

Portage and Main/maintenance: Rory MacDonald in Winnipeg

Portage is a word of French origin, which demarcates a place on a water-course where an obstacle needs to be bypassed. In order to do so, all materials and equipment need to be carried over land to a point further up or down to where the voyage can resume. Maintenance is the process of repairing or keeping something in good repair. Both portage and maintenance are essential to Rory MacDonald's art process. For the reader less familiar with Winnipeg, Portage and Main are the two streets crossing at the heart and core of the city. These paired names are in various ways symptomatic and representative of the whole city and they have mythic connotations not only in Winnipeg, but also for all Canadians.

Rory MacDonald is part of a loose and informal group of artists, which I am also included, working in ceramics, with representatives drawn from all across Canada, from coast to coast. This is a small group, but it is very dynamic and has been active for nearly forty years. One of its characteristics is that this group, as a group and individually, has been largely ignored by the institutional art world, despite its prominence, its historical continuity and its seminal contributions. This is slowly changing. All the artists, whom I would include in this group, make what I would call "conceptual ceramics", i.e. ceramics engaged predominately with ideas, with "thinking about ceramics", and defining (either through celebrating or challenging) what constitutes the radical autonomy of ceramics within art.

Now, I believe that there is no such thing as "conceptual art". All art is conceptual. To define a specific category within art as "conceptual art" implies that the works within that category are more conceptual than other works, or events, or even ideas, outside the category. It implies a hierarchy among ideas or thoughts (and works), as if some were superior, intrinsically, to others. This mind set within art (as an institutional category) is unfortunately endemic. I call such a mind set "artism", the false belief that some art forms are intrinsically superior to others, and the usual implication is that the more they are "conceptual", the better. It would be more appropriate to label such work as "immaterial art" since materiality is often absent or of little consequence, or even better "contextual art", since context is actually, generally, the determining factor to access meaning with what is mislabeled "conceptual art". I propose that from now on we all use "contextual art", in place of "conceptual art".

Rory MacDonald is essentially a contextual artist. His work is fundamentally informed by context and most of it wouldn't even exist without context. In fact it is predicated on physical context and it originates as a response to an actual context, in a process that is specific, somewhat original and requiring description. In a practice that is diverse and too complex to fully analyze here, MacDonald's work is known for its engagement with finding sites within cities where damage that is neglected exists: a chunk of sidewalk missing, a retaining wall on the verge of collapse, a few missing or displaced bricks, even an unexplained hole in a structure. MacDonald then proceeds to repair this damage, to "maintain" it by replacing the missing parts with a custom-made ceramic "filler", similar to a dentist repairing cavities. Often, the ceramic elements are fired onsite with the help of a movable kiln, of his own design, that is portaged to the location. This highly social practice of engaging with passer-bys and residents while interacting within public spaces, with demanding and unusual materials, with extreme processes and uncommon equipment, is rather unique and refreshing. It is also unexpected within the

numerous possibilities of ceramics and as such, it significantly expands on familiar conventions. In this process, he takes the principle of “site specificity” to its ultimate potential, since the intervention, while often removable if necessary, couldn’t readily be repositioned anywhere else without a complete loss of meaning. This operates in opposition to ceramics intrinsic nature, where fixity is irrelevant (pots, bricks, tiles can moved and be displaced anywhere without loss in intrinsic identity). MacDonald’s work often challenges ceramics potential for self-context and for inherent mobility. Here, it is the tool, a kiln, the artist and the process itself that are all mobile.

Another essential material and conceptual characteristic of ceramics (both as material and as art) is its permanency, its amazing resistance to time, as an intrinsically archival material. I would go so far as to state that the true material of ceramics is not clay, the true material of ceramics is time. This permanency is not just physical, as it is also conceptual. Ceramics operate within a conceptual constancy that is possibly confusing to some, particularly given the contemporary world of impermanency, fleetingness, throw away, instantaneous gratification, entertainment, and consumerism, that is found in art and everywhere else. MacDonald’s maintenance work, which at its core is utopian, delusional and pointless (possessing the essential qualities of art), also contests the impermanency of culture today. These small, dismissible and seemingly naïve gestures retain efficiency in their very lack of ambition and may even be more noticeable, thus more meaningful, than the usual grand gestures found in a lot of public art.

