

Robert Winokur

Ceramic Art Criticism.

Re: NCECA Newsletter Summer 2008

As I read the portion of the newsletter devoted to the “emergence of ceramic criticism” I was reminded of the story about nine blind men (in this case five) who were taken out and “shown” an elephant. “Oh! It is much like a rope proclaimed one while holding the elephant’s tail. Another said, “Not so, it is much like the trunk of a tree, he said as he embraced one of the animals legs. Another, running his hands over the elephant’s side said no, no she is very much like a wall draped with leather. And so on it went, each of the nine, in turn, describing the animal. Not one right or any all wrong.

McNeil Lowery was the head of the Ford Foundation in the nineteen fifties. In response to a lot of pressure on the Ford Foundation to support the arts McNeil Lowery responded with (please excuse my paraphrases) “The marriage of art and academe is a marriage made in heaven, for only heaven could have thought up a relationship of two so dissimilar and disparate entities.” Academe is cerebral. It organizes, categorizes and reduces phenomena to formulae. It venerates, lauds and uplifts science. It aspires to cool objectivity, clinically detached. It is verbal. Art is emotional, intuitive, passionate, non-verbal and subjective. It cannot easily be reduced to a formula by a compass or sextant or any other sort of bumper jack. Art, that is good art, is not logical. “I cannot tell you the essentials of a rose, but I do know one when I see one.”

When I read a book or even ten or more books about music I find they make absolutely no sense to me what so ever... “The fourteen modes of harmonic replication and melodic structure of Mozart’s choral perambulations extend to modalities that”...and so on and so forth... But when I listen to the music...it all makes absolutely perfect sense. “Seeing” is a similar sort of experience. I cannot imagine a worse handicap to have in life than to look and not be able to see.

A picture is worth a thousand words but a thousand words does not a picture make. Art and music are not academic pursuits. Art is a visual experience. Music is an auditory experience. They each exist because words simply cannot completely or sufficiently convey what ones sight and one sense of sound can absorb.

“Art is a product of organs”, says Rudolph Arnheim in his book Art and Visual Perception. “And is probably as complex as the organism that produced it. Language is not an avenue for sensory contact with reality”.

“The realization that a whole cannot be attained by adding up isolated parts was not new to Artists but at no time could a work of art have been made or understood by a mind unable to conceive of the integrated structure of the whole.”

“ I look up and I see a chair. The process of leaping from the elements of form...line, color, texture, position, light, etc. etc. to the chair takes but a small fraction of a second.” (Alfred N. Whitehead) “It really does not take very much intelligence to go from seeing the form to the knowledge that one is in the presence of a chair. What takes a great deal of concentration and training is to not make the “jump” from what is seen to the word that abstracts/represents the object but to keep the Chair and hold to it in order to weigh and consider all its parts, to rearrange those basic elements in some way so that someone looking at the “drawing” that results there from will respond to it favorably.”

You look at a work of art and think, “ I like it or I don’t like it.” Everything that follows is a rationalization of that response and will not physically alter the work. In spit of your

grandest eloquence it will not change. What is subject to change is how you think about what you saw. If you doubt this go to a museum exhibition. Look at the work and avoid reading any of the “signage” that accompanies the installation. Then leave the show. Go have a cup of coffee or leave the building and come back after a few days. Perhaps even jot down a few notes about the show in that interim. When you return to the exhibit read the signage and see if you see the work in the same way its curator wanted you to.

As to the relation ship between art and excrement, There is so much of both being produced out there these days but I do not believe shitting is, as yet, become an accepted art form. Jansen makes no reference to it. The truth is none of us are exempt from making cookies out of doggie doo-doo. Aldus Huxley in his Brave New World published in 1936), said “ You can put horse manure in a tin, apply a pretty label to the can and people will buy it” Yes, the magic of marketing. (“The very means by which a consumer oriented capitalistic economic system keeps itself from choking on all the trash it produces” Gore Vidal). How frequently do we accept the fallacy that if a movie grosses one hundred million dollars over a weekend that it must have some redeeming quality to it? And don’t we do the same with Rothko and Van Gogh? The difference may only have to do with the way in which the feces are packaged.

This is important! Be aware and understand that the differences you perceive between Art and Ceramics are only in your head. If you acknowledge the difference then the difference will persist. “The only way not to think of a Purple Pig is to think about something else.”

And, while I’m at it, consider this:

“ I really believe in hard looking at real things...Individual pictures and sculpture.

Not just historical situations but the physical reality of objects.

I feel the theoreticians have lost some of the great joy of art, which is its sensual immediacy and complex kind of intelligence that is not literary and (not) verbal intelligence.

The notion that ultimately it is the theory which is the viable and worthy part of Art (it seems to me) is an entirely rank prejudice”

Kirk Varnedoe, Director

The Museum of Modern Art

“There was Art long before there was the manifesto” Harry Bertioiae