of Eco, the materiality of Bachelard, the relations between power and knowledge of Foucault and the mythologies studied by Levi-Strauss, and the whole field of psychoanalysis, anthropology and gender studies, are all pertinent to a deepened understanding of contemporary and historical crafts and their contribution to world culture. So many connections are possible that it baffles me that so few are actually being made. Craft is in a privileged position within these discourses to assess and reaffirm its value and importance.

This is what I attempted to do myself in the text, *The Space of Pottery*, a reinterpretation of a text on architecture by Michel Foucault. What I simply did was to transfer Foucault's understanding of particular architectural spaces, which he called heterotopias, or "other spaces", to

pottery. The five categories he devised to define the particular nature of these spaces, i.e. universality; context; juxtaposition; temporality; and ritual, seemed particularly appropriate when applied to ceramics and pottery. Most of all, they permit us to expand our understanding beyond technique and history and propose options to write about pottery beyond the limits of materials and biography.

What I would like to try here is not to present a new exclusive model for understanding or for making. I would like to propose another model, another possibility to be added to the other models we have, in order to enrich the field of possibilities. At times during this presentation, I might sound critical or derogatory for certain practices, objects or people, but that is not my intent. When I compare two diverse things, it is not to assign a superior value to one over the other, rather, it is simply to stress their difference.

Along with Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel*, other books I've recently read and which have generated new ideas on these issues include: *The Art of Ogata Kenzan: Persona and Production in Japanese Ceramics* by Richard L. Wilson; *Kenzan and his Tradition* by Bernard Leach; *Bernard Palissy* by Leonard N. Amico; and *The Mad Potter of Biloxi: The Art and Life of George E. Ohr* by Garth Clark, Robert A. Elisan and Eugene Hecht. All these recent books are actually 19th century books, based in expertise and connoisseurship. Their emphasis on biography and on technique is fascinating and eminently informative but their outlook remains limited and flawed.

I feel deeply connected with these seminal figures in ceramics, and if I enjoy learning about them, it is with their work that I feel the deepest connection. When I first saw the work of Kenzan in a book, it opened for me a whole new world of possibility beyond the accepted model offered at the time. Palissy and Ohr did much the same later, less stylistically than Kenzan, rather, having more to do with an approach to ceramics as a valid activity.

Recently, I was asked what was the difference between Canadian and English ceramics. Frankly, I think that these kinds of nationalistic probing are pointless, and I will talk about that more later. Yet the question made me realize a difference that might actually exist between certain types of ceramics. Canadian and English ceramics, like all ceramic works made worldwide now, including Australian ceramics, seem to me to be particularly OBSSESSED with three things. The first is material, clay as an end in itself, as the answer to everything. I for one don't particularly care for clay, I don't even think that I like the stuff. What interests me is ceramics, and in ceramics there is no clay; it has been transformed totally, and it is this transformation that interests me. The second obsession is technique and process, which gives us the present craze for wood-firing, the raku of the 90's, for glaze recipes and tricks of all kinds. The third and most pernicious obsession is biography or personality; the concept that the work absolutely needs to be individualized and ego-based. These obsessions with material, technique and personality force makers to identify with a particular style and develop one concept throughout their career. It is ultimately market

that it must be original something we have learned from the modernist avant garde of the past century and what we haven't see ourselves have yet,

driven, since collectors collect NAMES above all else and can only recognize iconic objects. This creates the stasis of careerism so prevalent now, where we see artists making the same thing again and again. We used to have production pottery, which I still find valid, as the main model. Then came the concept of the non-functional vessel, the unique and personalised container, that we were told was a modernist construct, when in fact it has always existed historically (minus the ego of the maker). What we have now, is production vessels, people making the same "original" statement for the last twenty or thirty years.

In the organic world, if you take material with process and run it through an individual, you get shit. In the cultural world, material and process with individual also equals shit. But don't get me wrong, shit is good, it is fertile. Out of all the cultural shit we now produce, something new and meaningful might grow.

