

NCECA
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Explorations and Navigations:

The
Resonance
of

Place

“new eyes.”

WOCEF: The Total Ceramic Experience and Model for the Future of the Ceramic Arts

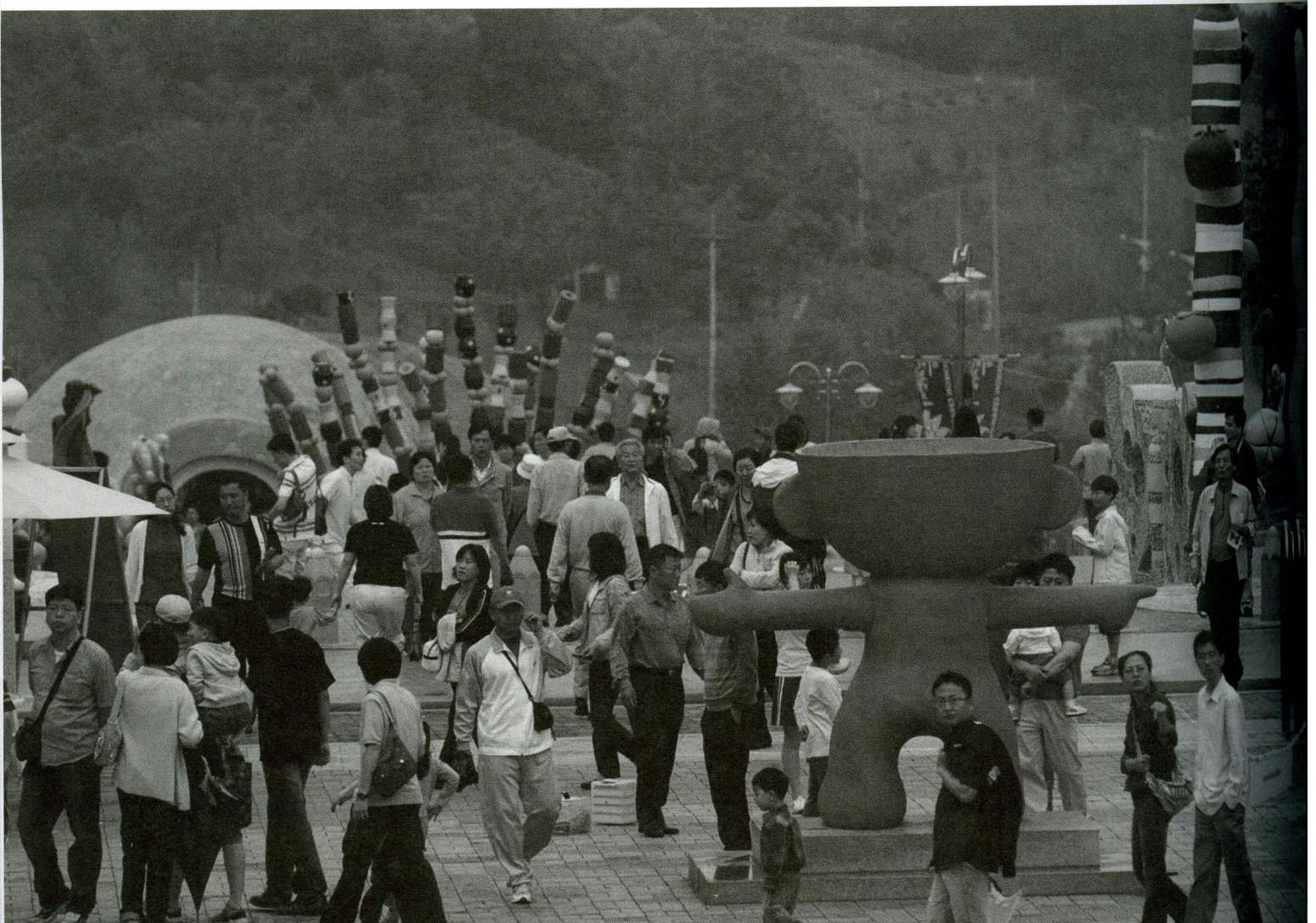
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The purpose of this paper is to discuss what is now considered a growth industry in the arts --the Biennale. Although there has been a long tradition of Biennales, today's newer ones are catering to a different audience and are far more mainstream. Just about any city that wants to increase its revenue or earn art world status seeks to sponsor a biennale - with its implied glamour, press, tourists, panache and megabucks. Biennales have become venues for money, politics and globalization and are exerting radical changes in the way we should be thinking about the future of ceramics. This paper will also consider the prospects for the long-term viability of various institutions engaged in the promotion and support of the ceramic arts - namely the gallery, museum, craft fair and the internet.

