

Ceramic Millennium

Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory, and Art

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DISCOURSE AND DECORATION: THE STRUGGLE FOR HISTORICAL SPACE

PAUL GREENHALGH

Accepting continual crossovers and correspondences between ceramics and other media, and the interdisciplinary nature of much clay activity, there are core practices and usages within the ceramics heritage that give it meaning and guarantee its continued existence and prosperity. I don't just mean the vessel or the wheel; I also mean the wide range of sculptural activity that has always been associated with ceramics, and the myriad of architectural and domestic decorations and fittings that have continuously been produced.

Presented at *History and Its Role in Contemporary Ceramic Art*, 1993, Syracuse

Ceramics is occasionally the subject of art history, but more often it is its victim. I am speaking here, of course, not of art history simply in the sense of the art of the past, but of art history as a profession; as a vast collection of scholars, books, journals, archives and collections; as a series of institutions and other repositories of knowledge. In short, I am suggesting that, to date, that large and powerful industry, art history, has not dealt with ceramic as it might have done.

This is not to say that there have not been scholars of immense stature who have dealt with ceramics. There are, as it were, many beautiful beads in the form of individual contributions to ceramic history; but there is little in the way of a thread. And the provision of this thread is not to do with the creation of works of

general overview (although this would do no harm at all), but with the clarification of the historiographic and ideological position of ceramics. What has this broad, amorphous, collective culture of clay meant? How does it recognize itself? How is it differentiated from other media, and how exactly are we, the contemporary audience, supposed to respond to it? Before I take up these questions, I will note the consequences of the negation of ceramics by the art history industry.

Theory without history gives you tyranny. If you attempt to theorize about a thing in its absence and in the absence of its past, you run the inevitable risk of misrepresenting it. Theorists of race in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, studiously avoided the real peoples they categorized. “Model” Greeks, Jews, Africans, and, eventually, Americans were invented, then described and classified, without the troublesome, empirical data that might have confused the picture. We are still picking up the pieces of these particular theories.

In a less tragic, though no less marked fashion, theories that were created in the absence of ceramics are constantly being used to criticize and marginalize it. An interesting instance of this is the idea of the avant-garde. Apparently, ceramics has become moribund because it isn't avant-garde anymore. Indeed, in the broader arena of visual culture, avant-gardism is widely perceived as being an important, even permanent, fixture at the fountainhead of creativity: a measure against which culture is tested. But what exactly do we mean when we use this term? It is worth pondering its usage in contemporary fine art circles.

We can assert immediately that “avant-garde” does not, in the proper historical sense, simply mean experimental, original, or innovative, though these things might be features of avant-garde practice. The term is closely connected with the rise of European modernism in the period 1870-1940, and is used most accurately to describe the activities of various groups in Europe in that period. The central aim of these groups was to subvert normative values in order to achieve the transformation of society through the radical use of the arts. The avant-garde in the military sense is that force that goes in advance to check the terrain before the rest of the army follows on. In the cultural sense then, avant-garde movements did not wish to change art, they wished to change the world. Cubism, Futurism, de Stijl, Constructivism, Purism, the Bauhaus, Dadaism, and Surrealism were all part of the broad movement collectively identifiable as modernism. Many historians have seen the Second World War as a decisive, terminal point for much of this activity.

What am I trying to say? Two things, I suppose. First, it is by no means clear that America or Europe has had significant quantities of avant-garde practice of any kind for some considerable time. Indeed, most of the forms, strategies, and idioms used in contemporary fine-art practice were learned in art school, which in turn inherited them from previous generations of artists. In other words, strictly speaking, these forms are no longer avant-garde; they are academic (i.e., historical strategies legitimized through public institutions). At the end of the day, avant-garde strategies were geared to the destruction of institutional life in the broadest metaphorical meaning of the term; but contemporary practice tends to bolster, not subvert, the cultural institutions of America and Europe. Few normative values are being challenged; rather, the norm is constantly being consolidated. Does all this change, radicalize, or even threaten society? Hardly. My assertions are contentious, generalized, and not new; but they do highlight the possibility that much contemporary fine-art practice is not avant-garde at all, but rather a *mélange* of tired establishment formulas.

The second, and most important, idea I am trying to express is the lack of relevance of all this to ceramics. However it is defined, avant-gardism was not invented or developed with ceramics in mind. Ceramics has rarely functioned in movements or been accorded the institutional clout that would render significant an anti-establishment radicalization. To accuse ceramists of not being avant-garde is to criticize them for something they don't do, and rarely ever did. As I have said, experimentation and innovation are not the same as avant-gardism.

There are many other instances of theoretical structures that ignore the historical record. The endless art/craft debate (i.e., Am I a craftsperson? Am I an artist?) and other related diatribes are absurdly ahistorical in their premises and assumptions, so much so that we can say with depressing confidence that we have wasted twenty years in meaningless discussion of the topic.

Accepting continual crossovers and correspondences between ceramics and other media, and the interdisciplinary nature of much clay activity, there are core practices and usages within the ceramics heritage that give it meaning and guarantee its continued existence and prosperity. I don't just mean the vessel or the wheel; I also mean the wide range of sculptural activity that has always been associated with ceramics and the myriad architectural and domestic decorations and fittings that have continuously been produced.