

TERREISM: materials, meaning and making

The conference title ***Subversive Clay*** implies that making with clay should be presented as an insurgent activity. As such it needs to challenge prevailing attitudes and practices that have become accepted, entrenched, and then ossified. Inevitably this means questioning aspects of thinking, learning and practice.

Art critic Christopher Allen recently observed that:

"...In a world alienated from nature and the immediacy of life - even our own individual lives - by a consumer economy and a bewitching but sterile illusion of presence conjured by digital communication, it is a fallacy to think we can recover an intimacy with the natural world or with each other through the same means that have produced the alienation in the first place"¹

My take here on sustainable practice is on how craft practice can be sustained and enriched through the use of indigenous materials as a basis for expressing the diverse narratives of place - ***TERREISM***. Inspired by the **Pottery Liberation Front**, I decided to develop a manifesto - the Dadaists did it, how hard could it be.

To get started on the **Terreism Manifesto**, I want to suggest that in terms of current studio practice we are the children of the revolution – the industrial revolution that is. Harry Davis stated in the 1980's that;

" The fact that an industrial supply system already existed in the late 19th Century when the craft movement began – allowed the new artisans to enter their fields halfway, with a profound ignorance of raw materials - where they might be found, what they looked like if one did find them, and how to convert them to useful forms. In other words, the story of the geological origins of a potter's raw materials was a closed book, and to a surprising extent still is."²

If it was a closed book then, what is it now 40 years on - perhaps an obscure and faded text that we can re-scan to help shape an alternative sustaining future out of the irrational consumptive present. However before adding my postscript to that text I want to look briefly at another more recent artful revolution – avant-gardism. As a craft maker I join the orphaned children of this revolution - one that has profoundly affected the appreciation and understanding of craft practice.

Recently I spent some time at the Museum of Old and New Art – MONA - on the outskirts of Hobart on a training day for my part-time teaching in the new TAFE qualifications in Visual Arts. While I wandered round this striking concrete and Corten steel monolith replicating the experience a student might have when field tripping here, I reflected on how ***craft*** has been erased from the title of the courses that I teach in. ***I am not a visual artist*** – it's not what I do or teach and presents a narrow, outdated, very insular and almost xenophobic view of art with little potential to sustain craft practice.

¹ Allen C Connected *and Together* in The Weekend Australian Review July 28-29

² Davis H. *The Craft Movement Assessed Historically* - The Studio Potter Vol 9 No 1, 1980

As I sought to overcome my well-crafted prejudices against the myopic privileging of the visual in art, Marcel Duchamp came to mind. Wikipedia told me that Duchamp;

"... challenged conventional thought about artistic processes and art marketing, not so much by writing, but through subversive actions. Duchamp produced relatively few artworks, while moving quickly through the avant-garde circles of his time. "³

As a wheelformalist moving quickly through circles is somehow very familiar. However Duchamp's avant-garde subversive actions of that time may now have morphed into a conservative and entrenched art establishment position, spawning art like the contemporary nature-made, of Damien Hirst with its agonizingly insightful title;

"The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living "

- Hard to resist a subversive rebrand. - ***" How to market a Big Flake "***

At MONA last year David Walsh set out to shock and provoke with his opening exhibition **Monanism** - another bloke with **isms**. While billed as shocking and confronting most locals were merely entertained and thanked this home town boy for his generosity in spending \$180 M to display his eclectic collection and provide them with a big thing to go to on the weekend - not so subversive after all it seems. However when I was there the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's was showing glittering " **artitainments**" including multiple **Cloaca** - those exquisitely crafted fecal extruders about which the artist stated;

" I was looking for a complicated thing, difficult to make, expensive and utterly useless "

That's the thing about avantgardism it makes you think about **ART**- it gave me the guts of the manifesto:

" I am looking for simple things, not difficult to make or very expensive and utterly useful. "

I found that subversion could be simple. - there was even a T-shirt logo for the MONA market in it.

A R T i s a n a l

Lets get to the clay – at about the same time as Mark Hewitt was declaring:

" Tradition is radical - the prevailing status quo in the Western ceramic world is based on Art School BFA and MFA programs. There are very few traditional potters. To have an MFA is to be normal, to be a traditional potter is to be unusual, radical. "⁴

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcel_Duchamp - accessed 2/4/2012

⁴ Hewitt M. *Tradition is the future* - *The Studio Potter* Vol 28 No 2., 2000

Alison Britton in a paper titled "*Overthrowing Tradition*" admitted that while using the wheel had indeed suffered from the " New Ceramics " discourse of the 80's, which resulted in that oxymoronic mongrel "**the sculptural vessel**" - she felt we were past that suffering now with a re-invigoration of wheel work in the creative hands and minds of people like Edmund de Waal and Takeshi Yasuda. While encouraged by those sentiments, I fail to see how those skills can develop within a visual art framework that is time constrained, conceptually bloated and skill averse.

