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### Old Fields and New Fields: Ceramics and the Expanded Field of Sculpture

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#### Repository Citation

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*Honors Papers*. 191.  
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Old Fields and New Fields:  
Ceramics and the Expanded Field of Sculpture

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Studio Art Honors Thesis  
Oberlin College  
Class of 2017

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April 24, 2017

### Part 1: **Old Fields and New Fields**

In 1979, only a few months before Rosalind Krauss published her now canonical essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” she wrote an article for *Art in America* on John Mason’s installation at the Hudson River Museum. In this article, Krauss praised Mason’s low lying four foot squares of stacked firebricks for their unsettling formal proximity to both landscape and architecture. These qualities made her discussion and analysis of the *Hudson River* series an ideal moment to preview her soon to be published postmodernist sculptural framework, the expanded field. This preview included much of the information conveyed in the later article, including the problematics of historicism for art and art history, the collapse of the monument in postmodern sculpture, and a description of what the expanded field of sculpture may look like, complete with the diagrams also published in her later essay.<sup>1</sup> However, in her discussion of Mason’s earlier works, which were almost exclusively made of fired clay, she makes a kind statement that is all too familiar for any artist who works primarily in ceramics:

the medium itself—whatever one did with it, no matter how “successful”—had craft associations. And these associations were intolerable to “sculpture.”...in the semantic associations to pottery ceramics speaks for that branch of culture which is too homey, too functional, too archaic, for the name of “sculpture” to extend to it.<sup>2</sup>

Here Krauss has stated the popular sentiment that craft-associated media are so drenched in familiar cultural associations that their presence in postmodern (and now contemporary) sculpture is too confusing to be permitted.

When first considering Krauss’ logic for excluding ceramic works from the mantle of sculpture, perhaps her reasoning makes sense. Due to the durability of fired ceramic media pottery is one of the oldest records of art and human civilization currently available. For example, the oldest ceramic fragments found to date come from a cave in the Jiangxi Province of China and date back more than 20,000 years.<sup>3</sup> Thus, with at least 20,000 years of presence in

human civilization, Krauss is perhaps correct in stating that fired clay has associations with pottery that are difficult if not impossible to avoid. However, before one can agree with this facet of her argument, one must consider the significance of medium specificity in postmodern sculpture. Only a few paragraphs after she arrives at her bias against ceramic media, Krauss addresses this point directly and makes an ostensibly contradictory statement about the “space” of postmodern sculpture with respect to ceramics:

From the structure I have laid out above, it is obvious that the logic of this space is no longer organized around the definition of a medium on the ground of material, or for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.<sup>2</sup>

The contradictory nature of the first part of this statement is immediately clear: how can an expanding definition of sculpture, one which is unbound from definitions and perceptions of media, simultaneously exclude ceramic art on precisely these grounds? Krauss’ statement becomes increasingly problematic with the sentence that follows, which claims postmodern sculpture is structured through oppositional cultural terms. Like the first part of the statement, this claim contradicts Krauss’ views on ceramic sculpture, and when you consider the work of prominent ceramic artists of the time, the contradiction only becomes clearer.

Among the artists in this category is the previously mentioned John Mason, as well as Paul Soldner, Robert Arneson, and Peter Voulkos to name a few. All four of these artists were at the center of and integral to the development of radical ceramic practice in the 1960s and 70s, which developed in response to those sentiments which held ceramics to be a second-class sculptural medium. We first consider Paul Soldner, whose most iconic work consists of raku fired geometric sculptures, constructed of wheel-thrown and slab built components. While Soldner was an accomplished potter, these works bear little affinity to functional ceramics, the only trace of which is the occasional cylindrical form hinting at the component’s wheel-thrown origin. However, more present than associations with pottery in these works are aspects of formal abstraction, experimentation in color application, and varying surface quality; clearly

Soldner, like many other ceramic artists, was heavily influenced by the abstract expressionist paintings that were at the center of the art world at the time.