Now I would like to go back to Kenzan, Palissy and Ohr. Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743) exemplifies the problem. One of the main revivals of interest in Kenzan recently centers around what has been called the Sano scandal. In the early 1960's, a new group of Kenzan objects came to light in Japan, along with some manuscripts supposedly in his hand. We already have a number of notebooks written by Kenzan and authenticated. I actually believe that Kenzan wouldn't be so talked about today and so studied by art historians if it wasn't for the extensive paper trail he left behind. All these texts make it possible for literal minds to come to grip with his work. And the same is true of Palissy and of Leach, for example, who both wrote extensively as well. Most of the scholarship about these people revolves around their writing, with amazingly limited results. Anyway, when the pieces and manuscripts of Kenzan came out, Bernard Leach was called to authenticate them, which he readily did. He also wrote a book about the new finds, *Kenzan and his Tradition*, since he was himself in the lineage of Kenzan, having apprenticeship with Kenzan VI at the beginning of the century in Japan. Well of course, the newly found Kenzan and the discovered notebooks were proven to be fakes. Leach was made the joke of this farce, and his rather good book was never republished.

What if Leach was right after all? Of course the objects were fakes and at the material level they were not by Kenzan, but esthetically they are very good, and conceptually they are as much Kenzan's as any he ever made himself. According to Leach, in Kenzan's days, "individualism simply did not exist as we know it." People like Kenzan "were to be copied and followed as leaders." (B1) And the Kenzan tradition has always been alive and is still thriving in Japan actually. The lineage of Kenzan is uninterrupted since the 17th century, and in our century, through Leach (who is of course more of a Chinese potter than a Japanese one) and Kenkichi Tomimoto, as well as Kitaoji Rosanjin. Warren MacKenzie, himself a student of Leach and arguably the best American potter said of Rosanjin: "He wants us to believe that he is just an amateur while he is an absolute master."

Art Historian Richard Wilson, in his book on Kenzan, relies too heavily on the written

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record as well as on his own prejudices concerning ceramics. For example, he always stresses the influence of painting and the importance of Kenzan's brother, Korin, a celebrated painter, on the development of the work of Kenzan. Richard Wilson states that in the manuscripts, "There is no evidence that he ever made pots on the wheel or in moulds" (D1) and "his physical participation in many of these stonewares is difficult if not impossible to prove." (D2) Yet there is contradictory evidence in the notebooks themselves, and contemporary witnesses mention that Kenzan was often to be found with clothes covered in clay (D3) and that his adopted son Ihachi learned to work on the potter's wheel (D4).

Wilson's intent is to have us believe that Kenzan was an artist BECAUSE he never worked with clay but simply designed the work and had it made under his supervision, limiting himself to painting the surfaces. But when we look at the work, it is obvious to anyone that has ever worked in clay that the thrown bowls with altered lips and cut openings are direct evidence of Kenzan's work in clay. Some thrown forms of Kenzan's are so gauche and inept that they can only have been made by him and not by some skilled potter working under his supervision. In that regard, Kenzan's work reminds me of the work of Cezanne, who according to American pop artist Jasper Johns, was totally inept at drawing. Again according to Kundera, "All great works (precisely because they are great) contain something unachieved." And this is why Kenzan's work had to be continued by others and is still continued now. There is no such thing as a fake Kenzan because there is no such thing as a real one. All the followers of Kenzan, all the imitators and impostors, only reinforce the vitality of his own work. Kenzan type work is a form of oral tradition; it is transmitted, passed down, ever changing, impure yet alive and renewed endlessly. It is not based on signature or authorship or authority. It is ultimately a GIFT, something beyond the understanding of art experts.