Biennales have also had a long tradition in the ceramic world. There is excitement in the anticipation of seeing something innovative, avant-garde, fresh and novel. It is a place to see and be seen. While today there are more than 20 international ceramic competitions (some dating as far back as 1932, like the Concorse in Faenza), WOCEF – The World Ceramic Exposition Foundation is a relatively new phenomena - just 6 years old. WOCEF goes far beyond merely providing a competition. It is, in fact, a world's fair for clay. WOCEF is in the business of promoting the ceramic arts as no other institution has ever attempted before. To appreciate what I am talking about I think it best to provide some background.

At New York University, in my Department of Art, we recently hired a full professor to fill a position that did not exist fifteen years ago. He is a professor of "Visual Culture". He studies the impact upon our individual and collective psyches of the mountain of visual stimuli that daily rain down

Fairground at Third Ceramic Biennial, Icheon, Korea



Opening Ceremony, Third Ceramic Biennial, Icheon, Korea

upon us from a world driven to a broadband frenzy by unfettered technology. The visual world is and will remain the dominant source of sensory input in the 21st Century and the Internet has become the global latchkey to the instantaneous and simultaneous sharing of this new reality. One of its functions is to stimulate, through the carefully contrived visual image, a “correct” emotional response. That response may be a behavioral one, like a silhouette of a dancing figure moves an individual to buy an Ipod, or an attitudinal one (a carefully positioned presidential candidate on an aircraft carrier is designed to move an unsophisticated viewer to a sense of national pride).



Corporations of the world know this well. They know that the Internet, and the shortened attention span that comes from searching the Internet, requires carefully constructed visual stimuli to first attract and then control mass behavior. As a result, students, who have grown up in the late 20th and early 21st Century, have been exposed to literally millions of flat, contrived visual images. One carefully documented result of this is that the younger generation tends to think two-dimensionally rather than three. Television, the predecessor to the internet and, indeed, the preparer of the populace for the internet, had for years created a world view which has been described, by some, as the “flattening of experience” – in other words, a generalized trend towards superficiality. Allan Bloom had noted that this view was part of the dummification of America and described it in his 1987 book: *The Closing of the American Mind*. Television images of well dressed, well-educated, middleclass individuals with all the time in the world, engaged in acts of mind-numbing buffoonery are offered to millions of viewers as reality, and are believed. The result is shock and disillusionment for those who have been lead by television to think that their mere existence automatically guaranteed them access to the largesse of the world – only to rudely discover the amount of work, frustration, and time required to achieve anything of merit.

But why discuss this? Well, it is preliminary to a discussion of the word, CRAFT and how the study, making, showing and promoting of ceramics relates to that word. The word implies work, an apprenticeship, which itself implies an arduous period of learning during which the student, through servitude, some guidance, and trial and error, eventually hopes to achieve mastery of a medium. However, as we have suggested, this process of apprenticeship is at odds with the 21st Century dream image of instant gratification provided by the corporate image-makers that shape our world-view.

So it is not surprising, for example, that the American Craft Museum, after hiring an image consultant, and conducting a national survey to assess public reaction to the word “craft”, decided to drop that term in favor of the more popular word - “design” - becoming the Museum of Arts & Design. In reality, this was not merely a name change, but a change of focus – a focus that departed from a unique vision, to one dominated by a vision of popular culture. Prior to the name change, the museum had been devoted to showing the very best in craft media. Now, with the name change, its focus has become so broad and so encompassing that it now runs the risk of focusing upon nothing by including everything. But if one thinks for a moment, the concept behind this change is the perfect summation of the 21st Century shift in thinking, where a beautifully de-

signed teapot by Michael Graves is not capable of pouring properly. Designers have assumed the role of tastemakers. They become corporate brands and craftsmanship, with its implied discipline and profound respect for function, is relegated to an earlier time. Crafts, in this way of thinking, is outmoded, much like the buggy whip was outmoded when the first Model T rolled off the assembly line.

I guess the Museum of Arts and Design thought that if an institution was to be viable in the 21st century, it had to compete with the superficial aspects of popular culture. Then and only then, if the institution was imaginative, and under the guise of entertainment, could those who ventured in be led gently to deeper considerations. I hope there will be deeper considerations. But there is the very great likelihood that instead of competing with popular culture, it will be absorbed by it.

I might point out that this trend is not unique, nor is it necessarily undesirable. Indeed, in the last decade, a whole host of museums, largely in Europe, have changed their names to include the word design. It is easy to see why. There is money to be made in the involvement with popular culture, and money is often seen as the root cause of shifts in vision. The evidence that Design is a money word abounds. For example, the London Times recently reported that a surge of interest in design, triggered in large part by television, is bringing "record financial returns for the more than 32,000 people in England who make their living through craft forms such as ceramics, textiles and furniture building."

Ultimately, the hand made object is, somehow, the authentic object. So the handmade will always be around because it is the Real thing, and when you buy it you are buying a bit of culture. It is like the difference between FAST and SLOW food. SLOW implies concern, dedication, selection, a deliberate and disciplined expenditure of time and effort. FAST implies stamping out with little attention to those subtle features that mark each effort as a unique expression. For example, when the ceramic artist, Dorothy Hafner, became the designer, Dorothy Hafner, and sold the designs for her beautifully crafted dinnerware to Rosenthal China to produce in quantity, the result looked dull, lacked texture, and had lost much of the feeling and charm of her handmade objects. The fact that her original pieces are still eagerly sought after and command high prices is testimony to the fact that people still want the real thing and will pay for it.

The stamped out cookie-cutter design, as the model for the successful corporate institution is not new. Walt Disney established it over fifty years ago when he began construction of Disneyland on July 21, 1954. And it has remained a successful model precisely because it entertains and educates and attracts a mass market. It is the archetypical theme park – understandable and enjoyable at many levels by people of all ages and from many cultures.

Seen in this light, we can now return to WOCEF – The World Ceramic Exposition Foundation. Millions of people from around the world flock to the centuries old Gyeonggi Province – already known as a historical ceramic center-about a 40 minute road trip SE of Seoul - for the 58 day period (April to June) for the Biennale to view the world of ceramics-- precisely because there is something for everyone - from the youngest child, to students, to the highest levels of scholarship - there is broad attraction. Boating, picnic areas, vendors, hiking, kiln firings, artists' demonstrations, symposia, books and catalogs are all available within an environment that is attractive and fun. In addition to the variety of first-rate exhibitions with accompanying magnificently photographed catalogs, professional symposia, master classes, workshops from wood firing to large-scale installation, performances, and festivals, they also sponsor an extraordinary competition, which attracts on a worldwide basis and constitutes one form of effective outreach program.

The Biennale is spread across three large parks totaling over 950 acres. Each park hosts an architecturally significant museum, which remains open yearlong. Each location focuses upon a different aspect of clay –contemporary, historical and commercial and within each park a variety of ceramic and cultural activities take place, from dance and music performances to local vendors selling wares, and tools, to exhibitions of large scale outdoor installations.

First there is the Icheon World Ceramic Center. This Museum features contemporary art, is home to the Competition, the various Invitational shows, and the vast collection the Foundation

**Photo Op at the Third Ceramic Biennial,
Gwangju, Korea, 2005**



Walter McConnel Demonstrating at Artist Workshop, Third Biennial, Jeju, Korea



has acquired from previous competitions. The Invitational exhibition at the last Biennale at Icheon was a show called Trans-Ceramic Art. It dealt with a variety of intellectually well thought out contemporary themes in current clay practice with thoroughly researched practitioners who exemplified the themes. The themes were: Clay and the Body, Clay in Untraditional Treatments / Installation, Clay as Irreverent Homage to the Domestic, Clay as Reinterpretation of History, Tradition, and Culture, and Clay Confronting Issues of Globalization-Society and Politics. The International range of artists represented at these shows was an eye opener even for seasoned critics, and the time, energy and expense of travel to Korea to see these shows was well worth it. It was mind boggling to even think about WOCEFS expense to mount such a monumental exhibition and this was only one of 15 going on at the same time.

I had the opportunity to represent the United States as juror for the Third Competition last year. We awarded a grand prize of fifty thousand dollars and attracted more than 2800 entries worldwide. The competition exhibition of the 190 finalists was an amazing distillation, ending with a most invigorating, original exhibition. The Competition, for those of you who might want to apply for the 2007 Biennale, is routinely divided into two sections—"Ceramics for Use" and "Ceramics for Expression" - with equal prize money awarded in each category to ensure equanimity. This year, for the first time the grand prize went to the "Ceramics For Use" category. The winners as well as visuals for all the shows can be found on the WOCEF web site www.wocef.com.

When you leave the museum in Icheon you then have the difficult decision of deciding what to do next - there are so many choices within the park complex.. You could meander over to the Korean traditional wood firing kiln, see what was going on at one of the performance stages, or you could spend time at the ceramic research center, home to a well stocked library, or use the latest computers to read and research the Korean table ware industry. You could stop in to the conference center where symposia were taking place, wander over to the Icheon City museum or, if you still had the energy, stroll along the many hiking trails or boat out on the lake.

Just ten minutes away is the Gwangju Joseon Royal Kiln Museum—another architecturally significant space that focuses on more traditional work. At the last biennale the following exhibitions were presented with beautifully illustration accompanying catalogs -- The Color and Shape of Celadon, Ceramics in Nature, two vast and impressive outdoor shows: the Landscape and Ceramics, which focused on public art showing the potential of the material for a sculpture park and Road of Ceramics - demonstrating the new potential of using ceramic shards and blocks in the creation of roadbeds.

Throughout the parks, the organizers were particularly sensitive to creating as many "Photographic Moments" as possible, actually creating "Digital Camera Zones where memories of loved ones could be forever captured against ceramic art - so the memories of the day would never be forgotten. The park surrounding Gwangju Joseon Royal Kiln Museum also has shopping pavilions where commercial and local potters set up stalls for sales—which by the way were quite brisk as locals and tourists vied for new work.

The last venue at the Biennale is the Yeosu World Ceramic Living Ware Gallery. I felt this complex to be the most innovative atmosphere and the one that probably made the most lasting impression on the viewing public. This museum placed everyday ceramic ware into natural living environments, highlighting the value and significance of ceramics, both hand made and the commercial, in every day life. There were beautiful bathroom settings of artist-made tubs and sinks, clever kitchen layouts with sensitive teapots, dishes and table settings on counters and shelves, sensuous and luxurious bedrooms featuring vases, tables and lamps, outdoor terraces of planters and urns, and splendid inventive ceramic tiled walls and screens on the passageways throughout the museum. The museum also had two immensely popular exhibitions Teapots of the World, appealing to all ages, and World Ceramic Souvenirs. - a remarkable exhibition topic with far-reaching potential.

There is one population of theme park goers that WOCEF seemed particularly devoted to cultivating, and I must say did an outstanding job satisfying - the children. In the brief time I was there I witnessed hundreds of school children arrive to be greeted by experienced docents. The kids were given time to look, see, and explore. In each of the parks, outside the museum settings,

kid were encouraged to get in the thick of it, at areas set aside for the kids to romp, stomp and plunk down in the material, experiencing it first hand. The clay activities were a great opportunity for the children to strengthen creativity, emotion and imagination while they enjoyed fun time with clay making vessels, stamping traditional patterns into wares and working on wheel throwing. Indeed seeing the kids experience the pleasure and fun of clay – slide on the longest slide in Korea, feel and touch the clay with bare feet and generally explore and expand their world thru clay was being witness to some of the best clay has to offer.

So now what does this all mean for the future of ceramics in the United States? I think WOCEF is on target with presenting a context for the appreciation and education in ceramics in a way that is engaging, exciting and current. It is an environment where the professional meets the public for an authentic experience and not thru the galleries as intermediary. Given this, I believe the 21st Century will witness the continued worldwide growth of craft fairs as a major vehicle for the marketing of ceramic art. Craft fairs constitute a form of entertainment, they are a destination, they attract ever-growing numbers of people, and though many of the attendees are there just for the entertainment, statistically, a certain percent buy and that means increased sales. And those that do not buy cannot escape becoming educated and thus have the potential of becoming future buyers.

It is all part of a growing trend toward mixing entertainment with sales. This is related to the demise of art movements and the rise of art markets. Craft fairs range from the high end – such as the SOFA shows in the United States or the new Collect show at the V and A in England - to the local craft fair where the works of local emerging craftspeople are shown. It clearly portends a growing trend away from the bricks and mortar associated with the craft store or gallery. And, as usual, it is driven entirely by economics. Noted New York Times critic Roberta Smith recently suggested in her article “Who Needs a White Cube These Days” (Jan 13, 2006) that traditional galleries are in a state of flux. She poses the question: “How can you slow, expose or disrupt the delivery mechanism- maybe even avoid it all together – to reassert art as a process and a mind-set rather than a product?”

The fourth Korean Biennale is coming in 2007 and I recommend that you try to attend and stay for at least 10 days to take in the three parks and see the surrounding area. You will need time to absorb the meaning and significance of what you are experiencing. You will need time to take in the diverse expressions of the art assembled. You will need time to take in the symposia and workshops, to mingle with the friendly Koreans, or just sit back and watch the world fall in love with clay. It is a rare experience and one that brought me back to my early years of learning about a material - with its history, content, function, beauty, and fascination on every level. I urge you to witness this wonderful phenomenon. If you are an artist, apply to the competition. If you are a teacher, go and see how children of all ages are seduced by the material, and leave time to buy great pots, leave time for Seoul ...a great city with fascinating museums and crafts of all types.

Dr. Schwartz, is a professor of sculpture in craft media at NYU's Department of Art and Art Professions. A curator, writer and juror she is currently working on a book, *Confrontational Ceramics* that highlights an international group of artists who deal with social, political, environmental, gender, and material culture issues in their work. She is also President of the board of the Museum of Ceramic Art/NY (MoCA/NY).

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