

CELSIUS

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Broadening Perspectives, Breaking Down Boundaries: On-line Initiatives for the Ceramic Artist.

Carole and Jordan Epp

The essence of our work in clay is the draw of the material and its endless possibilities. Our sensibility for manipulating clay through various techniques towards creative individualistic ends (however utopic that quest for individuality may be) is influenced at all stages by the historic and contemporary tools of our discipline. We crave the feel of clay between our fingers. We have a familiarity with the form and dimension of the wood or metal of a tool in our hands and the influence it has on the material's surface. We unconsciously work with each tool as though it is simply an extension of ourselves. The tool in hand is the intermediary between emotive and intellectual forces driven by the artist, derived from their history of making, their particular methodology and the traditions of making that preceded and continue to influence the artist maker today. The maker and their particular tools dance in an intimate relationship of material knowledge, process and exploration. We develop, build, hunt for, purchase and covet tools. There is an established history and often a story to accompany each particular tool, where it came from and how it changed the way we work. They are personal and define our work: its aesthetic, the physical construction process and how unique identity is interwoven into each object. As media theorist Marshall McLuhan once stated, "We shape our tools. And then our tools shape us."¹ What follows is an attempt to scratch the surface of the dialogues that are happening within our discipline regarding the use of new media as a tool, a tool which inevitably like other tools shapes us and our studio practices.

We are all witness to an evolution in the approach to studio production that sees the computer, with its multiple programs, design software, and Internet access, becoming a prominent tool. While not the tools of traditional practice or the tools that have shaped the scope of our discipline in previous centuries, they are the tools of our particular context and time. They are collaborative tools, shaped by users and evolving as quickly as the technology develops. Our generation is one of the last that will remember a time without email, YouTube, digital cameras, Photoshop, podcasting, blogs, microblogs, online shopping and personal websites. What has emerged is a shift in society wherein our interaction with new media and technology is a ubiquitous part of daily life, communication and education. An entirely new generation has emerged, described by Prensky as Digital Natives.² They have grown and created an awareness of self through technology; through viewing themselves digitally, and without conscious knowledge, are participating in a revolution in the methodology of learning. How will the next generation of ceramic practitioners seamlessly incorporate this

¹ Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964

² M. Prensky, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*. MCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October, 2001.

methodology into their practices, furthering the engagement between the craft sector and contemporary technology?

We may be makers or artists who see materiality as so intrinsic to our studio practice that we cannot contemplate and thus resist a greater interaction with the virtual world and online media, but a shift to incorporate this tool does not mean a replacement of the importance of the physical object. It's more a question of how this tool of online interaction can add to and actively shape an established practice or nurture a newly emerging one. How does it expand knowledge and available research about the ceramics arts? How does it build community, provide critique, feedback and dialogue, supply technical knowledge and links to new technology or even more simply, provide creative inspiration? A shift has occurred wherein communities are expanding beyond our close friends, neighbors, local markets, and instructors at our universities, workshops and community guilds to now include faceless bloggers, online galleries and shops, social networking sites, debate forums, downloadable homework assignments and podcast demos. How does this exponential growth shape our practice? Is our perception of our work, our role as a maker, our ability to learn altered? Has the dialogue, the theorizing and critical engagement we and others have with craft also been impacted?

The local arts community we engage with offers us a support system that helps us at different stages of our paths from emerging to professional artists. The people we connect with are our mentors, students, collaborators, galleries, and craft councils. They offer opportunities for further education, market outreach, sales and professional development. Online virtual communities, or communities of practice, exist to offer similar support structures to complement physical face-to-face communities. Through the growth of like-minded group on the Internet we dispose of geographical distance and bring knowledge sharing, education, and our support structures directly into the studio with us. These may be like-minded communities brought together through shared interests, but each individual brings their own cultural references, personal history and unique perspectives to the table. Here, in an online environment, our conversations begin to incorporate global perspectives expanding our regional outlooks; dissolving the boundaries between regional communities and their international counterparts. Most importantly, it allows the potential of a cross-disciplinary approach to research, production and collaboration, the potential to incorporate the design sector and access industry, and engagement in contemporary context, aesthetics and dialogues.

The shift towards user driven content development within the Web 2.0 context has already created waves of impact within our community. Coined by Dougherty and Cline while at the O'Reilly Media conference in 2004, Web 2.0 describes the contemporary state of the Internet as not simply an updated "version", but a shift in thinking by the Internet users as well as developers. The line between producer and consumer of online information has been blurred. Contributions and

collaborations are now being produced by all users as an attempt towards a more equitable framework. This evolution in the way we use the Internet, our online resource, has been key to the exponential growth and integration of the Internet into our daily lives as well as into our studio practice. We have, in the span of five years, moved from simply reading the Internet to creating it. This growth has also spawned the development and accessibility of the tools available to filter, share and link information, and thus establish communities. This is a societal shift, the impact of this tool influencing the infrastructure behind the scenes of all aspects of our daily lives and as such it is relevant to engage with its potential to effect and alter our approach to studio practice, professional development, education and the business side of being an artist.

Tools such as website development tools allowing the user template selection rather than requiring knowledge of html coding, have opened up the web for all artists to present their portfolios and contextually relevant artist statements to expand audiences. Simple to use and update, blog sites have taken the intimate thoughts and processes of the studio and turned them into a live sketchbook of ideas, techniques, imagery, and work in progress. And they do so through building a two way dialogue with the viewer allowing a space for feedback, critical engagement, suggestions and links. Blog sites quickly become portals of knowledge through which links to other sites build not only a community, but also a database of relevant information. Online journals provide greater opportunities for the advancement of critical writing about craft, by artists, historians and theorists alike and do so at a speed which ensures the most current and relevant information can reach the public domain with the highest level of accessibility and impact. Previously dismissed as more akin to entertainment, the credibility of online information has grown, as has the visibility of the many online resources, databases, publications and education models. Yet as a sector of contemporary culture ceramics has yet to take full advantage of these tools.

Working as an artist outside of the academic environment in the isolation of the private studio can seem to remove us from the process of growth and learning. Questions of financial survival quickly replace the quest for artistic experimentation and research. We lose our critical thought-provoking peers, the time and space for technical and conceptual research, exposure to new techniques, and lively debates on craft theory as time is increasingly taken up by the everyday of life. Yet we can adapt to a different methodology of learning and growth that better fits this new framework of production. As online technology becomes more ubiquitous we will see the expansion of more academic applications of online tools. Pedagogically, the Internet has already made us into better informal learners. We construct our own knowledge through actively seeking out the information we require, as opposed to more formal traditional learning structures. Carliner defines informal learning as, "a type of education or training program in which learners define what they want to learn and learning is considered successful when learners feel that they are able to master their

intended objectives.”³ Those objectives for an artist can be ever shifting: one day its glaze tech requirements, the next market research for online commerce, and then perhaps a theoretical inquiry in the state of contemporary figurative ceramics, or tips on how to apply for grant funding. Presented with an infinite number of pages of information, learners in an online environment filter through what they feel is relevant content to construct an acceptable understanding of the topic they are investigating. This is what we described as a constructivist methodology of learning. This online practice parallels the search for information within our physical communities, however offers a greater speed and efficiency in which to access necessary knowledge. To return to the notion of user driven content in the Web 2.0 context, we see that online environments not only foster constructivist learning methodologies, but the very nature of the tools we use online encourage the user to share found knowledge, through re-posting or links. In addition, we build upon what exists through furthering the research or discussions that are taking place with additions of users own perspectives or knowledge. We thus take on a role in the education of others through our own educational growth.

Research into online communities of practice shows that many of the vital characteristics of physical communities remain important when those relationships are transferred to the virtual world. The underlying basis for a successful community of practice is that learning is participatory and knowledge is social.⁴ Effective communities of practice, whether online or in person, engage both amateurs and professionals in dialogue. As less knowledgeable members of the community build their collective understanding they move to become active participants in dialogue and interpretation. An example of this can be as simple as beginning with commenting on other writers’ blogs, which leads to writing one’s own. The individual’s original legitimate peripheral participation grows along with their constructed and collective understanding.⁵ Known affectionately on the web as "lurkers", people often begin their participation in a social network as a wallflower; observing and ingesting knowledge, but contributing nothing. Typically lurkers turn to active participation quickly as they begin to recognise themes within the collective knowledge around them. This social knowledge building is grounded in social constructivist theory that suggests that knowledge is not only constructed, but that it is the interactions and shared experiences of our communities that make up what we know.⁶ Although formal learning institutions are moving toward an acceptance and integration of constructivist theory within their online and distance delivered courses, the constraints of institutional assessment, semesterisation, and accreditation make purely

³ Carliner ?

⁴ Bronack, S., Riedl, R., and Tashner, J., *Learning in the Zone: A social constructivist framework for distance education in a 3-dimensional virtual world*. Interactive Learning Environments, Vol. 14, No. 3, December 2006, Appalachian State University, NC, USA , 2006, pp. 219 – 232.

⁵ Wenger, E., *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press, New York, USA, 1998.

⁶ Bronack, S., Riedl, R., and Tashner, J op cit

constructivist communities of practice incompatible.⁷ However, informal and non-formal learning communities, such as those found within local craft guilds and like-minded communities, work exceptionally well within these social, flexible walls. Online virtual learning communities follow many of the same principles as these informal unofficial learning environments and build online environments that effectively engage users by allowing peripheral participation and encouraging an inbound trajectory towards the user becoming a full participant.⁸ They contribute to the learning of others while continuing to engage in reflective thinking with less experienced members of the community.⁹

Social networking sites are growing beyond their infantile associations with irrelevant procrastination to be viewed as core meeting spaces for communities. Ceramic-specific social networking sites are appearing, such as INTO Ceramics (intoceramics.ning.com) based out of South Africa; which acts to not only build community, but hosts online galleries of members, forums, message boards, videos and an edited online publication. Facebook has seen the increase of formation of ceramic-related groups sharing feedback, galleries, upcoming events and calls for submissions. Each member of these communities is equal in their role and responsibility to the continuation of both the mandate and the success of the community. Ideally these sites will grow to incorporate more applications for the artist, following the precedents set by other highly successful community-driven tools, such as Wikipedia (which is a quintessential example of an effective Web 2.0 tool, with over 19,000 pages of user contributed content, Wikipedia is one of the most successful Web 2.0 projects on the net).

Although debates continue over its reliability and lack of accountability, Wikipedia encompasses the collaborative spirit of Web 2.0. Content as created by users. Articles on any subject can be started and/or edited by anyone with Internet access. The actions of online 'trolls' (those who would do malicious harm to the content or produce intentionally false information) are policed by all contributors and users alike. If any reader discovers false information, they have the power to edit the article and correct the errors. Articles, therefore, are built on consensus as opposed to credentials. In this way, the collaborative power of Wikipedia is immense, in that a global audience of diverse readers and contributors are able to build articles from a regional perspective and construct globally acceptable information. The constructivist method of building truth and understanding is central to the Web 2.0 philosophy. Many hands make light work, and in eight years Wikipedia's contributors have produced some 12 million articles. Witnessing Wikipedia's success we can see the potential for tools such as more cohesive databases of technical ceramic information, articles on the history of ceramics, and artist databases online.

Going back to the fact that we are makers of physical objects and that the essence of an artwork can be lost in digital translation, there are more and more

⁷ Nunes, M.B., and McPherson, M. *Constructivism vs. objectivism: where is difference for designers of e-learning environments?* Dept. of Inf. Studies, Univ. of Sheffield, UK, 2003, pgs. 496-500

⁸ Wegner op cit

⁹ Bronack, S., Riedl, R., and Tashner, J op cit

tools that are working to bridge this gap in visual communication. Consider the collaborative possibilities of Skype where global studio visits are made possible by an Internet connection and a twenty dollar webcam. Colleagues are transported into your studio where they can see and discuss your latest work and research. Dialogue and interaction is both synchronous and free. Skype grants access to visual and audible information in real time, whereas emails and message boards often take weeks to correlate information back and forth; and where telephone conversations lack the visual element. In combination with additional tools or learning objects, such as Google Docs, the possibilities become even more profound. Now with the addition of a shared document application, so that collaborators can see and edit simultaneously, the Skype experience takes on another level of interaction. Similar tools are used in academic institutions in the delivery of distance learning, and the applications of this technology are also seen in on campus courses as a means of linking students and instructors outside of the classroom. Individual artists are beginning to comprehend the possibilities of online tutorials and use tools such as video and audio podcasting, through websites or YouTube channels, further developing web content and increasing accessibility by the user to visual instruction, demonstrating that which text based instruction cannot. Instant messaging tools such as Twitter can also have an effect on your collaborative learning. Although audio and video capabilities are not present, Twitter and other Instant Messaging clients offer a constant flow of information and resources. Twitter allows your community of practice to deliver relevant news about resources they've found online. As your community of Twitter friends grows the information coming in can easily keep you clicking all day on relevant topics of interest and intrigue, but it doesn't need to consume your busy studio schedule. All these tools should be just that, a tool. As each tool is integrated one tool at a time into daily life, they quickly become transparent in their nature. What may seem a disruptive technology on the surface soon becomes a ubiquitous integration into your daily activities and takes no time at all to use. In fact, tools like Twitter and RSS feeds streamline the process of Internet searching by doing much of the filtering and searching for you, delivering only relevant content.

All of these tools can shape our practice, give us greater opportunities for collaboration, can link us to communities that assist in our professional development, to clients and our audience. Most importantly through these new tools we are engaging in the progress of contemporary culture. One must keep in mind that they are simple tools. Our interactions shape them, and they in turn have an impact on our perspectives and our work. But the core of our practice will always be our interaction with the material, the physical manifestation of idea and emotion in clay. While the ceramic sector may be intrinsically linked to tradition, through material process and historical reference, we also have the ability and responsibility to be forward thinking: engaging and referencing the here and now, reflecting the climate in which we live in our work. This, in turn, will not only foster greater value associations with our art form, but will add its own visual language and poetic reference. As these tools become ubiquitous, we will

see their impact filter through us and into our work. The aesthetics of this moment in time, the dialogues of the global community, and our newly fostered interactions with other disciplines, techniques and artists will have impact on our work, make it culturally relevant and secure its place in the future dialogues of artistic practice.

Bronack, S., Riedl, R., and Tashner, J., *Learning in the Zone: A social constructivist framework for distance education in a 3-dimensional virtual world*. Interactive Learning Environments, Vol. 14, No. 3, December 2006, Appalachian State University, NC, USA , 2006, pp. 219 – 232.

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Nunes, M.B., and McPherson, M. *Constructivism vs. objectivism: where is difference for designers of e-learning environments?* Dept. of Inf. Studies, Univ. of Sheffield, UK, 2003, pgs. 496-500

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