The great Renaissance potter, scientist and religious figure Bernard Palissy (1510-1590) is another example. Contrary to Kenzan, whose signature prominently features on all of his works and is often included in the overall design, Bernard Palissy never signed his work (E1) Like Kenzan, a long lineage of followers continued his work, shortly after his death and, after a long period of neglect and forgottenness, in the nineteenth Century. Again, his imitators often chose to leave the work unsigned (E2). For Palissy himself, the work was so distinctly his own, and since only himself knew the secret of their fabrication, there was no need to add his name to his work by signing it. Palissy was also deeply religious, and if he had no doubt as to his contribution and the importance of his researches and discoveries, he was also humble in his debt to God for his gifts. Palissy called his work "rustic" and by doing so, "he identified with the lower stratum of French society" (E3). This deep religiosity is itself evident in the work, which are meditations on death, by fixing life in clay, to counteract the corruptibility and degradation of the flesh (E4). The moral battle between good and evil, between life and death is illustrated in the basins. It is a return to Eden and the Earthly Paradise (E5).

The recently published book by Leonard N. Amico, from which I am quoting, is very

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perceptive and does justice to the genius of Palissy. Palissy wrote extensively on nature, agriculture, mineralogy and fossils, and also left numerous philosophical texts where he discusses, among other things, the value of practice over theory (E6). His aim was to discover the secret of white glazed pottery, after having seen a piece of Italian Majolica. But luckily for us, he never stumbled upon tin and never discovered opaque glazes. Instead, he composed beautiful clear and coloured lead based glazes that reveal and stress the intricacies of details in the moulded snakes, fishes, frogs, shells and plants covering his plates. His interest in nature, in biology and science, in practice over theory, is evident there as well. According to Amico, "Palissy's reputation was revised in the 19th Century not because of his artistic accomplishments but because of his scientific output (E7)."

The realism of Palissy is never a form of trompe-l'oeil. This realism is not simply optical, but psychological. The animals are presented as if they were alive and it is their placement and interaction that creates the amazing vital tension they project.

To make an interesting and contrasting parallel, in Picasso's work in clay, the fishes are dead. Picasso's contribution to ceramics has never been properly assessed. Again, all books dealing with Picasso's ceramics are exercises in marketing and myth making. A recent show at the Royal Academy in London and at the Metropolitan Museum in New-York, comes with a lavish catalogue: "Picasso, Painter and Sculptor in Clay". The arguments of the essays in the book stress the fact that Picasso was never a potter, that his work in clay had nothing to do with ceramics, that they actually are related to his work in painting and his sculpture, not only in term of iconography and style, but conceptually as well. The intent here of course is to emphasise the importance of this work and more importantly its market value, by reinforcing the high art connection. Yet, nothing could be more false. Picasso is one of the best and most important POTTER of this century. His pots are so informed and intelligent (as you would expect from him) about ceramics concepts, the volumetry of form, the relationship between interior and exterior, the connection to history and to anthropomorphism, the symbiosis between form and surface, that they represent a new departure in his work. It is not that his painting and sculpture influenced his ceramics, on the contrary, it his the profound impact his work in clay had on subsequent developments in his sculpture and painting, both radically changed after his long exploration of ceramics, that needs to be analysed and recognised.

The American potter George E. Ohr (1857-1918) is another mythical genius I want to discuss. Ohr considered himself to be the second Palissy and he himself compared his predicament to that of Palissy (F1). He also used moulds of shells and crabs to decorate pots as well as hand formed snakes. Unlike Palissy, he lavishly signed and inscribed his pots and wrote:

I am making pottery for art sake, God sake, the future generation, and -by present indication- for my own satisfaction, but when I am gone (like Palissy) my work will be prized, honored and cherished (F2).

He also wrote extensively but all his manuscripts were burned by his sons after his death and most of what we have left are the inscriptions on his pots. Permanency appealed to Ohr (F3) and luckily for us he worked in clay, which preserved most of his oeuvre. Ohr's work is always extreme; the paper thin walls, the emphasis on virtuosity and skill (he was largely untrained), on never making two pieces alike. He adopted "an extreme standard and he was proud of the fact that his work was incapable of being catalogued or duplicated(F4).

Ohr turned his life into a performance and the body of his work into an installation. It really comes alive so vividly in the photographs of his workshop with their excessive and jumbled accumulation. In a museum or on slides, they look abandoned, disconnected and their power is diffused, as is so often the case when craft is experienced in the aseptic space of the museum environment.

