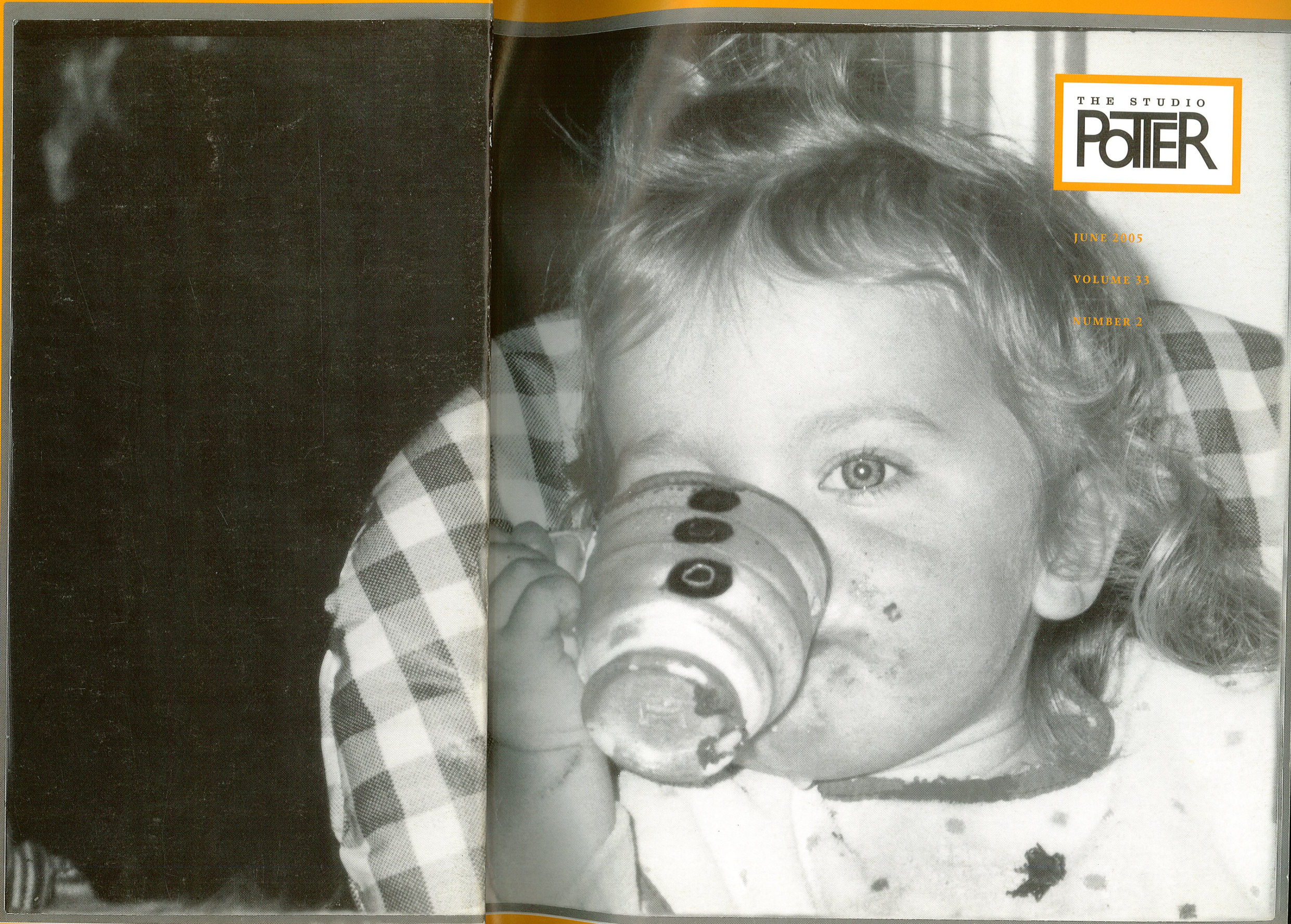


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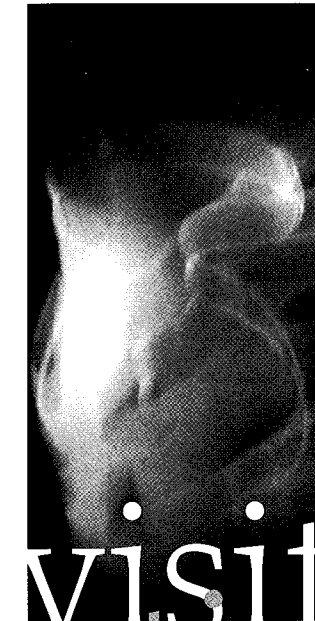
From time to time STUDIO POTTER has devoted an issue to functional ceramics (see Vol. 13 No. 2 and Vol. 18 No. 1). The last one was in 1989, and changes in the field and society since then have shifted and altered the discussion. While function once seemed like the embarrassing birthmark of modern ceramics, new thinking has examined the relationship between people and objects from fresh perspectives. Any object in human use, we now know, functions in multiple ways, including as a medium of communication between people. It seems timely to revisit what functional pots can say and why we still make them.

For modern potters, function is both a strong historical framework and a perennially open question. Society at large has not needed handmade pots to be utilitarian for over a century, yet successive waves of makers and thinkers have found new meanings in this old and, some might say, defunct activity. