

Audience question: When you conceived the wall work, did you conceive it in parts and then assemble them on the wall, or did you have a thought of how the whole thing worked together?

Woodman: When I make something like this, I [tend] to have too much organization so that when I actually put it on the wall I make the piece. I need time to take it apart and give it structure. When I look at something on the floor it seems I always need much more. But when I get it on the wall, I eliminate and remove parts of it, to see how far away from something I can go and still have the idea there. In stating it, I'm half remembering it. It isn't there [but] sort of there. I can't work in a totally abstract way, so I have to have enough reality there to see the picture or the spout.

Audience question: Can ceramic work that does not come out of the tradition of vessels be taken seriously as ceramic art?

Woodman: Certainly it fits in with the ceramic world. Clay has always been used throughout history for making images and things which are not vessels. I don't think anyone in the ceramic

world has a problem with the fact that clay is a material with which one makes sculpture. The art world has a problem with ceramic sculpture in that it's out there competing with all other sculpture.

My idea of sculpture is somewhat outdated and comes from having lived in Florence and thinking of sculpture as what happened in the Renaissance. Don't get me wrong, I like being somewhat controversial, but the vessel is someplace where I really am not competing with anything else in the art world. This is taking something that hasn't been looked at and asserting it. If you're making sculpture out of clay, you're one of many, many sculptors.

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THE THIRD CONVERSATIONAL SESSION

Mark Hewitt and Janet Mansfield, with Emily Galusha, Moderator

Hewitt: Given our location [at the NCECA conference], the adjective used best to describe the critical sensitivity toward functional pottery these days might be “woebegone.” Woebegone, however, is anyone who really thinks this; it is far from the truth. A mug, for instance, need not be mundane or ordinary; it can be eloquent, lyrical, engaging, poised, intense, complex, happy and easy, capable of engaging a person’s sensibilities over years of frequent, ordinary, actual use. Not ritualized use, nor ceremonial use, but the bleary-eyed-early-morning-automatic-reach-for-a-mug use. The type of familiar use that requires a pot to move, to be active, not passive. In that sense, I think of pots as kinetic art.

There are many ways of interpreting simple pots. The mug [in Figure 1] could be thought of

as having visual imagery concerning water and sky, but when making it I was thinking about musical rhythms and structures, a complex polyrhythmic foundation beneath a John Coltrane scream of blue.

Useful pots can be sophisticated and nuanced enough to give an emotional rush each time you go to your refrigerator, open the door, see a pitcher and pick it up. I am engaged as much in that context as when I am in a concert hall listening to a Beethoven symphony. That’s why I’m a potter. I try to make matter matter.

I also know that mattering about matter matters as much as matter matters. After all, the model I have for being a potter is Michael Cardew, with whom I apprenticed and who wrote quite brilliantly. I recognize that in contemporary society words about pots are almost more powerful than the pots themselves—not to mention their images. I don’t know how many people have Cardew or

Leach pots at home (and of those, how many actually use them), but probably

most of us have their books and refer to them frequently.

While I cling to some of the ideas and observations expressed by Cardew and Leach, a lot has altered inevitably over time. The Mingei Movement I have translated into “mingled, mangled, Mingei.” [Laughter] I’m not folk, and yet it is folk pots that I particularly enjoy. Those are the ones that inspire me more than any others, and because of the age that we live in and the multiple images that are available to us, I can mingle all these cultures and mangle them to fit my own taste.

Mansfield: Is [their appeal] because of their spontaneity, because they were made quickly, easily, skillfully, and for use? They were made without all the criticism and contemporary thinking of pots today.

Hewitt: It has much to do with the actual quality of the substance of folk pots. For instance, their color. There is a sumptuousness and lushness and complexity in the depth and substance of the color of folk pots. I have a visceral response to pots that have been made by potters who have gathered materials from their local area. The quality is different and, to my eye, better.

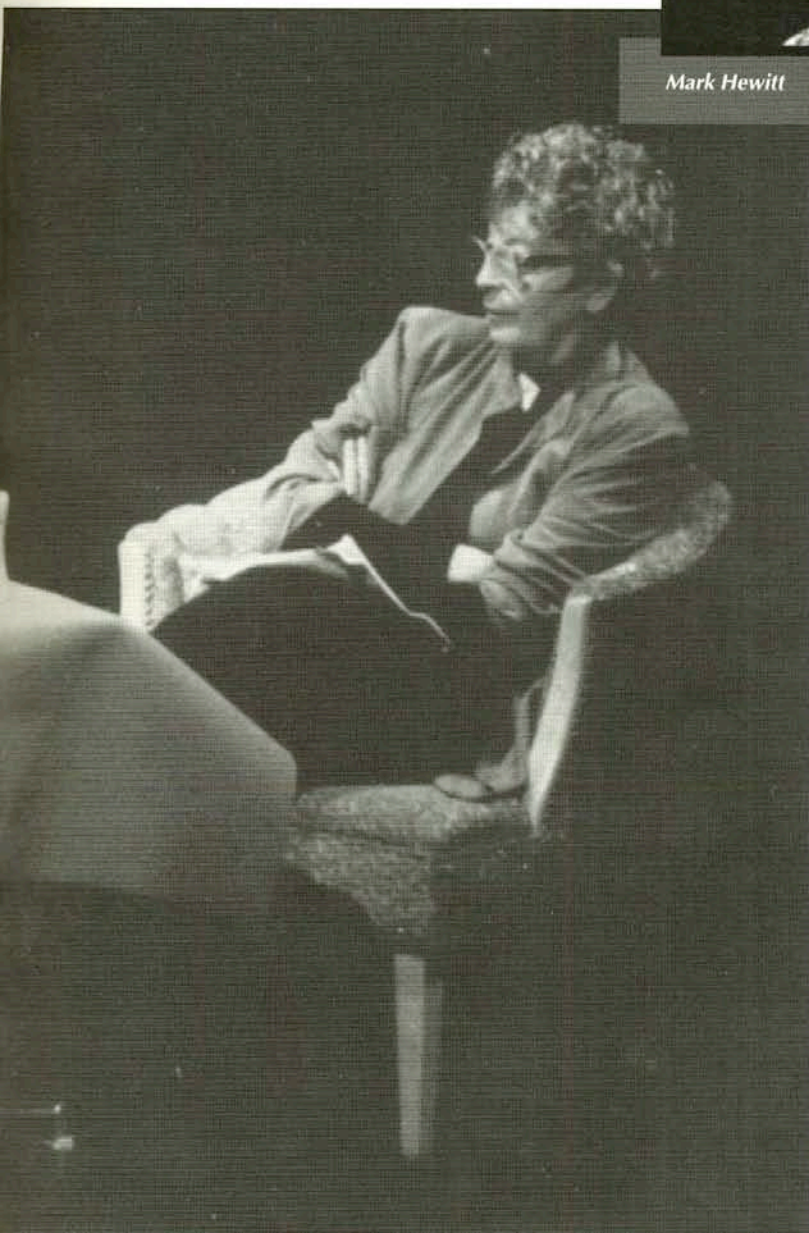
And I love the formal qualities that come out of skillful production pots for ordinary use. I value skill very highly in what I do, and make fine distinctions in the skills of folk potters. For instance, in Korean kimchi jar villages, many of the pots are boring and made under awful conditions. But there will be one or two potters who are able to make their pots shine and achieve a sort of classicism. That’s the level of skill I particularly value.

Mansfield: That’s the craft side rather than the art side. Would you make that distinction?

Hewitt: No, they are indistinguishable. A fantastically made object that is in daily use is not denied the same formal and poetic poten-



Mark Hewitt



tial of a work of art. The level of skill only increases the emotive and expressive capability of the object made.

Coming from a rebellious, anti-industrial, socialistic pottery movement, I expect pots to somehow transform the world into a better place. Mark Rothko had the same sense: he wanted people to go into a room filled with his paintings and, having sat with them, to go out enlightened. It may be messianic, but that's what I want to do. It is what I try to do. It is my intention. A high level of skill doesn't hurt the attempt.

Mansfield: Should people get pleasure from your work or should they be challenged?

Hewitt: Both. I expect people to go home with my pots and despite the fact that they are wonderful pots and that I have a "name," use the pots. I have to be cunning. I don't want to make mugs that are challenging in the sense that they can't be used (a cup and saucer made of fur, for instance). Nor do I want to make a cloyingly sweet Bambi mug that is pure saccharined pleasure. But there is room for reflective, improvisational, oblique challenges within the pleasures of using a mug.

In reference to Paul Mathieu's lecture on "Pottery and Eroticism" [during the NCECA conference], there is a difference to me between a pot that you just look at in a rather pornographic way and that you are distanced from, and pots that you touch, pick up and use, which is more like making love. Using a mug is more like a having "normal" sexual relationship with one person over the course of a lifetime. It need not be devoid of eroticism—after all, you can lick their rims and do exotic things to them. But I see use as the consummation of the relationship.

Mansfield: [Is there] any conflict between your ideology, philosophy and aesthetics as a potter and your success economically?

Hewitt: Again, it relates back to the school of potters that I come from, Cardew and Harry Davis being the classic examples. It could be argued that as soon as they achieved any success and notoriety, they couldn't deal with it (after all, they were fighting such bourgeois notions as success) and ran off to exotic places to escape.

But I am living here and now. I have to look success in the eye and not blink. I don't intend to run away. I like to be encouraged, and it's much easier than being criticized. I am able to be acknowledged. It is perfectly acceptable to be successful at making pots and not be compromised by it.

Mansfield: With your traditional background, do you feel anachronistic in this part of the 20th-century?

Hewitt: No, I don't. Despite antiquated systems for clay preparation and firing a wood kiln, my pots are products of these times. Technology isn't necessarily age-specific. It doesn't matter how or when a pot is made so much as whether it is any good.



Janet Mansfield

Mansfield: Let's look at your apprenticeship with Cardew. One of my best friends in Australia was Ivan McMeekin, one of Cardew's first apprentices. You were one of the last. McMeekin kept up a correspondence with Cardew all his life. McMeekin felt that Cardew had a set of forms based on his historical knowledge, experience and position, and that there were no better forms. This was the form of a pot; there was only one way, only one form for a cup, teapot or jar. He never altered the forms. It seems almost like brainwashing.

Hewitt: There are certainly several issues here that need to be teased out and separated. First, it is interesting to note that McMeekin's book, *Notes for Potters in Australia*, was published before Cardew's *Pioneer Pottery*. Without Harry Davis and McMeekin, I doubt Cardew would ever have written *Pioneer Pottery*. They helped each other. They may have competed with each other but they also cooperated, and good things came from their shared knowledge.

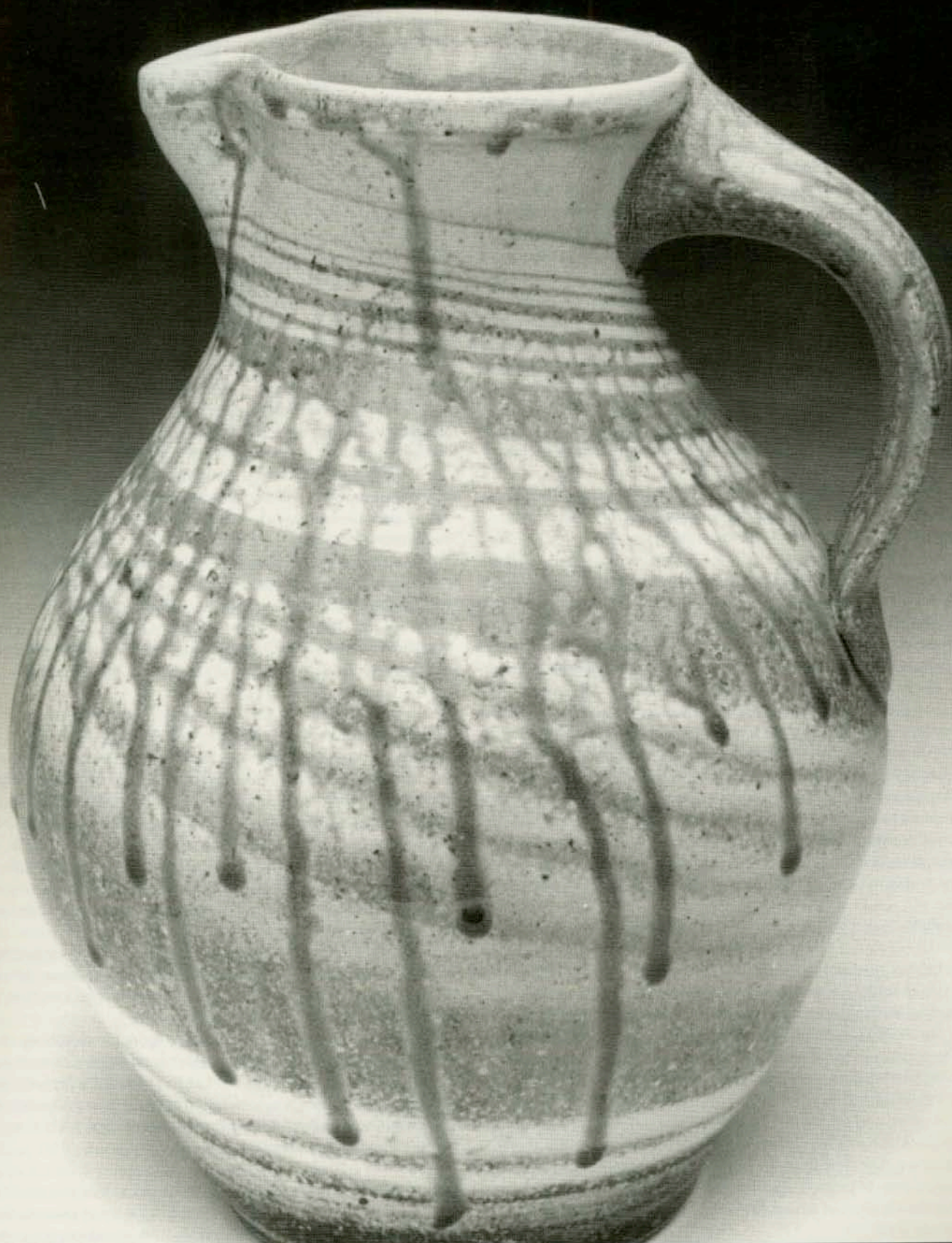
Secondly, to say it was brainwashing is a little strong. After all, who was influencing whom? It's all too easy to say, without looking at the work, that one artist "never broke away" from another, that one artist is therefore "better" than another artist. I have a little tumbler made by McMeekin a few months before he died, a simple but dark stoneware covered with a brilliant, glossy tenmoku. It has been formulated and fired so that when you ping it, it rings like Ming. Which shows a particular intelligence and understanding of materials that warms the cockles of my heart. McMeekin was an engineer with a particular material sensibility that very few people get close to. His students Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and Col Levy are continuing and expanding upon his work. The point is not to obliterate your past but to build upon it. Otherwise, you have to start at the beginning as if the past had never happened.

Thirdly, so what if Cardew and McMeekin made similar pots? Potting isn't a competition to see who can be the most original, or who has the biggest mouth. They both made pots that are deeply intelligent, separately idiosyncratic (if you take the trouble to examine them closely), expressive and useful. Surely that's enough. It's better to praise what someone does rather than chastise them for what they don't do.

The criticism implies that each artist is expected to somehow dream up a whole new meaning of life itself, and if they don't, or if they have any psychic, social or aesthetic flaw, they are thrown out onto the dungheap of worthlessness.

Mansfield: In your writings you have said "a pot is a portrait of its maker." How do you reconcile that with these thoughts?

Hewitt: Every pot is different and deserves to be paid attention to. The same applies to people. We have more in common with each other than we admit. It comes down to how we treat each other. If we start afresh each time we meet people, without the confusion of prejudice that surrounds gender, race, class, sexual orientation



Mark Hewitt: One gallon pitcher, salt glazed swirl ware, woodfired, 12"h.

and age, then we might begin to see each other more benignly. After that we might be able to look at pots without the blindness of criticism, which all too frequently becomes condemnation.

It is possible to deconstruct a simple mug into its various components in order to analyze the person who made it.

Mansfield: For example, your North Devon handle [Figure 2] is not like the ones Cardew made.

Hewitt: Exactly. There is the story of Leach taking on Cardew as an apprentice partly because Cardew knew how to pull North Devon handles. Unfortunately, it is a myth that Cardew actually knew how to do that. If you look at North Devon harvest jugs, you will notice that their handles were made by sticking a stub of clay onto the top of the neck and pulling a roundish handle from it. Cardew pulled an almost complete handle, flattish in cross-section, which he then attached halfway down the neck. They are very different. Svend Bayer worked up in North Devon at an earthenware factory, and it was through him that I learned how to pull handles. Needless to say, if you're interested in these lineages and developments, you will notice that mine are different from his. Within our small context there are, to me, fascinating differences in our perception of handles, and our attitudes toward them are a reflection of each of our histories and personalities.

Mansfield: There is a definite tradition that you are working in. Your work is similar to Svend Bayer, Robert Barron, Mark Skudlarek and Todd Piker. Can you name that style?

Hewitt: I have referred to it as Functional Minimalism. Actually, Svend fits that category best, making the same plain pots over and over. They have a purity about them, rather like Donald Judd's sculptures. My work is not the same as Svend's or Michael's. I'm going my own way. How about postmodern functional romanticism?

I always look for [idealism] in other people's work. I asked Adrian Saxe a question concerning corruption and decadence and the nature of late 20th-century American society, and whether an artist has any obligations to work or comment about it. I like to think that I am a political activist in my work and can somehow make things better. I can't shake the notion that there is something corrupt about industry. As Balzac said, "Behind every great fortune there is a crime." Even if I'm not making a huge difference to the world, at least I'm not making bombs, destroying acres of rainforest or engaging in fraudulent financial transactions on Wall Street.

Mansfield: Has it got something to do with lifestyle?

Hewitt: No, that's a bogus argument. I don't know of anyone whose life doesn't have some sort of style. Using that argument would be like suggesting that the important thing about Gandhi was not his ideas but that he didn't wear a suit. Or that Hamada made pots only so that he could live in a beautiful compound. It's putting the cart before the horse.

It's confusing to suggest that what I do, everyone else should do. Idealism and art are fragile and suffer at the hands of critics, politicians, the military industrial complex and money. But there are many progressive people who continue to try and change things, if only in small ways. That's the idealism I'm talking about—not the idealism of a megalomaniac. If you are not an idealist, what are you?

Mansfield: A cynic. Did you choose to live in North Carolina because of the ceramic tradition there?

Hewitt: Yes. I spent a winter researching clay deposits in different states. I wanted my own clays. There are substantive differences between locally available materials and commercial ones. It's easy to become addicted to the convenience of commercial materials.

Mansfield: How would you explain the difference?

Hewitt: There is an earthy, natural analogy. In old Japanese pots, for instance, the clay talks to you in a particular way. There is a tactile and visual complexity that comes from carefully considered and prepared local materials. You see it in the quality of imperial Chinese porcelains, and even in comparing contemporary industrial work to 19th-century industrial work, where the earlier pots are wonderful—a little off-white, the odd pinhole, thicker, crazed glazes.

In Adrian Saxe's book there's a reference to the quality of Sevres soft-paste porcelain that's different from the soft-paste porcelain you can buy these days—a different weight, a different feel.


Mansfield: Do you think this has to do with your Cardew apprenticeship? Whereas, if you went to an art school it would have been different, more conceptual?

Hewitt: Obviously. In his keynote address at the Kansas City NCECA, Cardew described art schools as really being art hospitals, commenting that it is sad that culture has reached the point that art has to be confined to an institution, unlike other places and times where art was a regular part of daily life. Cardew was being kind. You might think of art schools as being more like art prisons, where adolescents are incarcerated and taught things that in no way relate to normal life. The more bizarre the activity, the more likely they are to be recidivists and end up with a life sentence (or tenure).

In her book *Homo Aestheticus*, Ellen Dissanayake suggests that art is a normal human activity. In the same way that we are wise (*homo sapiens*), so, too, we are innately artistic and creative. You don't have to go to art school to be an artist.

Apprenticeships exist. I was lucky to work for somebody like Cardew, and of course I've been influenced by him. It seems normal to me. If you were a physicist in the early 20th century, got your Ph.D. in Vienna, and wanted to study further with someone in Munich, you walked there and said, "Here I am, I want you to teach me, what do I do next?"

Adrian Saxe, Audience question: I understand that you aren't presenting your work in galleries, that you sell only at your studio. I have a question about how your work is received in your culture



Emily Galusha

through the way that it is presented in context. I've been thinking about what you've done and how you've arrived there. You didn't grow up making pickle crocks in the boondocks. You've had a highly informed upbringing, and what you do is a choice and a construction. You leave in some aspects about the tradition and practice that are interesting to you, and you exclude a lot of other things. I'm thinking that you really are like a performance artist. Taken together, the assumptions you make about your work and your persona result in a performance. Even the presentation of your work is your engagement with your audience. This would be one way to provide some access to analyze your practice.

Hewitt: I like the notion that I'm a performance artist. After all, I like being on stage. It's a much more satisfying way of looking at what I do than thinking that I'm just another maker of brown pots.

But I'm not sure how accurate the label is. To be sure, my Kiln Openings are like tightly choreographed performances, and there are ritualized sequences of movements that I repeat in my workshop while making pots, and in the kiln when loading. There is a dance.

But if I think of contemporary performance artists, such as Leigh Bowery, Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey or Rachel Rosenthal, the paradigm doesn't seem to fit so well. Nor does it when I compare what potters do with what traditional performance artists do. Musicians, ballet dancers and actors engage in performances that may linger in the mind but there is no concrete three-dimensional permanence after their performances (videos and CDs, granted, go part way). But pots have a presence beyond performance. Performances tend to be grandiose and fleeting; functional pots tend to be unannounced and constant. While the constructions and persona behind a pot may be a performance, the pot isn't. The pot stands alone, engaging its audience or user in its own private performance, with an identity beyond its making and selling.

Audience question: What thought process do you have in the cycle of your work, given that the forms come from tradition?

Hewitt: Sometimes I'm not thinking at all. There isn't time. I'm successful because I'm quick, proficient and organized, and I just get on with it, just do it. For instance, I make mugs only three days a year, one day each cycle. Sometimes I'm in such a rush, I can't think much about them. I just have to make them. I lead a busy life with young children and all the nitty-gritty bureaucratic details of running a small business. I simply have a lump of clay and a mug to make. It requires me to be spontaneous. Mugs become crystallized moments of creativity. Borrowing Philip Rawson's notion, I have a memory trace of a mug in my mind and a clay memory in my fingers and hands, and that takes me from where I've been to where I'm going. I give each mug different nuances and interpretations that day. I like to treat each of the 200 mugs I make that day as an improvisation. I don't have measurer or pointer. There are an infinite number of curves between the bottom of a pot and the top of a pot — some good, some bad. Sometimes I blot it. But without technical proficiency and professionalism, I'd be doomed in this very unforgiving economy.

The best traditions are fluid; the worst implode. The Leach/Cardew traditions are flexible. Looking broadly at 20th-century western ceramics, I think that Leach, Cardew, Hamada and Yanagi correspond in importance to the early Japanese Tea

Masters like Rikyu and Enshu. We're still in the early stages of what you might call the "Food Ceremony." We don't have anything like the Tea Ceremony, but we do have debates going back and forth that are similar in some ways to the debates between Tea Masters in 15th- and 16-century Japan where one might call another's taste in clay "lukewarm," and foster a particular style over another. I like that degree of sophistication and connoisseurship.

Mansfield: Do you consider yourself a traditional potter?

Hewitt: No, I don't think I am. I don't think Leach, Cardew and Hamada were, either, although I respond to traditions in the same way they do. I think of them as sophisticated modernist artists.

I sometimes describe Cardew as being like a combination of four people. In the way he restructured folk idiom with great modern intellectual vigor, he was like Bela Bartok. In the way he went off to make his art in an exotic place, he was like Gauguin. In the way he was a craft missionary "doing good," he was like Albert Schweitzer. And in the way he used alternative technology, he was like E. F. Schumacher. Not a bad combination.

I live in North Carolina, surrounded by its tradition, and while I admire it greatly and am inspired by it, it would be foolish and deceitful for me to think of myself as a traditional potter.

Audience question: How do you feel about the non-functional vessel?

Hewitt: I have a real problem with non-functional vessels. They seem to be a metaphor for cultures that don't work. Imagine going to get into a beautiful car and trying to open the door but you can't because it's been designed only to "make a point" about openings. It may be interesting or witty for a minute, but then it seems pointless. Being purely decorative is a limited and vain function.

Jeff Shapiro, Audience question: Has there been an evolution in your thinking recently?

Hewitt: Yes. I have been thinking that what I make is "high-status functional entertainment." By entertainment I mean the engagement of the senses, a way of holding your attention. A pot engages your sensibilities in a different way from a piece of music or a sculpture. The type of engagement is specific to the medium.

I'm also reconciling myself to the fact that my work is high-status. I can't deny it (I think Davis and Cardew did). I know the sort of people that buy my work and the prices I get for it. But I am accustomed to thinking that what I do can't be elevated to be legitimate or good (the moral legacy of Leach, Cardew and Davis).

If crude, funky, wonderfully organic Japanese teabowls are revered as high-status objects, then I don't see why my mugs shouldn't be as well.

Mark Hewitt is a studio potter and lives in Pottsville, NC where he produces large planters and storage jars in a woodfiring kiln. He was born in England and apprenticed with Michael Cardew.

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