

The MARGINS

Ceramics is steeped in tradition. Whether an unfired Paleolithic bison, a Ming Dynasty ewer, or a pressure cast shower tray, clay has held hands with society since its dawn. Traditions, however, do change throughout time and the way they are perceived does as well.

Today, artists are using clay in every way possible; dominant and supporting, fired and unfired, for utility and experience, high tech, low tech, with other materials, in performances, objects, installations, etc. Artists are still using ceramic materials for their archival and sanitary qualities, as cultural and historical lenses, to access the fragility of Meissen porcelain and the strength of a Rapp Brother's brick. Ceramic Art is simultaneously asserting why it has a vibrant tradition and dynamic living pulse, while the nature of its very versatility declares the necessity for it to no longer be referred to as Ceramic Art, but rather just Art. Artists who use ceramic materials are less and less background specific and disciplinarily self-conscious, and more interested in using material for a specific reason. As Art in general has made a shift away from maker-specific materiality toward work-specific materiality, clay is now just another material akin to paint or bronze, polyurethane or plywood, a digital image, light, sound, scent, or the human body; just another material used by artists to make Art.

Just as Ceramic Art has been 'marginalized', relegated to displays behind museum ticket counters, or capitalized in writing such as this, so have non-traditional approaches been 'marginalized' by Ceramists. At what point are certain debates and definitions not only tired and worn, but possibly even a liability? At what point do they get dropped in favor of simply recognizing an expanded field? A field where there are no margins, there is no disciplinary allegiance, work is not categorized by a material or process, and tradition is not the principal benchmark. At what point is everything considered on the field? Just one field. When do we stop using the term "non traditional" or getting together to discuss borders, boundaries, limits, or margins? When do we use approaches that yield discourse about Art for the sake of the individual piece regardless of the background of a maker or an audience? At what point do we dissolve the margins?

We organized *The Margins* exhibition to be somewhat of survey that operates to substantiate an expanded field. It uses an approach to art practice that promotes unbiased consideration of the work. The artists presented in *The Margins* are such that reduce elements to their necessity. Materials are chosen to best realize an intention. Though clay is a component that runs through the work, it does so from outside an improvident focus on physical or conceptual mass. These are artists who are unfettered by discipline specificity. They are interested in broader discourse. They are artists who dissolve the margins.

The Big Bang

By Katherine L. Ross

As a teacher, I am intent that my students investigate two things: technical traditions and processes toward expertise, and the questions that take each student down a personal path to develop a voice. Often history and technique eventually give way to a subversive application of what is learned. The margins of a field or medium are where the subversive applications of education house the least typical, and most personal work.

Is this not the center of where we all, as artists, want to be?

Clay is a material with specific characteristics, histories, and associations. It is of the earth and yet at the same time, industrial. Clay can be considered dirty, and when it is porcelain it is pure and even a status symbol. It is architectural, performative and conceptual. It is domestic, utilitarian and non-functional. *The Margins: A Non-Traditional Approach* brings together ceramic work from many technical, historical, and conceptual directions. The intent of the artists here, according to the curators, is more important than the ceramic discipline. Without having seen the works in this show I will speculate that they are innately tied to the histories of the medium and richer for it. I base this assumption on the previous work of these artists. Many, if not most of the work in this exhibition contain more than one material. Each material, as well as the visual forms they take, carries the baggage of its histories. If successfully developed and edited, each material brings content to the whole. If an object is ceramic, it should not be possible to say that it could just as easily be another material with the same effect. The material itself, aside from the form it takes adds information to the whole. Always, the work in the margins of the ceramics field has moved the medium forward.

Prehistoric female effigy figures in clay were thrown into the fire by the thousands, not to vitrify, but to explode. Was this a performative gesture intended to question the mysteries and powers of the female? In 1876, Isaac Broome's Baseball Vase was the first American ceramic object to be declared Art during the International Exhibition in Philadelphia. During World War I, airplanes were used for the first time in history to drop bombs. Pilots received target practice by dropping ceramic bombs filled with talc or plaster. Ceramics and china painting became the most popular American women's hobby in the 1930's only to be marginalized by returning American GIs attending art school in universities on the G.I. Bill after World War II - and then re-appropriated later. These and others histories of the material that we all know well, will continue to push our assumptions about the "center" of ceramics.

Once utility, technical skill, and function were highly valued by society and ultimately defined by the Arts and Crafts Movement. By the mid nineteenth century society itself moved from the predominantly rural to the city. The

workplace moved from the home to industry and with it, domestic and utilitarian objects were devalued in favor of industrial technology and more worldly art. Craft became hobby and therapy, particularly for women. In the late 20th and 21st centuries industrial skill gave way to the more urgent digital and information age. The technical skill of industry, and again of craft, was demoted to a position below content and idea. Craft continued to be viewed separate from Art. The ceramics field remains clearly marginalized from the “art” world in this country. This is something we have been hearing for decades, but is it? Craft and ceramics are undoubtedly in and hip. The hierarchical nature of the art world, it seems, has marginalized ceramic artists, but not the ceramic production of fine artists. But don’t we also see the best ceramic artists of our day considered equals to artists in the broader field of art? Many highly regarded artists in the sculpture and painting fields produce ceramics. Often their use of this material is a very personal pursuit akin to sketchbook production- intuitive and emotive- and in keeping with a DIY approach to production. These can be ceramics of the most messy, unskilled appearance where technical precision is a non-issue and the subconscious and the intuitive are mined in a stream of consciousness to develop expression. Contemporary popular culture is very self-absorbed. We all are keyed in to Facebook, YouTube, etc. to tell the world about ourselves. This cathartic self-indulgence is evidence of an interest in the intensely personal in popular culture. The body, the familiar, the “other”, and the emotive, are embodied in a narrative ultimately concerned with empathy. The haptic qualities of clay objects undeniably convey the maker’s and the viewer’s presence in a culture that longs for emotional connection, understanding, and recognition. Issues of function and the domestic can once again come to the forefront in the broader art context because of their connection to intimacy and the personal. The profound success of ceramics in designed objects can be explained by the current interest in intimacy and the domestic. The digital age has created a cultural obsessed with objects of empathy, hence the current interest in craft and ceramics in the broader art world. I will look at the works in this exhibition for these links rather than for a confirmation of what constitutes the center or the margins. Perhaps I will see an investigation of the domestic, the queer, our intimate bodies, or other ways of seeing our world as it is today, as well as some seepage of issues from other art fields.

The margins in any field are always changing. We could think of our field (ceramics) as some sort of strange explosive event where everything at the edges is rushing towards the center, like some kind of reverse Big Bang. Today it is nano-ceramics, ceramics in bioengineering, high tech ceramics in industry, and the use of rapid prototyping occurring at the margins. Recently the fringe of ceramic expression was the use of mixed media, readymades, installation, process art, and performance. So now we find that what was the in the margins of the field are now within the center. If ceramists were cosmologists we would be looking at the entire universe. If we did this we would see that the field of ceramics is expanding, interacting with the broader art world, with seepage of ideas from one discipline to another, less of a hierarchy and more interactive.

We would see the natural movement of the center and the margins and the relationship between the two as part of a whole universe, interrelated and in conversation.

Isn't it time that we abandon the issues of craft vs. Art, of ceramics vs. sculpture? Let's continue to watch the movement of cultural concerns and how we as artists utilize the contemporary world around us. An awareness of all history and the rich history of this material is enough to inform and generate work without marginalizing ourselves. Non-traditional approaches in ceramics (in fact this is the title of a course I taught for over two decades), is now a label I wish to drop. Successful ceramic work asks us questions, investigates ideas, and reflects our world, whether it is a functional pot, unfired clay in a performance, or a figurative object. Science, theory, culture and aesthetics are evident throughout the clay universe.

On the Margins: Ceramic Sculpture, Centering and Decentering

By Glen R. Brown

The metaphor of margins and centers fairly bristles with poststructuralist connotations and cannot easily be separated from a certain heuristics designed to elucidate some complex assertions about truth, knowledge, representation and power. Margins-and-center metaphors have circulated in critical discourse over the past forty years as means of commentary on (and ultimately deconstruction of) binary epistemology: that mode of thought given to constructing hierarchical dyads of mutually exclusive terms such as subject and object, nature and culture, or essence and contingency. Since binary epistemology implies the possibility of absolute distinction between truth and falseness, it provided for centuries an ostensibly firm foundation for classical philosophy, western religion and modern science (all of which have writhed famously at the hands of deconstruction since the late 1960s). Trivial though the case may seem in the company of such institutions, the distinction between art and craft could be viewed as another product of binary epistemology and therefore a construct vulnerable to the same processes of decentering to which so many other hierarchical dyads have succumbed under the implications of the poststructuralist metaphor of margins and centers.

My purpose in this essay will be to suggest something of the expectations that are raised conceptually when applying the term margins to an exhibition such as this. As I am writing from within that curious vacuum existing when an exhibition's participants have been selected but the specific works are yet to be determined, I am compelled to present much of my discussion in the abstract. However, as this is not the appropriate venue for an extensive description of poststructuralist theory, I will refrain from delving any deeper into the thorny roots of the metaphor of margins and centers than is necessary for contextualizing the work in question. At the same time, one can hardly employ a rhetorical term as margins – which, in the case that I will be discussing it here, defines not a material space but rather a certain effect within discourse – without laying some groundwork. I will do so by way of analogy and begin by drawing two verbal pictures, instances of literal margins and the activities taking place there, that I think may help to frame the metaphor of margins and centers in such a way as to render it useful to a discussion of contemporary ceramic sculpture and specifically the objects comprising this exhibition. These instances of literal marginality – scholia and medieval marginalia – are, I think, especially illuminating, as they place margins in the context of words and images, the two most familiar, if not necessarily least problematic, forms of representation.

The scholia of the ancients – interpretative commentary, glossaries and grammatical observations inscribed in the margins of older manuscripts – served

practically as a means of relating material from a previous age to contemporary contexts. Aristarchus's famous scholia to the Iliad, for example, interpreted that venerable work, already more than six centuries old, for the Hellenistic age – and, indeed, for every subsequent age, which has faced the difficulty not only of grappling with the Iliad itself but also of reckoning the merits of all previous interpretations. At the same time (and no doubt as an unanticipated consequence) scholia converted the margins of manuscripts into sites where the apparent univocal incisiveness of the text – its temporal continuity as a narrative and its logical unity as set of ideas – gave way to the dialogical: to something more like conversation than oration. Scholia, in other words, proved not merely contingent upon self-sufficient narratives but, on the contrary, revelatory of the prospect that the texts they bordered were not nearly so autonomous and plenary as would seem. From the margins, scholia subverted the illusionary purity and isolation of the text and opened its meanings onto a succession of fragmentary comments that could accumulate with the passing of epochs.

Another enlightening instance of activity on literal margins is presented by the medieval marginalia that have puzzled scholars for centuries: weird hybrid images of flora and fauna that sprouted in the margins of manuscripts like strangely malformed fruit dangling from the tendrils of chapter letters. What could have inspired the medieval illuminator to render, on the borders of solemn and sacred texts, the apparently satirical and often lascivious imagery of knights battling snails, scatological acts, or orgies of lewd apes? Our uncertainty regarding such practice is no doubt revealing in more ways than one, but for the moment I am concerned principally with the picture of medieval marginalia formed within the theories of poststructuralist art history, especially as expressed in the writings of the late Michael Camille, who argued provocatively that marginal art reflects "the problem of signifying nothing in order to give birth to meaning at the centre."⁽¹⁾ In this view – echoing Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the carnivalesque, Michel Foucault's musings on madness and Jean Baudrillard's observations on Disneyland – the irreconcilability of center and margin and the apparent lawlessness, absurdity, and perversion of the latter, serve to enhance the impression that, in contrast, truth resides at the center. The capriciousness and perversion of marginalia, in other words, reinforce the contention that everything else can be trusted.

If I have laid things out to advantage it will be apparent that the poststructuralist metaphor of margins and centers, when approached through the examples of scholia and medieval marginalia, embodies an obvious paradox. On the one hand, margins proffer a subversive power through which the apparent unity and autonomy of centers can be potentially deconstructed; on the other, margins are, through their associations with banishment, externality, caprice and perversion, hosts to the irreconcilable Other against which the ostensible truth of the center shines forth. Margins, in other words, seem to reinforce the propriety of centers. This paradoxicalness of the metaphor, the ambiguity of margins as sites of falseness and of power and centers as variably constructs and truths, sets the

stage upon which I will attempt briefly to situate this exhibition. I do not by any means presume to explain the motivations behind the works themselves but only to indicate some of the highly interesting points that emerge when these works are considered through the metaphor of margins and centers.

The title "The Margins" inevitably imposes a sense of contingency on the objects encompassed by this exhibition. One is tacitly invited to contemplate ceramic sculpture (for this is the exclusive content of the exhibition) not as autonomous material but rather as signifier of something that is, so to speak, conspicuous in its absence: an undisclosed though implicit center (in fact, two centers) in relation to which the production of ceramic sculpture will seem a marginal activity. Though there are multiple ways that margin-and-center relationships could be constructed for ceramic sculpture, two in particular are intimated by the term itself and therefore seem to promise greatest insight into ceramic sculpture's potential indigestibility and consequent marginalization. As will soon become evident, these constructs are related, defining different and mutually exclusive centers while, in effect, sharing at least one region of their margins. Not to make a secret of it, the points of departure for these constructs are the terms 'ceramics' and 'sculpture,' each of which, when taken as central, can be paired in binary opposition with the other as marginal. The center-and-margin dyads thus formed define certain discursive categories – sculpture and ceramics – with which we are, or at least generally feel that we are, fairly conversant.

In the context of sculpture the term 'ceramic' clearly serves as a qualifier – not to say stigma, though it has obviously been frequently regarded as such by both those who actually seek to denigrate certain objects and practices and those who only suspect such intent on the part of others. It is, I think, more productive to consider the qualifier 'ceramic' to be an effective indicator of marginal status, a mark of difference and distance from those concepts that center the discipline of sculpture as a division of the broader category of art. As in the case of scholia in relation to central texts, ceramic sculpture as a marginalized practice assumes the role of annotation, implicitly commenting on and interpreting the definition of sculpture (and the broader category of art) from a position of remove and interpreting that definition for the audience indicated by the qualifier. (As the present exhibition aptly demonstrates through its NCECA affiliations, part of what a certain kind of ceramic sculpture does, whether intentionally or otherwise, is interpreting sculpture in its art context for the benefit of ceramics.) A precise parallel to this situation emerges when one considers the term 'sculpture' as a qualifier within the discursive category of ceramics. In contrast to the vessel, which enjoys not only centrality to the definition of ceramics but also to the larger category of craft, ceramic sculpture could be regarded as both inhabiting the periphery of ceramics as a field and mediating that field for the discipline of sculpture and the broader category of art. The qualifier 'sculpture', in this respect, hints at aspects of alterity and consequently a scholia-like interpretive potential crystallizing on the margins of ceramics as a discipline.

The picture I have sketched thus far may be suggestive of set theory: a Venn diagram in which the fields of ceramics and sculpture overlap at one section of their peripheries to form the commonly held subset of ceramic sculpture. Although this strategy of visualization possesses the unfortunate flaw of suggesting material existence for what are in fact only effects within discourse, it is a device expedient enough that for present purposes we may overlook its shortcomings. One of its chief merits is its clear assertion that particular forms of ceramic sculpture – and certainly those composing this exhibition – inhabit two categories simultaneously. For set theory such simultaneity poses no particular problem, since the units contained by each set are posited as possessing independent existence regardless of what boundaries might be delineated around them. Sets, likewise, could be considered independent of the objects that they contain, the empty set being axiomatic despite its having no members. But can the same be said for a category such as sculpture? Could this category have ever been envisioned if not for those concrete objects – from the Venus of Willendorf to Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* – from which it seemed possible to abstract certain common traits: traits central enough to define a field? Modernist formalists obviously thought not, and consequently went so far as to enumerate for the discipline of sculpture a list of essential characteristics that seemed, at least for a time, to provide an immovable center for the category of sculpture.