Then while relaxing on the couch watching TV with a beaker of terroir red on came Mark Zuckerberg - he of Facebook fame. Considered to be an entrepreneurial whizkid with a business model that persuades real and virtual friends to become materialist cannon fodder for global marketeers, he has the superficially catchy but vacuous motto:

WORK FAST + BREAK THINGS

I prefer:

MOVE SLOW + MAKE THINGS

I follow a more sustaining activist path - *TERREISM*. - and in the spirit of **GET UP**
I urge you to embrace the axiomatic and
CLAIM IT

Clay Liberation Army Insurgency Manifesto of Individual
Terreism

MY INCIDENTAL TERREISM - materials, meaning and making

I started my real learning in ceramics at the School of Art in Hobart in 1978. I came to clay from working with fibreglass, from making surfboards and playing in the ocean - after being responsible and getting a Degree in Economics. It was a transition for my eye from long to short curves, from encasing soft foam in resin and fibreglass to forming plastic clay, coated with glaze and fused by fire. **I sense now it was another step on the same path as beauty and intense functionality sought synthesis in nature.**

I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time. The right place as the teachers within the ceramics studio were workshop trained – a unique bridge that couldn't happen now with the " no PhD - no start " mentality that prevails. The right time because there was still a **connection between place, materials and making that has since been eroded.** I found in translation an eastern art aesthetic that resonated with the growing environmental consciousness within Tasmania - an approach to making with an emphasis on place and on engagement with place. I participated in what was sadly to be the last field trip by the Ceramics studio when we collected clay and glaze materials from around the state. It was an important experience, a year later and this opportunity to directly connect and engage with place through materials would have been lost.

However the field of Ceramics I entered was changing rapidly. The revival of studio ceramics that Leach advocated had an emphasis on place and the indigenous traditions developed in place, sought to express beauty and saw a danger in over-accentuated individualism. This was challenged by an American celebration of industrial production,

placelessness and a confident aggressive individualism. Change meant rejection of the past and as the Art Academy increasingly became the home for ceramic learning, a painting inspired abstract expressionist fervour changed attitudes to materials, meaning and making. In many ways this statement from Rob Barnard expressed my despairing sense of what was happening. Born the fifties, growing up in the sixties and coming to ceramics in the late-seventies at a time of growing environmental consciousness, the place-based pragmatic expressionism of craft held the depth and connection to initially attract and continue to sustain me – so I became an incidental **TERREIST**

The Tasmania of the late 70's was a place of relative isolation in terms of material supplies for ceramics, and this alone encouraged a search for materials that would maximise creative self-sufficiency. However just as relevant was the philosophical influence of Ivan McMeekin expressed through the making and teaching of Les Blakebrough and Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott⁵ - both were teaching and making in Tasmania at that time. McMeekin in the introduction to his book published in 1967 had asked the simple yet fundamental question;

" How, then should we go about our work. "⁶

His answer to that self-posed question was twofold – through studying the rich and diverse history of traditional craft making, and by " the direct study of our own materials and processes " ⁷ applied through the tools of modern science and technology. McMeekin in his own making, forged a synthesis of the inspiration he found in Chinese Song dynasty ceramics, the influence of his mentor Michael Cardew and the regional materials of the land. It was a personal bridge from the past to the present, and he encouraged others to develop their own unique Australian making traditions. In many ways this is what I have tried to do over the last 30 years - develop a contemporary traditionalist practice.

I would like to think it is still possible for craft makers to take some direct responsibility for the collection of their materials and the consequent impact of their making on the source environment. Industrial processing separates materials and making, with a disconnect between the commercial clay in a plastic bag and the massive hole in the ground of the clay pit, and its associated environmental consequences. It also means we never see our raw materials in situ – in place, with the consequence that a whole potential area of stimulus, engagement and understanding is wiped out. The plastic bag is no substitute for the clay bank and the rock face as industrial raw materials are processed for consistency, purity and predictability - in essence for *a false purity* - not necessarily the foundation for artistic growth.

Ten years ago I felt I needed to take time to examine, question and challenge my approach - to look back to what had framed my learning and how my making responses had grown out of those early influences. In many ways that need to question increased after developing the prototype Southern Ice porcelain body with Les Blakebrough. A

⁵ Ivan Mc Meekin had 3 apprentices at Sturt Pottery in Mittagong -Les Blakebrough, Gwyn Hanssen-Pigott and Col Levy

⁶ McMeekin I. *Notes for Potters in Australia* NSWU Press. 1967 p.4

⁷ *ibid* p.4

project that started by investigating the potential of local kaolins, culminated in using an international material palette to create a beautiful industrial composite for those who lust after translucent whiteness. It was an interesting research project to undertake and it served to focus the questioning of my own practice. To put structure around my questions I chose to undertake postgraduate study and initially found myself on other field trips, often to the west coast of Tasmania around Queenstown, an area of both natural beauty, eco-political confrontation and environmental degradation from mining.

My aim was to intensify the search for a natural, fluid integration of stimulus, materials and process in the development of form and surface. I became a reflective wanderer, recording poetic and photographic responses to the fragments of stimulus that caught my eye. These west coast field trips were an exotic compressive experience and I returned home to look more closely and deeply at developing my making relationship to place. The research opened me up to wider views of how an engagement with place was crucial to human existence and helped confirm that the aesthetic influences that I had inherited were fundamental, enduring and sustaining for both being and creative making. I also realised that my making influences could be seen in the wider context of place-based studies:

*"It seems a commonplace that almost everyone is born with the need for identification with his surroundings and a relationship to them – with the need to be in a recognisable place. So sense of place is not a fine art extra, it is something we cannot afford to do without."*⁸

and

*"there is no possibility of understanding human existence – and especially human thought and experience – other than through an understanding of place and locality"*⁹

I presented an exhibition titled "*A Journey in Place*" - an unexpected combination of photographs, journal poetics and woodfired pots.

My way of working has a strong but by no means exclusive emphasis on woodfiring, partly in response to the revealed potential of the materials, but also to the unique transformative power that this ancient method of firing offers. I now term this process "**fire working**" and see it as fundamentally different to the heat using approach of firing with gas or electricity. The surfaces produced by woodfiring echo the variations found in nature, with the potential to carry meaning not easily induced using other fuels. Woodfiring inevitably leads to a strong connection to place - collecting black wattle from our land on a sustainable rotation, making up glazes with seawater and packing with marram grass and shells from local beaches all contribute to that connection. Recently I have used video to present my **fire-works** practice - the digital dissemination of my story offers a great opportunity to explain and connect, at a time when I can no longer assume a literate audience for making.

What I make now, I often term **working pots**, and many of them find their place in restaurants like **Garagistes** and its offshoot the **Sidecar** bar in Hobart and a cooking school, **The Agrarian Kitchen** in the Derwent Valley, north of Hobart - and soon at

⁸ Nairn I. *The American Landscape* Random House New York 1965 p.6

⁹ Malpas J. *Place and Experience* Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1999 p.16

Loam on the Bellarine peninsular near Melbourne. A developing food culture that celebrates the slow food ideals of creative use of produce that is local and seasonal has created a far more sympathetic and creative stage for my work than the commercial white walled gallery ever could. The work for The Agrarian Kitchen is a great example of how it can work - here place, materials and creative use come together in a very special way. The glazes are made from a feldspathic sandstone from that area along with local dolerite and ochre, are used on our own clay bodies made from local wild clays, then the pots woodfired using black wattle gathered from our land. They are then enjoyed in creative use in the cooking classes.

Whether any of this terreist thinking can find a place in ceramic courses within the Art Academy is questionable. There seems to be little or no philosophical space for traditional workshop practices that link the past to the present, or for contemporary work that represents a synthesis of skills, ideas and imagination expressed through lyric functionalism. The Art Academy has been far more comfortable and much less challenged by vessels hollowed out with uselessness than ones filled with purpose. However there is a growing and articulated concern about how craft education has been derailed by Visual Art studies. Recently Les Blakebrough observed;

“ One big dilemma is that in the 21st century there seems neither the time or inclination to train in the skills needed to make handmade work. Lots of art schools have abandoned ceramic courses altogether and Australia is no exception.. the whole subject needs to be reinvented for a new outlook to surface.”¹⁰

I rarely exhibit in a gallery environment as there is little chance to present the work in context. Vitrify last year was a rare opportunity to be able to frame the viewing of my work. I created a series of **Instills** - arrangements of pots temporarily stilled, their innate potential only to be found in creative use. It was great to have that appreciated in the inaugural award. However it is in experiencing and enjoying the intimate synthesis of the working pots in the restaurants that the real contextualising of my work is done. The chefs respond to the ideas reflected here – of connection with a place and culture before the seductions of internet driven globalisation found expression in a franchised sense of placelessness.

Ben Richardson - 20th September 2012

¹⁰ The Journal of Australian Ceramics April 2012