Moving towards much more literal means of expression than those used by Solder, Robert Arneson is best known for his humorous yet grotesque ceramic sculpture, which often included components of self-portraiture. A work emblematic of these qualities is *Portrait of the Artist as a Clever Old Dog*, in which Arneson has rendered his head atop the body of a small dog sitting on the ground, surrounded piles of multicolored feces and a bowl of dog food. As art historian Glenn Adamson puts it, in these works Arneson shows a shameless self-awareness for his medium, and “[implies] that working with clay was a shameful act akin to playing with one’s own feces.”<sup>4</sup> In works such as these, Arneson vehemently protested the perception of ceramicists as mass producers of functional objects who lacked the sophistication or intellectual rigor to qualify as sculptors, and approached this topic in a self-aware yet self-deprecating manner.

Perhaps the best known of the three artists—and the most formally concerned with the perception of ceramics as it relates to pottery—is Peter Voulkos. Voulkos was a prolific potter with a talent for throwing cylinders of any size, which he used to construct large vessels and ceramic sculpture. His most well-known works are vessels which omit the possibility of function. He achieved this through the absence of an aperture at the top of his forms, or by using his hands, mallets, rebar, and other tools to pierce the walls of his vessels, disrupting any possibility that these objects could be successfully used as containers. Artists like Voulkos further distanced their work from that of traditional pottery through their use of color as it related to form, “form and surface are used to oppose each other rather than complement each other in their traditional harmonious relationship—with color breaking into and defining, creating, destroying from.”<sup>5</sup> Through treatment of form and surface, Voulkos’s vessels contained the contradiction between process and product, where the final forms of the vessels sought desperately to be viewed as anything but a pot.

While the work of these artists certainly is not wholly representative of the innovative ceramic art produced in the 1960s and 70s, they do shed light on the variety of approaches to conceptual ceramic practice and its reaction to the marginalization of ceramics as a medium at

the time. Soldner, Arneson, and Voulkos all created work in a language and practice which utilized, and yet, was inherently oppositional towards traditional forms of ceramic expression. Whether this opposition was achieved through formal abstraction in the work of Soldner, grotesque humor and blatant protest by Arneson, or negation of function in vessel forms by Voulkos, these artists cultivated a culture of objection towards the perception of ceramics as it related to pottery in the art world at large. This quality, of creating art with terms that exist in opposition to a cultural situation, places these artists and their work within Krauss' defined boundaries of postmodern sculpture. While Krauss certainly did not recognize this, many museums and art institutions did as these works are now found in prominent collections alongside other postmodern art throughout the country.

So why are Krauss' statements from her essay on John Mason and the expanded field, as well as the ideas expressed through the work of the above artists still felt by and relevant to contemporary ceramicists half a century later? The answer is found in the current discussion and criticism of ceramic practice as it relates to sculpture and art history. In 2014, the University of Westminster in London hosted a conference titled, *Ceramics in the Expanded Field*. Incorporating the writing and art of many of the most influential contemporary ceramic artists, art historians, and craft critics, this conference sought to address what was believed to be the broadening of dialogues within the field ceramics due to developments in experimental practice and critical theory.<sup>6</sup> As the title clearly notes, Krauss' ideas still have significant sway in the way we think about sculpture, and more specifically the way ceramicists think about clay.

Recognizing the reference to Krauss' essay, there is an implication within the title of this project which is particularly important to note. The title suggests that as of 2014, ceramics' place in the expanded field was either yet to be defined, or new developments in ceramic practice had only recently allowed for the medium to enter Krauss' expanded field. This proposed change in status suggests that those artists and academics involved in the expanded field project sought to insert ceramics within the sculptural discourse of art history. Thus, even though modern and contemporary ceramic sculpture has been accepted into museum collections over the past fifty years, the discourse on ceramics in art criticism is still focused on the medium as an "other" and exists in a space adjacent to that of sculpture.

Of the literature published through the Ceramics in the Expanded Field project, two contributions stand out as they most directly address ceramics in relation to Krauss' expanded field. In an essay titled, *Ceramics process in the museum: Revolution of recidivism?*, art historian Glen R. Brown questions whether the dialectic physical qualities of contemporary ceramic sculpture are new to the medium, or simply being rediscovered.<sup>7</sup> He begins to delve into this topic through a discussion of both Sadashi Inuzuka's work in a 1999 exhibition titled, *Cooled Matter*, and art historian Mitchell Merback's response to the work, *Cooled Matter: Ceramics in the Expanded Field*. Merback's essay marks the first attempt to apply the logic of Krauss' expanded field to ceramics, and considers the physical contradiction between liquid and solid states in Inuzuka's cracking slip sculptures as analogous to the dialectic corners of the expanded field.

Unlike Merback however, Brown holds this analogy to be unnecessarily damaging to the perception of ceramics as it invokes a primitivistic narrative. Brown warns that attempting to place ceramics within the expanded field thirty years after its conception by Krauss falsely positions developments in ceramic art behind those of sculpture, "The suggestion of a late embrace of the expanded field, with the implications that it carries of a lack of initiative within the discipline of ceramics, seems patronizing—unnecessarily primitivizing of the discipline, which is made to follow the lead of sculpture in other media."<sup>7</sup>

According to Brown, ceramics have long occupied the complex of the expanded field and opposed the permanence of the monument. The occupation of this space is achieved through ceramics proximity to landscape in its material and to architecture through function. Opposition to the permanence of the monument is realized through pottery's inevitable dispersal across space and time, and its ever-evolving relationship between use and process. Considering the long history of ceramics, in the same way Krauss claims labyrinths and mazes occupied the complex before postmodern sculpture ever did, Brown suggests ceramics operates in the same capacity, going as far as to insert 'ceramics' into Krauss' own statement:

'Which is *not* to say that [ceramics] were an early, or degenerate, or a variant form of sculpture. They were part of a universe or cultural space in which sculpture was simply another part—not somehow, as our historicist minds would

have it, the same. Their purpose and pleasure is exactly that they are opposite and different.<sup>7</sup>

In ending his essay on this note, Brown suggests that ceramics have always existed inside the expanded field, and leaves the reader to decide how that may affect ceramics' standing with respect to sculpture.

Following Brown's essay is a transcript of the keynote address that was given at the Expanded Field conference by Theaster Gates.<sup>8</sup> Different from Brown's approach of directly engaging with Krauss' essay, Gates asks us to pause and consider the nature of a field, and moreover what it may mean for a field to expand. Drawing an analogy to the generations of corn and cotton farmers in his family, Gates notes that a field is most wholly understood when those people who work it engage with all aspects of its care. As time has passed, and the number of the people working in the field has decreased, so has knowledge of how to care for the field:

[My parent's generation] had fewer kids and so they gave parts of the field away...[this] compartmentalization of the field meant that not only did we control less, but we knew less in a way. The field became a fragment of itself. What I know of caring for a field, is far less than my cousins who grew up in the South know, and far, far less than my dad, and far, far, far less than my grandfather.<sup>8</sup>

Following this analogy, Gates suggests that if the field of ceramics is expanding or has expanded, then it is towards forgotten parts of the field which are only now being rediscovered.

Having established that if the field of ceramics were to expand it would be towards previously known territory, Gates questions what it is we have lost from the compartmentalization of the field, and what, if anything, there is to gain in rediscovering the field in its entirety. In this discussion, Gates identifies two factors which significantly limit access to the field of ceramics: its middle-classness, and its orthodoxy. These two qualities are inextricably linked, and reinforce one another. The middle-classness of ceramics is due first and foremost to the high costs of maintaining and operating a ceramics studio: material costs, renting studio space, investing in equipment such as potter's wheels and kilns, and the energy



costs of firing kilns. The necessity for maintaining such a space is upheld by orthodoxy of pottery: those characteristics of craft which define well-made and sophisticated ceramic forms.

It is from these exclusionary circumstances that Gates perception on expansion is revealed. Unlike the many other artists and academics involved in the expanded field project who see ceramics to be a second-class artform, and who look to the expanded field as a path towards equality for their medium, Gates ignores this condition all together. He asserts that like contemporary practice in other media, contemporary ceramic practice has been asking questions about the nature of the material and the future directions of the medium. For Gates, this future does not include an expansion of the field of ceramics, but rather a broader understanding of where the field exists through an investigation into those fields which surround it:

There's a way in which the material has been pervasive and there have been these fields that surround the field, that preserve the field and if we stop caring about archaeology, anthropology, social science, social formation, architecture, and don't imagine those things as being directly related to our core field, then we only see parts of the field.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Gates suggests that what has been lost to the field of ceramics is the self-awareness that it exists alongside the rest of the world; much in the same way that art at large is falsely thought to be neutral and exist outside of forces such as politics or capitalism. For Gates, the future of ceramics is found in the space between this field and those adjacent to it, and that bearing light upon these spaces will reveal those qualities of ceramics we have lost sight of.

## **Part 2: The Expanded Field of Banana Peels**

When I began making art about pottery, it was from a place of frustration and resentment. There is no ceramics department at Oberlin, and outside of a private reading I did in the fall of my junior year, I perceived a lack of interest in and support of my making pottery from the art department. When I discovered there are decades worth of debate which claimed pottery and craft to be low art, I quickly made the Art vs. Craft issue the focal point of my work.

I became interested in the radical ceramic sculpture of the 1960's and 70s, with a particular affinity for the work of Peter Voulkos. In reading about his life and work, I was inspired by the story of how a once prolific potter became aware of and confronted the perception of pottery as a lesser art form. By the end of his career his vessels had been added to museum collections, and yet they were still constructed with the tools and processes used by a potter. I wanted to mirror this retaliation and contribution to the Art vs. Craft debate in my own work.

In the past year I have completed many projects which address ceramics through the lens of Art vs. Craft. I have made cup sized garbage cans, slip casted in porcelain which make the simple statement: pottery is garbage. I have made tall, functionless, perforated vessels that exemplify my skill and control over pottery's technically demanding process, while readdressing the negation of function as the formal quality which first allowed modern ceramics to enter the museum<sup>7</sup>. More recently, I have made works inspired by contemporary ceramic artists, such as Claire Twomey or Keith Harrison. The iterative process of sculpting individual banana peels and placing them on the floor mirrors Twomey's ceramic installations, such as *Trophy* or *Piece by Piece*. The fabrication of raw, slip-casted bowling pins which are ultimately shattered through their use—titled *Rerack*—reflects the provocative destruction of ceramics in Keith Harrison's gallery interventions, such as *Last Supper* or *Moon*. Most recently, I have begun to incorporate the display of found objects directly into my work. In *Chamber Pot*, I reappropriate Duchamp's *Fountain* to a discussion of domestic everyday ceramics, connecting the functional and aesthetic qualities of artisanal pottery to an art historical debate of what work can qualify as sculpture.

Most central to my thesis and representative of my perspective on contemporary ceramic art is *Banana Field*. In this work, the banana peel illustrates an analogy for pottery in museum and gallery spaces. Like pottery, the banana peel is a highly functional vessel: is there anything better suited to containing a banana than a banana peel? The banana peel is also disposable and becomes trash the moment it no longer contains a banana. This disposability is reflected in the ways pottery is unfavorably displayed in museums, where both contemporary pots and those made in ancient civilizations are exhibited in large group displays inside of vitrines. The grouping in vitrine displays limits interpretation of a pot to comparison with those

which directly surround it, decontextualizing functional and cultural influences, leaving the viewer only to consider differences in formal aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as most pottery was designed to be handled and used, vitrine displays limit the kinesthetic interpretation of work which is most fundamentally intended to interact with a body. In *Banana Field*, this cartoon ceramic symbol exists outside of a vitrine to fulfill its function as a navigational obstacle, and to loudly relay the message, “Slippery, watch out!”

