

r o b b a r n a r d e s s a y s

THE NEA AND POTTERY 1 2

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One of the biggest problems in discussing the issue of discrimination against pottery by the National Endowment for the Arts and the modern crafts establishment is the possibility of furthering the polarization and enmity that exist between artists who work in the separate contexts of the “vessel,” ceramic sculpture and pottery. The old arguments over which is more important – functional or sculptural – would be revived, with people forced to defend their positions by denigrating entirely different categories of work that have no historical, conceptual or physical relationship to each other except the over exaggerated one of material.

It is time, however, to end this uneasy marriage of ceramic artists who no longer share a common direction or language in order to maintain not only the integrity of each group’s ideals, but also to allow for a much less political and more friendly relationship based on mutual respect rather than mere tolerance. I am not suggesting that critical analysis or dialogue be suspended, but that they should be based on and deal with the context within which an object is made. Almost every ceramic artist you ask will say that categories don’t matter; what really matters is the quality of the work. But when pressed, very few are actually able to articulate what that quality is and where in an object that quality resides. Nevertheless, this platitude, like some mantra, is recited over and over again.

I believe that to begin to determine the importance of work, one has to look at it in its context, its relation to other work of its own kind, work that is attempting to speak to us in the same kind of language. This is how we as human beings understand the world around us, by assembling and organizing information, then putting it into categories so we can make sense out of it. We cannot expect to find the quality of the proverbial apple and orange by comparing them to each other. To really know how good an apple is, we compare it to other apples. Whether one prefers apples to oranges is a personal preference that should not enter into the decision regarding the relative quality of either fruit. When this personal preference extends to decisions about whether one fruit should be held up as more important in our culture than another and therefore more deserving of public subsidy, then it ceases to be a critical decision and becomes a political one.

Part of the problem (as seen by those who argue that pottery has its own context or language, separate from that of either the “vessel” or ceramic sculpture) is that in the last 15 years we have been labeled by the modern crafts establishment as unimaginative conservatives who lack the creative wherewithal and intestinal fortitude to compete in the larger, more visible and supposedly more significant world of modern painting and sculpture. In other words, because our work does not comment on trends in the fine arts, we are not making ART.

This view is a red herring used by some ceramic artists to lay claim to and to capitalize on pottery’s historical position within the crafts, while at the same time allowing them to reject crafts’ language in favor of the language of modern painting and sculpture. Why else would artists, who have struggled to free themselves from the so-called crafts mentality with its limitations of usefulness and domesticity, be so

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eager to maintain their positions within the crafts field by applying for NEA fellowships in the crafts category, accepting exhibitions in the field's museums and seeking to publicize their work in the field's magazines? While the answer to that question might be obvious, the answer to the question of why this shell game has been allowed to continue, especially at the NEA, is far more difficult.

There are two basic untruths that seem to be operating in the modern crafts. The first – a premise so flawed that it is hard to believe it is tolerated – is that crafts are not defined by or seen in their historical context, but rather are determined simply by material. The second – an idea abandoned in the fine arts over 30 years ago – is that some forms of expression are inherently more capable of conveying serious thought than others. By fostering these two specious notions, the modern crafts establishment and the craftspeople who support it have been able to not only cling to the title of crafts and its support structures, like NEA fellowships, but also have been able to create the illusion that the very abandonment of that language – the rejection of pottery, for example, in favor of ceramic sculpture and the “vessel” – is actually a progression in crafts' history (an illusion designed, it seems, to make the crafts palatable to the more affluent and prestigious fine arts).

The old question of “art versus crafts” – a euphemism for ceramic sculpture and the “vessel” versus pottery – has little to do with the sum and substance of aesthetic expression and everything to do with the politics of power and self-interest. There is a statistic that demonstrates this point dramatically. Of the \$2,250,000 awarded by the NEA [prior to 1990] to ceramists in the crafts category, only \$179,000 was given to those who make pottery. Potters have gotten the message; few now bother to submit grant applications. But what is worse and has a more far-reaching effect on pottery's survival in American culture is that young students drawn to pottery have also gotten the message and have abandoned their aesthetic investigations of pottery early in the educational process. How pottery can be expected in our culture to be the potent and vital form of expression that it has always been through human history is a question that the NEA and the powerbrokers in the modern crafts establishment on whom they rely seem unconcerned with.

Rudolf Arnheim, in a keynote address to the 1961 conference of the American Crafts Council, gave a definition of art that I tend to apply more and more to objects and situations I encounter daily: “I had better confess at this point that when I think of art I think of what makes the nature of things visible. I don't much care whether it is made by nature or by man, by hand or by machine, intentionally or unintentionally. All that matters is whether or not shape makes my eyes understand what they see. If it does, I call it art, whether it be a waterfall or a flower, a human face, a spoon, a pair of shoes, a statistical chart, a pitcher, or a picture.”

This is a view one might suspect the NEA and the modern crafts establishment, who have always portrayed themselves as progressive and liberal in their approach to art, have embraced. It is ironic, however, that in practice their position turns out to be more restrictive and conservative. Simply put, their attitude seems to be anything can be art except pottery.