The work is also remarkable in its engagement with decoration, used here for a variety of complex purposes. The decorative is basically intrinsic to ceramics and one of its defining conceptual characteristics. The function of decoration is also less obviously relevant here. Again this is confusing to some since decoration (at its core, a concept) is also devalued by “artism” as irrelevant or less significant and meaningful, less “conceptual” than other means of expression. MacDonald’s engagement with decoration utilizes the great iconic potential of blue and white patterning, so familiar, so innocent, so reassuring. Blue and white decoration itself, in its origin, in its universality and commonality, is fundamentally a ceramic signifier. When coming across one of MacDonald’s repair in the urban fabric, the pedestrian will be confronted by this seductive and recognizable surface, which is incongruous and jarring with the drabness of the ubiquitous grey concrete. By positioning decorative blue and white and other patterns found on the borders of plates to the curbs of sidewalks or to crumbling walls, a domestic aesthetic invades the public sphere. In doing so, this intervention pushes boundaries, creating shifts in normalcy within the banal and the familiar, shifts already present in the damaged site in need of repair. A reassessment of experience becomes necessary, however fleeting, however superficial. A subtle yet efficient challenging and questioning of conventions and expectations takes place. The comfort with the appropriated references (pottery patterns) creates an understanding of association, somewhat nostalgic yet basically universal in its accessibility. The narrative of our lives becomes disrupted and it disappears for a moment, and all we are left with is this moment: experience is enhanced; life is refocused. By using the conventions of pottery (appropriation, decoration, domestic references, function, universality, timelessness, etc.) within the conventions of contemporary art (appropriation again but also display, installation, site specificity, documentation, performance, etc.) MacDonald’s interventions operate on both fields, doubling their potential for creating meaning. These “aesthetic band-aids”, to quote the artist, are essentially ineffective given their low-quality, their amateurishness, off-handedness and their

optimistic yet failing functionality. They confront our expectations for impossible standards, while making obvious a genuine commitment to the materials. The work itself manifests in all the energy necessary in making something that ultimately doesn't really matter in so many ways. This celebration of labour and devalued work provides a critique of a hierarchical society that does not place importance on the labour of maintenance and repair. MacDonald's practice offers a critical reflection of this hierarchical malaise within society and within art itself.

As a ceramic fundamentalist myself placed in comparison to MacDonald's reparative interventions, I remain nonetheless somewhat skeptical of the non-committal aspects of the work, so symptomatic of much (if not all) contemporary art. Despite a clear and convincing engagement with materials, processes and ideas (many of them of great originality, notably in the expansion of the use of movable kilns, portaged from site to site, to fuse and fire new information into place), the results remain somewhat disengaged with historical continuity so potent within ceramics itself. While remaining deeply connected in one direction (the past), and while operating fully in the now, the shifting present, the contemporary, these interventions remain somewhat oblivious to the other direction, the future. The artist may want to consider this too, to assume this other aspect of responsibility in his work. What is culture? Is it what we produce now (for our personal or communal entertainment, basically to consume) or is it what remains at some point in the future, of what we produce now? Ceramics hold an exceptional ability to engage fully with the past, through historical and conceptual continuity. At the same time ceramics possess relevancy in the present, the contemporary, as tool or as sign. One cannot supersede the fact that these objects (ceramics) also carry the potential, thus the responsibility, to continue their engagement with experiences and meanings into the future, in ways that are not so readily possible to another material, another art. This is where its radical autonomy lies.

The value and meaning of the work remains in its critical stance. These "pathetic gestures" of optimistic yet delusional repair and (equally delusional) effective social change are charming in their impotency. Charm and seduction, like decoration, are powerful, effective if neglected tools for art to use. The sorry fact that we rarely see them at work today in art is efficiently demonstrated in MacDonald's work.

This re-contextualization of ceramics and art in various urban environments may require other, further experiments as well. I do not think that the now universal convention of documentation (photographic and digital, and dangerously fleeting) will suffice to maintain (remember maintenance) the necessary continuity of the intentions at work here. I would suggest that such documentation of the works be "re-ceramicized" within other ceramic contexts, where the potential for further, if different, efficiency would be maintained. The Winnipeg projection of a decorative pattern over a terracotta façade on a vacant yet very beautiful building, could easily and effectively be repositioned and re-contextualized that way.

MacDonald may have hit an obstacle in his journey. Portage may be necessary.

Paul Mathieu

Paul Mathieu is a potter, now living and teaching in Vancouver at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design. His most recent book on the history and theory of ceramics *The*

Art of the Future is available for FREE online, text and images, at
www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture