

## *Materiality, Process, Critique*

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### **Aims**

My primary aim in this brief essay is to foreground the applicability of some ideas from twentieth-century literary theory and aesthetic philosophy to our analysis and appreciation of ceramics, and of functional ceramic works in particular. I will suggest how considering these ideas can fortify our critical discourse, grounding it in established foundations of modern humanistic thought.

### **Pots as Things**

Much of the philosopher Martin Heidegger's writing is concerned with developing an authentic and unmediated experience of *things*. In fact he seems to suggest<sup>1</sup> that responding sensitively and astutely to things is itself a kind of craft that requires earnest study and practice.

Heidegger proposes<sup>2</sup> two special modes of experiencing things, which relate to what we might call questions of meaning. First we can experience certain things in our lives *as equipment*; Heidegger devotes lengthy passages to analyzing the "equipmental quality" of things we relate to as equipment. When we experience a given thing as equipment, our consciousness flows through the thing without dwelling in it, passing directly to a task that we are executing (*e.g.*, when using a familiar trimming tool we may not really think about its specific shape or heft, or the material it's made from – our mental focus can instead pass directly to how we are shaping the clay). Heidegger characterizes<sup>3</sup> the reliability of equipment as an essential aspect of how we experience the world.

Second, we can experience certain special things *as works of art*. The elucidation of the "work-being" of the work of art is a central concern for Heidegger, who does not seem to preclude the possibility that a given thing may be experienced in some contexts as equipment and in others as a work of art. Indeed, in his widely-read exegesis<sup>4</sup> of the "thingness" of a ceramic jug, Heidegger elaborates the same kind of work-being of the jug – which could otherwise provide a prime example of a thing to be discussed in terms of its equipmental nature – that he ascribes elsewhere<sup>5</sup> to a painting by Van Gogh. Heidegger develops his discussion of the jug into a general notion of "thinging" as a way in which things (be they functional or "purely" aesthetic objects) stimulate our awareness of deep relationships across unexpected dimensions of culture, nature and the divine. To Heidegger, receptiveness to the thinging of things is a crucial faculty that human beings must nurture and celebrate in order to resist the debasing abstraction of experience<sup>6</sup> instigated by the rise of modern science and technology.

Heidegger presents thinging as a variety of what he elsewhere discusses as "worlding," an essential aspect of the work-being of the work of art. A thing things by stimulating us – by virtue of details of its form, visual or tactile qualities, utility, *etc.* – to think of wide-ranging, otherwise disparate facets of our lived experience. And by extension we are led to contemplate how these invoked facets of experience are related, to the extent they must be in order to be gathered together by the qualities of a single material thing. In this way Heidegger believes that things, if we are sensitively responsive to their thinging, are active participants in revealing our *world* as a web of complex and subtle relationships that

stands above and beyond the tenets of science and rational thought. The creation of works of art thus contributes to this activity of worlding.

Here it is worth noting a fundamental resonance with the writings of philosopher Susanne Langer, who proposed<sup>7</sup> to analyze works of art as what she called articulated symbols. Relative to Heidegger, Langer places great emphasis on the kinds of structural relations among symbolic/signifying qualities that can pertain in a work of art, which she believes are distinct from and complementary to the kinds of relations inherent in the grammar of discursive (rational, expository) language. The work of art, which gathers together through its stimulating qualities a complex of references to wide-ranging facets of experience, may articulate relationships among these signifieds that mirror the integral structural relationships among its signifiers. As the kinds of structural relations inherent in a work of art (be it visual, musical, poetic, *etc.*) can differ radically from those of logical argument, Langer asserts that art can explore and analyze relationships among facets of experience that are complementary to and distinct from the domains of scientific and philosophical analysis.

### **Pots as Texts**

If we are to follow the ideas of Heidegger, Langer and like-minded philosophers in developing an aesthetic approach to ceramics criticism, we may also want to consider what literary theorists W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley called the intentional fallacy<sup>8</sup> and the affective fallacy<sup>9</sup>. As clarified by literary theorist Paul de Man<sup>10</sup>, our take-away lesson regarding the intentional fallacy could be summarized as follows: While acknowledging that works of art are created by people with expressive intentions, our critical analysis should focus on the form and content of the work of art itself. Intent is relevant to criticism to the extent that it leads to the incorporation within the work of carefully selected elements of form, and to their placement in specific structural relations, which can be analyzed in their own right. From this perspective, we stray onto thin ice if our critical discussion reaches back through the finished work to rest upon details of the work's history or of the artist's creative ideology that cannot be better referenced by analysis of the work of art itself. To do so would be to move from ceramics criticism to the documentation of studio practice or to the writing of ceramic biography, or to the consideration of ceramics-based performance art, which are interesting but separate enterprises. Indeed there is no reason we cannot combine the criticism of ceramic works, technical documentation and artistic biography together in our writings. However, I think it behooves us not to mistake any one of these modes for another, especially when we choose to talk about process (*e.g.*, cones or lengths of firings).

Wimsatt and Beardsley's analysis of the affective fallacy guides us to keep our critical analyses focused on ceramic works and not our own personal histories or associative idiosyncrasies. To paraphrase these theorists<sup>11</sup>, a piece of ceramics criticism is unlikely to be of broad interest if it reads like a self-psychoanalysis of the critic by way of contemplating a pot (like a Rorschach test). De Man urges us to accept that a work of art may support a multiplicity of coherent and well-supported interpretations, and to recognize that this polyvalence is an essential character<sup>12</sup> of art. Nevertheless, just as a wine or beer critic works to call out visual, olfactory, tactile and gustatory qualities that most attentive and experienced tasters would agree with, our characterizations of the thinging of ceramic works may aspire to broad sympathy. Wimsatt and Beardsley in fact go beyond this point to propose that criticism as a discipline should remain distinct from a psychology of aesthetic response, focusing as much as possible on analysis of the forms and structures of artworks themselves, and of the mechanisms by which

artworks achieve meaning. Returning to the ideas of aesthetic philosophy introduced above, we might take this as encouragement to place more weight on the formal analysis of artworks as articulated symbols, as discussed by Langer, rather than on appreciating and elaborating the worlding function of art as put forth by Heidegger. Where we chose to operate on this spectrum is, of course, ultimately a matter of personal taste.

In developing detailed analyses of ceramic expression, it seems we may have much to borrow from established methods of formalist literary criticism. Functional pots have a dual nature of utility and symbolism that mirrors the entangled literal and imagistic layers of meaning of texts. We can naturally find analogs of linguistic and literary tropes in ceramics: hyperbole (giant Goro Suzuki teapots and Don Reitz tea bowls), synecdoche (*yubi-ato* invoking the hand of the maker), metonymy (Bellarmine jugs), metalepsis (Meissen blue onion patterns, Shimaoka Tatsuzo's *Jomon-zogan*), parody (slip-casts of disposable plastic cups), etc. The dual nature of functional pots likewise invites consideration of ideas from semiotician Roland Barthes' analysis of the rhetoric of advertising images. Barthes notes that in an advertising image, for example on a billboard or magazine page, individual compositional elements (signifiers) that do the most rhetorical work "are 'set' in a syntagm *which is not theirs and which is that of the denotation*" and that the denotation of the image can play a "naturalizing function ... with respect to the connotation."<sup>13</sup> As followers of contemporary ceramics we may be reminded of the integration of symbols of nuclear holocaust and meltdown within the syntagm of teapots by Richard Notkin, or of the "naturalizing function" that the utilitarian form plays in The Democratic Cup project or in the work of Ehren Tool. We thus see that a functional layer of meaning of ceramic works can enrich the formal possibilities of symbolic articulation in the sense of Langer.

