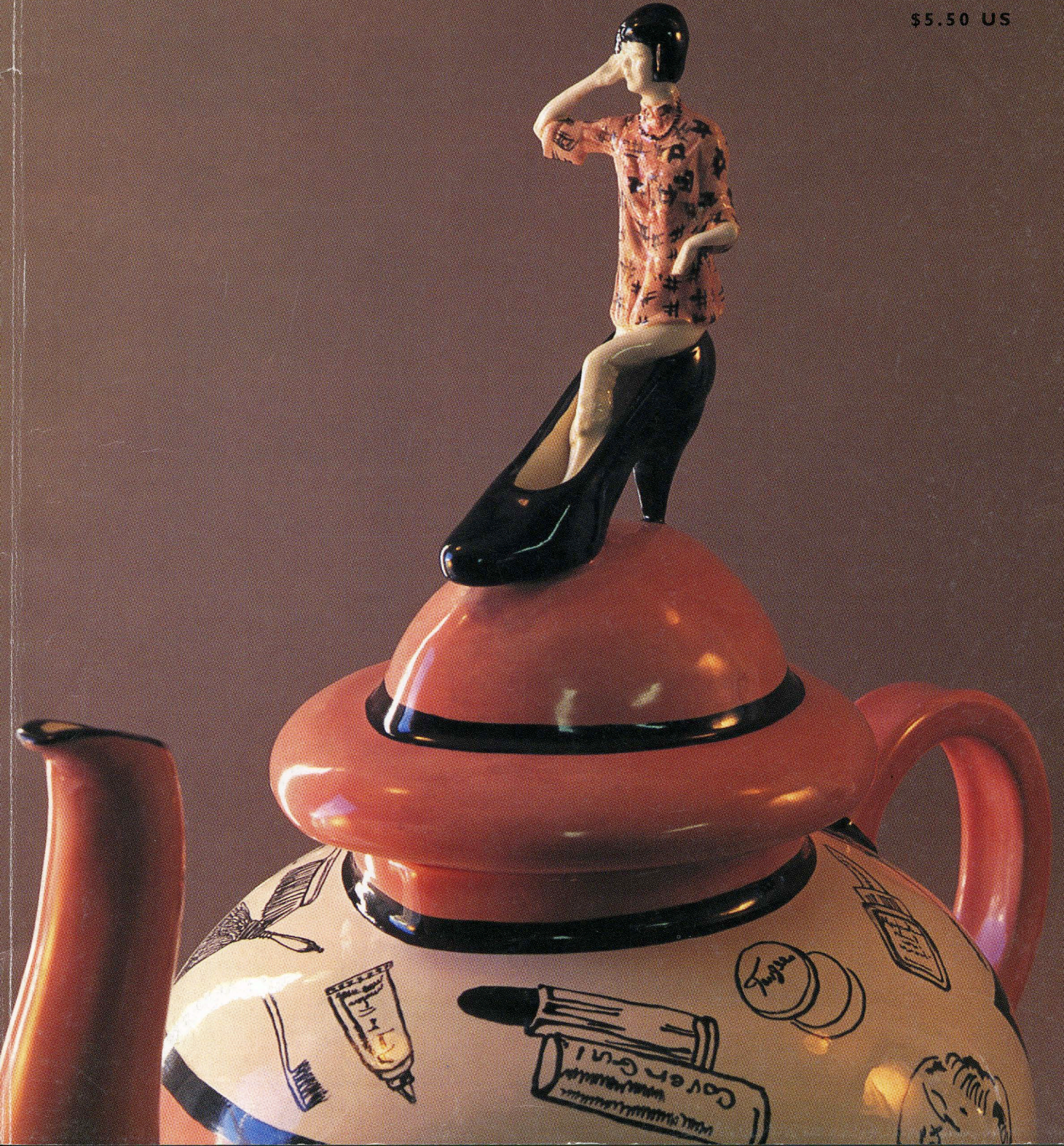


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The Politics of Exclusion

The "National Biennial of Ceramics" at Trois-Rivières, Québec, has been important as the only national forum for ceramics in Canada. As the deadline for the eighth competition nears, one ceramist, a frequent participant and prizewinner in the past, ponders its changes.

The "National Biennial of Ceramics," which has taken place in Trois-Rivières, Québec, for the last sixteen years, is *the* most important ceramics exhibition in Canada because it regularly takes the pulse of Canadian ceramics (yes, it's still alive!). Furthermore, because ceramics is largely ignored by the art world and its institutions, the biennial remains one of the few places where one can be engaged, challenged and confronted with the current scene. As one example among many, the National Gallery of Canada, despite the numerous historical decorative art objects in its collection, has an official policy of not acquiring or exhibiting contemporary crafts.

Over the years the biennial has had its problems, its critics and its detractors (its supporters as well) but has always been, overall, a success. Of course, especially early on, the results were mixed and the selection offered was hardly cohesive—it was even incoherent at times. Yet, perhaps this is the very nature of the discipline, with its amazing richness and variety, its very wide scope: from function to decoration, from representation to sculptural installations, from abstraction to realism, from domestic to architectural, from cute or beautiful to sophisticated or willfully ugly. Almost by definition, a ceramics show is a hodgepodge of all these things. Some people don't like that. Maybe they shouldn't be organizing ceramics shows!

For last year's biennial, the organizers changed the format and restricted the range of possibilities. The work had to be self-supporting; I interpreted this as meaning that the submission had to be either mounted on the wall or placed on the floor. It was possible to use a shelf or a stand but this had to be integrated with the piece and not be a mere prop. What this restriction meant was the work had to be *sculpture*; it also meant that roughly ninety percent of

the work presented in previous biennials, and ninety percent of the ceramics work made in Canada today, became unacceptable! (Just imagine if the only national photography show limited itself year after year to large-format portraits!)

