

URC RESEARCH REPORT

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Project Title: *Clay Economies: Travels to Muddied Provinces*

1. What is(are) the research question(s)?

How a contextual survey of contemporary handmade and industrial ceramic production and consumption offers new opportunities to theorise craft practice in the expanded field of ceramics?

2. Rationale

The New Zealand craft writing tradition has historically occupied itself with judgements of quality based on material or technical considerations rather than looking at these objects from the point of view of the user. The meanings people attribute to objects necessarily derive from human transactions and motivations, in particular how those objects are used and circulated. This project takes a long view of the social life of clay commodities, affording insights into the complex but specific mechanisms that regulate taste, trade and desire. Focusing on culturally defined aspects of exchange and socially regulated processes of circulation, the publication and exhibition seek to illuminate ways in which people find value in objects and objects give value to social relations. Objects have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with. If we look, not to the objects themselves, but to what people actually do with them and what contexts they may exist within, we will gain a broader understanding of the scope and range of contemporary ceramic production.

3. Methodology

The project divides into two major components; the exhibition and the associated publication. The exhibition is scheduled for August 2008 at Objectspace and has been specifically commissioned and endorsed by the Objectspace Programme Committee to address one of the organisation's key objectives which is to promote new opportunities for critical writing in the area of craft and design (see attached letter from Objectspace Director, Philip Clarke).

The curatorial methodology associated with the exhibition is based on primary research into the expanded field of New Zealand contemporary ceramics (local industrial production, local handmade production, imported commercial production, commercial prototyping and high-tech ceramic applications). This process will entail travel to various parts of the country to conduct indepth interviews with leading figures in the New Zealand ceramic community. The selection of objects for exhibition will be determined by the outcomes of these wide ranging conversations with ceramic experts. The intention is to bring together a range of ceramic objects that have never previously been considered in relation to one another. The approach

here is unlike any previous examination of ceramic production in New Zealand as historically these types of exhibitions have confined themselves to the domain of locally produced studio ceramics (that is ceramics made by individuals working within craft traditions). The final selection for the exhibition will be peer reviewed by Philip Clarke and supported by additional research undertaken by Objectspace Programme Co-ordinator, Matt Blomley.

The intention of the publication is to substantiate the exhibition by producing a major new work of scholarship in the ceramic field. The publication will include contributions of approximately 2-2500 words from writers uniquely positioned to theorise a particular aspect of ceramic production. The publication will not be an explanation of the exhibition in the usual manner in which a 'catalogue' operates. The publication will function independently as an autonomous document. Financial support, to the extent of \$16,000, is being sought from Creative New Zealand for the costs of the publication.

Broadly stated the publication is an edited critical anthology inclusive of a number of means by which ceramic objects may be theorised:

Theorising nomenclature within a notional 'expanded' field (interrogating normative values associated with different contexts of production).

Theorising cultural production that responds to the specificity of a New Zealand political economy.

Theorising the idiosyncratic or those attributes of the handmade and motivations that are aligned with this pursuit.

Theorising industrial production in relation to the specialisation of labour and technologies.

Theorising the vernacular via the accumulations of collectors and collections.

Theorising the decorative with a view to consideration of a contemporary ornamental discourse.

Theorising historical global production and its contribution to international trade and consumption of mass production.

4. Outcomes / findings

Key outcomes are:

1. An exhibition at Objectspace, Auckland (A substantial survey of contemporary ceramic production across a broad range of contexts; local industrial production, local handmade production, imported commercial production, commercial prototyping, high-tech ceramic applications.
2. A publication (funded primarily by Creative New Zealand) involving five writers and three interview subjects in addition to the lead writer and editor. This publication intends to bring together a range of critical perspectives not normally associated with the tradition of craft writing.
3. It was anticipated that two other design school Academic staff members would contribute essays to the publication. Regrettably their contributions were not sufficient to be included within the published text. An untimely personal bereavement at the time of writing precluded one of these contributions.