His most amazing and important work is the bisque ware of 1902-07, towards the end of his working career as a potter. They show that "his genius lay in the area of form" and that he was probably the first to address the concept of a sculptural vessel, investigating space as an idea, "integrating form and surface within the structure of the vessel (F5)." These pieces can only be compared to the contemporary investigations of Cubism and the work of Picasso and Braque.

"Ohr remains an anomaly" (F6). His handling of clay has more to do with sheer skill than technique, due to his extreme personality, bordering on the pathological. According to Garth Clark (F7), "the ideological purpose of Ohr's pottery is a commitment to individuality". I would say instead that it is more a question of singularity, like that of the folk artist, individuality expressed through the collective unconscious. In his case, the lethal mixture of technique, material and personality works because it is so extreme, extreme skill pushing the material to its limits, and because he was more than a mere personality but a singular genius. Otherwise, the mix would need to include a profound sense of culture, which we have lost.

Again Kundera argues "for the end of individualism; the end of art as expression of irreplaceable personal originality". An interesting counter-example of that is the work of Martin Smith, where the clay material is negated with gold, where the anti-technique refers to non-plasticity and hardness, and where personality is a form of subjectivity grounded in a sensibility in tune with the present, like most contemporary art. You could say that when compared with contemporary British sculpture they don't stand too well. Nonetheless, they are redeemed by the fact that the objects are actual bowls, since bowls are universal and intemporal. If these objects were actually abstract formal sculptures (instead of bowls at the conceptual level), they would just be mediocre and derivative art, which they are not.

The myth of Ohr tells us that he was mad, crazy and eccentric; Kenzan was a recluse, anti-social and removed; Palissy was obsessed in his quest for glazes, burning all his furniture to complete a firing. All this gossip is irrelevant in an appreciation of the work. What unifies them is that they all created work around a timeless and idealised organicity, and that their example is still

valid today.

This emphasis on personality is also evident now in our relation to decoration. Historical pots are never merely decorated, specially those of pre-historical "primitive" cultures. Their design always carry meaning. They are symbolic and never solely stylistic or optical, like most contemporary work made today. If abstraction is as old as culture itself, and there are numerous examples to prove this point in the ceramic lexicon, this abstraction is never the meaningless and egoistically expressive abstraction of modernism and of our times. When we look at historical pots, specially primitive pots, it is impossible to find a bad one, they are all good. Because they were made anonymously, in symbiosis with the culture that produced them. Most pots made today, and most of their decoration, are bad since we have lost that connection with the culture we now live in, in order to focus instead on individual expression. They might actually be very beautiful or very well made, and they usually are, but they are still bad since they remain in the end meaningless. Nonetheless, they will outlive us and remain as emblems of our culture.

Primitive pots are not only ego less, anonymous and deeply connected with the culture they embody and preserve for us, they are also grounded in tradition. Tradition is a word I like a lot and I consider myself a traditionalist. The true traditions of ceramics have nothing to do with stylistic conventions, which is how tradition is usually thought to operate, falsely. One of the central tradition of ceramics is anonymity. Another one could be defined as the notion of a conceptual constant, a concept I got from Paul Greenhalgh of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The conceptual constancy of ceramics implies that the basic concepts of ceramics are universal and intemporal, they are shared by all cultures and they never change. A bowl is always a bowl, no matter when, where or by whom it is made. For that reason, all the stylistic traditions of ceramics are intrinsically mine as well. They are a part of me, integral to what I do. The familiar notion of tradition as belonging to a particular group or time is obsolete. It doesn't matter anymore whether we are British or American, Canadian or Australian. World culture, global communication, instant access to information have irreversibly changed all that. We are the first generation in history to have access to the whole visual culture of humankind. In that sense. tradition is dead. After all, according to Woody Allen, tradition is only the illusion of permanency.

Since the central concepts of pottery never change, the only thing that change is style, and style is largely irrelevant. Yet we go on appropriating style when what matters are the intrinsic concepts behind style. What remains when fashion changes.