From the perspective of the maker, perhaps the strongest point of contact between literary and ceramic criticism stems from the notion of intertextuality. Literary theorist Harold Bloom has famously asserted "there are *no* texts, only relationships *between* texts"<sup>14</sup> and in applying this (admittedly rather extreme) idea to critiquing pots, we may ask whether it really makes sense to speak about ceramic forms or only relationships between forms. Bloom maintains that poems are shaped fundamentally by the ways in which they yield to and struggle against the influence of poems that came before them, and we may recognize in this something of the condition of contemporary wood-fire ceramics, for example. Writing from a quite distinct perspective, literary theorist Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has elucidated<sup>15</sup> the practice of "Signifyin(g)" as a master trope of intertextuality for African American creative culture, exemplified most famously in the contemporary context by sampling, tagging and related practices in hip-hop music. The analysis of signification in Gates' sense would seem to provide a rich framework of ideas for ceramics criticism, especially in the consideration of modern work referencing historical creative traditions. One thinks for example of the emerging style of *manga-Oribe* as it is being developed by contemporary Japanese ceramists such as Shogo Ikeda and Fuminori Fukami, or of the progressive surfaces on classic forms by Betty Woodman, Grayson Perry or Roberto Lugo.

### **Summary and Outlook**

Pots are things, made by ceramists, to which we may respond in a skillful, sensitive, and unbounded manner. Pots are articulated symbols that can exhibit subtle interplay between functional and imagistic layers of meaning, employing mechanisms analogous to rhetorical and literary tropes. Pots are points in a long timeline of history that refer to one another through a network of explicit and subconscious influences. All such features of ceramic work can serve as inspiration for our critical discourse, and as

critics of ceramics we may look to the established disciplines of aesthetic philosophy and literary theory for instructive examples and adaptable methodology.

Learning from these sister disciplines, I believe we should take care in our criticism to distinguish among the analysis of ceramic works-in-themselves, the documenting of historical/biographical circumstances of their creation, and considerations of the psychology of aesthetic response. When extolling the expansive thinging (in Heidegger's sense) of a ceramic work we may strive to characterize the associations that it plausibly evokes for members of a broad audience, and to elucidate the worlding function it thus plays in reifying connections among far-flung facets of lived experience. By analogy with literary criticism we may focus at times on the analysis of structural mechanisms by which ceramic works can propose complex relations among their constituent references. Such formal-technical studies can enhance our appreciation of great pots and enrich our creative practice, and may also aid in elevating the status of (especially functional) ceramics among contemporary artistic media.

Pots are things and we are makers. We can aspire to develop sophisticated craft criticism that fully embraces our native instincts regarding the importance of materiality, process and historicity. The vast majority of pots simply can be appreciated as beautiful ceramics, but our field would benefit from a greater volume of principled critical writing that gives us a concrete sense of what makes our finest works such compelling things. To the extent that we are interested in functional pots as much as in ceramic sculpture, we may not find sufficient guidance in the value systems of the contemporary fine art world. We should not hesitate to look elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2013, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art," pp. 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing."

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art."

<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, Martin. "The Thing," pp. 163-165.

<sup>7</sup> Langer, Susanne K. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> Wimsatt, Jr., W. K. and Monroe Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Verbal Icon*. University of Kentucky Press, 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Wimsatt, Jr., W. K. and Monroe Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy." *The Verbal Icon*.

<sup>10</sup> De Man, Paul. "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism." *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd edition, revised, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 24-25.

<sup>11</sup> Wimsatt, Jr., W. K. and Monroe Beardsley. "The Affective Fallacy," p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> De Man, Paul. "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism." Translated by Wlad Godzich. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, pp. 235-237.

<sup>13</sup> Barthes, Roland. "Rhetoric of the Image." *Image – Music – Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath, The Noonday Press, 1977, pp. 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> Bloom, Harold. *A Map of Misreading*. 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*. Twenty-Fifth-Anniversary Edition, Oxford University Press, 2014.