Ironically, of course, late-modernist attempts to explicate the categorical essence of sculpture prompted a flurry of phenomena – installations, environments, performance, process art and the like – designed deliberately to negate that supposed essence. The result was not, as one might have anticipated, the tensile collapse and subsequent dispersal of the discipline of sculpture as its boundaries ranged ever further from the center but rather the institution of a new mode of definition from which the problematic of a circular argument – definition of the category of sculpture as a container of objects that are recognized as sculptures only because of their containment by the category – seemed to have been eliminated. Rather than defining itself inwardly through presence, through an enumeration of central, absolute and essential traits that all objects enclosed by its parameters were required to possess, sculpture as a discipline assented to an existence through absence: through difference from other alien and irreconcilable categories. In this manner the field of sculpture became not a positively established entity offering only finite potential but a negatively sustained category whose only restrictions on membership arose as prohibitions of certain objects, the insurmountable alterity of which had to be maintained at all costs. In this it mirrored the larger category of art, which shed the last of its raiment of classical aesthetics in the late twentieth century and henceforth has defined itself only through difference from its irredeemable others. Perhaps it goes without saying that one of these untouchables has been craft.

It may now be clear where I have been headed. I wish to suggest that the discipline of sculpture, perceived as a division of art, stakes its very existence on what could be considered the functional equivalent of medieval marginalia – a

projected alterity that, through its difference, generates the impression that there is actually a legitimate meaning residing at the center of the discipline. The discipline of sculpture must distance itself from categories such as ceramics, perceived as a division of craft, not only as a matter of maintaining its status as art but also and more importantly of its continued existence as a discipline at all. It needs its Others even as it holds those Others at perpetual remove. Nor is the discipline of ceramics immune to this necessity. While definition through projected alterity may be less obvious in that case (since, on the surface of things, the discipline of ceramics seems to possess a material essence in the medium of fired clay), can there be any doubt that mixed-media work, sculpture in unfired clay, virtual ceramics, and performance involving clay, all of which have garnered the aegis of such institutional authorities as NCECA, have cast the credibility of this material essence in doubt?

This leaves us with a picture in which sculpture only maintains its disciplinary status through exclusion of, among other things, the discipline of ceramics (when construed as craft), and ceramics in turn only maintains its disciplinary status through the exclusion of, among other things, sculpture (when construed as art). Each is in this sense an Other of the other, and consequently, through difference, an expedient element in the process of disciplinary centering. Sculpture and ceramics, at least ostensibly, form a dyad that both reflects and reinforces the larger dyad of art and craft. When marginal activity arises to suggest an implicit continuity between the two – in this case ceramic sculpture, the very term for which suggests a stake in both territories simultaneously – the result is a threat to the stability of the sculpture/ceramics and art/craft constructs. Like scholia, the marginalized phenomenon of ceramic sculpture reveals the dialogical rather than univocal nature of the definitions of sculpture and ceramics as disciplines. Ceramic sculpture, in other words, discloses the unsettling assertion that neither ceramics nor sculpture can exist as self-referential categories: their essences are nominal and their centers, through the revelatory activity of the marginalized, prove to be no centers at all. The potential consequences of this decentering are a double collapse of categories and a spilling of their former contents into one another.

Wielding its title strategically, this exhibition urges reflection on the role of contemporary ceramic sculpture in simultaneously defining and destabilizing centers: implicitly those that at present seem to anchor the disciplines of ceramics and sculpture. By emphasizing the situation of the works on the peripheries of these disciplines "The Margins" attributes to them a certain deconstructive potential. The works are presented as resisting the logic of 'either/or' even as they are bound within it and through this resistance as casting substantial doubt on the perseverance of the centers that, through their alterity, they help to define. The mixed-media constitution of most of these works and the installation format assumed by some in apparent assertion of a certain status as art, indicate their affinity with contemporary sculpture in its unqualified sense. On the other hand, their material basis in clay, even when clay is not materially

necessary, and, perhaps even more importantly, their willingness to gather in the context of an NCECA-affiliated exhibition, stress affinities with ceramics as a discipline. As a consequence of their dual associations, they cannot be wholly ingested by either ceramics or sculpture and must, at the cost of these disciplines' very existence, be relegated to the margins. Ironically, of course, this relegation to alterity can be seen as the very source of their destabilizing potential.

(1) *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 48.

On Margins and Marginalization

By Ezra Shales

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1919)

These elegant lines of first-rate shamanistic poetry evoke the nihilistic state of post-war Europe. For many readers, the poem is a touchstone of Western civilization. For others, the verbal dance is too formal and courtly, or a remote cliché. The "centre cannot hold" has been interpreted as a battle cry against globalization, be it missionary or imperial, economic or ideological, and also for conserving centrism in the face of extremism. Hence the poem is a ubiquitous epigraph, stoking the anti-colonialism of Chinua Achebe and the conservatism of Robert Bork, the counter-cultural songs of Joni Mitchell and Joan Didion's scathing portraits of hippies in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The hypnotic gyre has held an enormous number in its sway, and become canonical in the American literary compendium. But that was back years ago, before our society began to produce poetry writers that vastly outnumbered its readers, before fiction writing classes replaced those in literary appreciation, before the worship of the creative individual assumed its current proportions. In light of the deification of individual creativity, it is worthwhile to ponder the spiraling vortex of miscommunication Yeats describes. Surely today, the falconer's or any voice does not sally forth easily. Google Yeats' poem and one finds it ensconced in vertical and horizontal banners depicting a phenomenon identified as "tummy loss." It's the inversion of T. S. Eliot's suggestion that each great artwork reinvents all its predecessors: now each over-familiarization with a cultural event renders it more remote. In this context, one of diffuse applications and heterogeneous readings, the idea of cultivating the margins deserves skeptical inquiry.

Yeats' interpretation that "the worst are full of passionate intensity" is haunting, for it smacks of paranoia, and imparts a lethal pause, one that in my abject mind has lasted from high school to the present day. I have endured schooling by two types of teachers, those who perceived themselves to be railing against "the system" and single-handedly carrying on the anti-authoritarianism of the 1960s, and those lacking conviction in any systemic or anti-systemic dogma. I found myself wanting to agree with the rebels but finding their rebellion self-serving. I agreed with their politics, their Marxist theory and whatnots, but the assurance

with which they saw themselves as marginalized was amusing and never convincing. Most were awfully fancy Marxists when it came down to coffee, real estate, and cheese. The fancy Marxist's rants were all mumble and no rumble, an extensive critique suspended in a hothouse where lifestyle held the centre.

The assertion of the mantle of the "non-traditional" today still evokes memories of this post-1960s influenza, and one wonders if the term performs a service or disservice, proclaiming the survival of "the outsider" in an era when the most remote parts of Achebe's Nigeria have gone from no phone to cell phone. In ceramic art, there are so many margins, and yet none. Anti-academic prejudice lingers, either among anti-intellectual adherents of Dewey's "knowing by doing" or within sophomoric neo-romantic searches for authenticity.¹ It manifests itself in the tendency to dismiss artists and art as overly contrived, overly literate, or overly sophisticated. Is the university program too centralized and divorced from reality to be anything more than a self-enclosed ocean liner, or is it the last place where the free dialogue, experimentation, and unfettered rationality of the Enlightenment remain? Is it really risky for an individual to leap into the deep end of the pool, or is it so much more daring for an institution to take a risk with a true reorientation? How can a society divide over seeing the liberal arts education as either a juggernaut or a necessary indulgence? Even in the academy, to be academic is a put down. So are there really margins in the field that can be tilled?

The interesting thing about teaching ceramic history is that the field has its own idiomatic narratives, facts be damned. George Ohr is one of the best examples, a potter lionized into a maverick, a word that ought to perish with the McCain presidential campaign. Ohr was not a marginal figure in 1900, yet he has been consecrated as an outsider artist phenomenon. He was in the major published surveys of American ceramics, had been affiliated briefly with Newcomb Pottery in New Orleans. Far from having a provincial or regional outlook, he was extremely well traveled and educated by studying each of the major world's fairs of his lifetime. He was not a "folk" artist no matter how the term is defined. Idiosyncratic? Yes. Occupying margins? No. Marginalized during the Modernist mid-century? Yes. But to return to the issue of Ohr's creativity, I would argue that his sophisticated eye and knowledge of contemporary high-end European and American factory-sized firm production makes his own work only more interesting. To situate him as periphery is to indulge in storytelling, whereas to contextualize him accurately is a serious intellectual challenge.