Another conceptual constant of ceramics is function. Function is the conceptual parts of tools and use is the conceptual part of pots. That is our tradition. Speaking of tradition, Milan Kundera states:

The spirit of the novel is the spirit of continuity; each work is an answer to preceding ones; each work contains all the previous experience of the novel. But the spirit of our time is firmly grounded on a present that is so expansive and profuse that it shoves the past



off our horizon and reduces time to the present moment only. Within this system, the novel is no longer a WORK (a thing made to last, to connect the past with the future) but one current event among many; a gesture with no tomorrow. (A4)

A gesture with no tomorrow is as succinct a definition of contemporary art as I can think of. Kundera goes on: "The sole raison d'être of the novel is to say what only the novel can say (A5)." We need to communicate with the pots we make the things that only pots can communicate, not only in a formalist modernist fashion of truth to materials in their transformation, but for the cultural implication carried by these objects.

The universal, intemporal and conceptual constants of ceramics go beyond tradition as limited by style. In the scholarship on ceramics, comparisons between formal and stylistic similarities are often made, yet I consider them largely irrelevant too. If you throw forms on the wheel, if you are making pots, there is a rather limited vocabulary of forms and shapes possible. These are bound to remind anyone, by obvious association, of Chinese precedents or Greek prototypes. It doesn't in any way mean that the potter was either familiar with these antecedents or was quoting them. Goethe said that the world is more fraught with genius than we are, and that objects can eventually elevate us to their level. I hope that eventually art historians will be able to raise themselves to the level of objects.

If I had to choose guests from history to invite to a dinner party, I would like to ask Ogata Kenzan, Bernard Palissy and George Ohr to attend. I often feel that my contemporaries are from the sixteenth Century and that my public might be of the twenty-second. To quote Jeanette Winterson again: "This is where I am in history".

de la Robbia and Kander and  
Plano  
with  
Matisse too

Milan Kundera, the author of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* writes:

To bring together the extreme gravity of the question and the extreme lightness of form -that has always been my ambition. The union of a frivolous form and a serious subject lays bare our dramas (those that occur in our beds as well as those we play on the great stage of history) in all their terrible insignificance. (A6)

Also writing about lightness, the American cultural critic Dave Hickey in his book of essays *The Invisible Dragon* states: "The critic recognises the quality of heaviness. Lightness doesn't register on them, and yet lightness is one of the true eternal qualities that art essentially possesses." Obviously, I am not writing novels, like Kundera. What I do is more limited both as an artistic project and as a result. The wonderful advantage of books is that, contrary to pots, they have no real materiality, but like pots they have no specific location either; they are everywhere.

Writing of Kafka, Kundera says :

If I hold so ardently to the legacy of Kafka, if I defend it as my personal heritage, it is not because I think it worthwhile to imitate the inimitable (and recover the Kafkaan) but because it is

such a tremendous example of the RADICAL AUTONOMY of the novel (of the poetry that is the novel). This autonomy allowed Franz Kafka to say things about our human condition that no social or political thought could ever tell us. (A7)

And ceramics is also an autonomous practices despite the tremendous hegemonic pressures to co-opt it, make it conform to and rejoin other artistic practices. It is by retaining its radical autonomy and by acknowledging the radical autonomy of its history, that pottery, in its own limited way, can also say things about the human condition that no social or political thought could ever tell us.

Kundera continues:

Once upon a time I too thought that the future was the only competent judge for our works and actions. Later on I understood that chasing after the future is the worst conformism of all, a craven flattery of the mighty. For the future is always mightier than the present. It will pass judgment on us, of course. And without competence.

But if the future is not of value for me, then to what am I attached? To God? To Country? The people? The individual?

My answer is as ridiculous as it is sincere; I am attached to nothing but the depreciated legacy of Kafka, of Cervantes. (A8)

And I am attached to nothing but the depreciated legacy of Bernard Palissy, of Ogata Kenzan.

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