This final quality of the banana peel as a cartoon symbol has become the most important aspect of the work. Most viewers are familiar with this symbol and can engage with the humor found in the absurdity of a floor covered with fragile ceramic banana peels. However, this humor additionally addresses my self-awareness for the tiredness of the Art vs. Craft debate, and the slightly dated art historical references I continue to engage with. The combined concept and humor of *Banana Field* was inspired by artists like Voukos and Arneson, and sought to pay homage to their contributions to the way I think about ceramic art. However, it achieves this with humor which is less vulgar and grotesque, and only gently prods the idea that we should still consider the problematics of art-craft relationships in the present day.

Humor additionally acts in a self-deprecating fashion, where the title of this piece points to Krauss’ influence on the way I have learned to think about sculpture. I have read Krauss’ essay in both studio and art history classes, and the idea of the expanded field has significantly influenced much of the literature I have read in my research on contemporary ceramics. While my expanding field of banana peels literally places ceramics in an expanding field of sculpture—a status I have long sought for my work—, its humor detracts from the seriousness of claiming ceramics as an “other” or oppressed medium, and raises the point, how much does this debate of Art vs. Craft truly matter?

Considering this question, I return to the displays of cups, mugs, and a bowl at my exhibition. While I sought to create an experience that would allow viewers to engage both physically and conceptually with my pottery, it was still my non-utilitarian sculptural work that most effectively conveyed the conceptual depth of my artist statement. The only pottery that carried conceptual weight was *Bowl for looking at*, and yet the symbolism suggested in this piece was overshadowed by that of *Banana Field*, *Missing*, *Chamber Pot*, and *Rerack*. The ideas

or qualities within a cup that make it a conceptually engaging form—such as the analogy of a vessel as a living body, or its identity as a revolutionary technology which allowed for transport and preservation of food and water in ancient civilization—are now so familiar that despite them being overlooked, they lack the ability to engage a modern viewer.

This is not to say that my pottery was received poorly in the exhibition, as there was an overwhelming quantity of positive responses to the display and use of pottery at the opening. Not only were visitors excited to pick and choose a cup off the shelf to be used as they explored the show, but also attendants would ask me if I was selling my pots far more often than I heard the question, “are your banana peels for sale?” This excitement to engage with functional vessels, and the repeated valuation of my pottery as something worth purchasing has begun to settle the idea for me that perhaps the “condition” of pottery is fine where it currently stands.

It is from this conclusion that I return to the previously discussed words of Theaster Gates. Perhaps pottery, and more broadly ceramics, do not need to expand their field and continue to fight for acceptance into the world of sculpture. While the echoes of the craft movement still ring in my ears as a contemporary ceramicist, my research has shown me that ceramics have successfully integrated into the museum, and that perhaps the only factor holding them back from achieving sculptural status is the opinion of the ceramic artists who continue to claim the medium as an oppressed “other.”

To borrow Gate’s language, in my work moving forward I hope to explore those fields which exist adjacent to the field of ceramics. I want to engage in questions of what it means to be an environmentally responsible ceramicist in the age of a dying planet, and how a middle-class, white, male potter can continue to enjoy making his work while consciously addressing the problematics of his identity in the forms he makes and the practice he maintains. Addressing these questions will require less of a reductionist focus on the field of ceramics, and force me to engage with bodies of knowledge outside of those disciplines I am already familiar with. It is this kind of research based practice, which allows the artist to develop a social awareness and responsibility for the arts in society, that I hope to create for myself in the medium of ceramics.

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