To go back to Yeats' apocalyptic mumbo jumbo, neither the spiraling "gyre" nor the pivotal "centre" seem like appropriate metaphors in our age that combines simultaneously excessive illiteracy and also information. To compose a frame for your self-reflection: what types of texts and what exemplary material precedents do ceramicists name as influential on their production? From what discipline do

¹ See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

they come, and from which decade, and what is their provenance? To compose a frame around my own self-reflection: this scribbling in the margins that I am engaged in, and thanks if you've hung on this far, is peripheral in a multitude of ways that need not be enumerated. It is an academic habit, one officially instituted in glossy art magazines for several decades. In such catalogs and periodicals, words are pasted around illustrations and are as legible as the molding around an oil painting. Are they cumulative? Perhaps they are intelligible but they are rarely read or pondered in practice. Art writing is nevertheless treasured as an economic lubricant and instrument of power, however despised it be when piled on a desk as an assignment or competitor's bountiful cornucopia of reviews. I reference my own craft to point out its essential and understood role as a supplemental tool. You can either see this description as the sign of a premature mid-life crisis or hard-boiled realism occurring in the Southern Tier of upstate New York. I would argue that the condition of supplementarity that has long haunted ceramics (in the craft-versus-art inferiority complex, the hierarchy of fine art media, and the subjugation of object to architecture, to name a few) is a social as well as a material situation today.² And here ceramics can take refuge in being a part of the main, conjoined to the anxious continent of contemporary art.

What is less than a forgone conclusion today is the value of the individual contribution, as aesthetic or political barometer. We now move forward understanding that the silos of professional cabals and professionalization in post-war American society have been largely economic lifestyles more than ideologically defined positions or self-declarations of meaning. This is what I hope is central to our contemporary discourse of the margins: that it adds self-awareness and constitutes a movement away from the manic individualism and romanticization of marginalization (as in, I heard that act in a bar before they became a top dollar commercialized brand). Improbably, ceramics long stood inoculated from the sea-change of postmodernism in which high-brow and low-brow cultural distinctions were inverted and blurred. While it has now become more contemporary and less formalistic (to judge from the participants in this exhibition), there remains a real danger that the false-consciousness of mass-culture will be perpetuated. The self-identification with "the outsider" based on James Dean and "The Wild Ones" has been lasting in American culture, and is as damaging as relying on John Wayne films to define indigenous cultures. With the president emailing people weekly and using Facebook daily, look not for fringe or alternative space. The next time we screw up to an extraordinary degree, chances are we will be on YouTube, and it just might be a good thing. Perhaps a respect for public space and a desire for collective action will emerge again if the pain of adolescent pranks springs eternal from the Internet. Historical self-declared margins, such as "the Irascibles" and the Group of Seven, seem like hollow potshots to gain a toehold in the culture industry.

² See Glenn Adamson *Thinking Through Craft* (London: Berg, 2007), pp. 9-37.

To end on a more titillating historical example, let's remember the rather plain-faced Marie-Louise Fuller born in Fullersburg, Illinois in 1862 amidst the Civil War, who journeyed to Paris and became "*La Loïe Fuller*," an international sex symbol of greater proportions than Paris Hilton or Madonna, and pivotal to numerous visual expressions of what came to be called *art nouveau*. Her serpentine dance was drawn by the great artists of the day, from Toulouse-Lautrec and Rodin, Cherét and Larche, and her incarnations spanned all media, posters, glass, gold, and ceramics. Yeats and Mallarmé also wrote of her charms. She embodied an aesthetic attitude: a building at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 was transformed into her costume, so that the doorway gained illicit and suggestive carnal allusions.³ Sèvres modeled a series of biscuit porcelain statuettes after her figure so that she came to adorn the table of Czar Nicholas. Her patented inventions for stage designing and her role in promoting modern dance and Isadora Duncan might be her most lasting contributions. Her defiance of high- and low-brow categories and provincial birth provides optimism that an individual can journey far and that their cultural labor can be productive. Yet she is also a warning that our own definitions of "margins" and periphery, academic and authentic art, are likely to pass within a brief temporal span and that they are often tied to the limitations of our own cultural horizons

³ See Ann Cooper Albright, *Traces of Light: Absence and Presence in the Work of Loïe Fuller* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Richard Nelson Current and Marcia Ewing Current, *Loïe Fuller: Goddess of Light* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, May 1997); Giovanni Lista, *Loïe Fuller: Danseuse de la Belle Époque* (Paris, Stock-Éditions d'Art Somogy, 1994).