I was worried about this and wrote a letter to the organizers, asking if, in 1998, a similar restriction would apply—say, exclusively functional pottery, or decorative figurines. At the same time, I had been invited to participate, so I made a wall piece and sent it. I carefully followed the restrictive guidelines but made rather an "in-your-face" piece that would probably have been rejected had they not invited me! (Other invited winners, whose work didn't quite fit the imposed format, decided not to participate or sent work that was rejected—after being invited, no less—because it wasn't "self-supporting.")

I didn't see the 1996 show in Trois-Rivières but did see it this year at the Richmond Art Centre near Vancouver, the last venue for the tour. I must admit the work created a more cohesive visual effect and the "installation" format made the work accessible and acceptable to art cognoscenti, but nonetheless it looked like a rather weak and oh! so conventional art show.

Back to the present. For 1998, the organizers have decided to present the same restrictions, somewhat less ambiguous than the last time: the work must be a large-scale sculpture or an installation. Is this going to be the format forever? Won't this create predictability and boredom? Do we need ceramics exhibitions at all if they look exactly like all the other shows around?

You can say what you want about the "old" biennials—at least they presented works that were just about impossible to see anywhere else.

*N*arrow definitions are as pernicious and false in art as they are in matters of race or gender. They must be challenged and denounced as vigorously.

I understand the need for change. Many options are possible: collaborations with architects and designers or between artists of various disciplines or theme shows concerning such issues as the body and the figure; nature; sexuality and politics; historical precedents and historicism; deconstruction, fragmentation and recontextualization; domesticity and rituals; decoration and decorative objects; concepts of containment; the figurine and genre scenes; miniatures; tiles and bricks; sanitary wares; trompe-l'oeil; narratives; functional pottery, etc. Most of these options were made possible by the previous, open format.

Possibly, a guest curator could select and structure a show as he or she pleased; it would then be the sole responsibility of the curator to justify the choices made. With a new curator, the format and content of the show would change each year. It could also serve to educate those people (curators, critics or historians) who need it badly and, through rigorous and articulated analysis, create an intelligent debate around the choices made and the issues raised.

But I believe this is a lost battle. The only way to play along is to have some semantic fun. I propose we all send anything we wish and call it a sculpture: that is what sculptors do. It is art if you say it is; it is sculpture if you say so. Since Marcel Duchamp's exhibition of his "Fountain" urinal, nobody has dared challenge the possibility of any object not being a sculpture! If you are worried it is too small, say it is a sculpture for ants, or for people with small brains (they are everywhere these days). Cannot a large teapot, a large cup or a large plate be labeled as sculpture? A large sculpture...what does *large* mean anyway? Call it an installation. No one will dare to challenge you. Send a teapot and demand it be exhibited on the floor. Send a cup and provide a metal hook or a wooden peg (thereby making the piece multimedia) and ask that it be mounted on the wall as an installation. Send two small objects and request they be exhibited one hundred feet apart as a large installation. What is an installation anyway? Could it be defined as various objects, interventions and their interrelations, organized within a specific space? Is a tea set on a tray an installation? Is the ritual of serving tea a performance? Yes. Is a bathroom an installation? Of course. Is the decorative tiled surface of an Islamic mosque an installation? Yes again. The installation is, after all, a very old ceramic

concept, as are abstraction and large-scale sculpture. What, anyway, is the point of a show of large-scale *ceramic* sculpture and installations? They differ from similar shows and installations only in the materials used—in this case, clay. This reinforces the false and dangerous notion that the distinguishing feature separating ceramics from other disciplines and practices is its use of clay. This emphasis on materiality, which the politics of the biennial reinforce, doesn't help in a world where the focus of art has been moving away from materials toward content, contexts and concepts. Instead of adopting old formalist models such as large-scale sculpture and installations, why not investigate and focus on those contents, contexts and concepts specific to ceramics. Isn't the very concept of installation a bit "passé" anyway—very 1970s?

This kind of prejudice and discrimination comes from people with an inferiority complex. They firmly believe that in order to be accepted, ceramics must conform to the dominant model of another discipline (sculpture) and in the process co-opt its history and the extraordinary contribution it has made to culture for millennia. They would have you believe that pottery, the figurine, tiles and bricks, as well as small decorative, ritual or votive objects are obsolete—in the rarefied atmosphere of art, they are things of the past and should be discarded.

This attitude stems from what I call "artism," a pathology rarely found in artists but nearly always present in those surrounding the practice of art: curators, critics, historians, gallery owners, exhibition organizers and other bureaucrats. They believe in a narrow definition of art. Narrow definitions are as pernicious and false in art as they are in matters of race or gender. They must be challenged and denounced as vigorously.

We do not need yet another space where only certain forms of expression are acceptable. There are already countless art institutions, supported by public funds, who, with the same oppressive mentality, have for years operated in what can only be defined as a state of aesthetic apartheid and elitist superiority.

The politics of exclusion demonstrated by the organizers of the Trois-Rivières Biennial amount to nothing but shameful silencing and censorship.

Paul Mathieu is a potter presently living in Vancouver, where he teaches ceramics at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design.

See Calendar for details about the "Eighth Ceramics Biennial."—Ed.



"The Arrows of Time" by Paul Mathieu, 1990; Trois-Rivières Prize, "Fourth National Biennial of Ceramics."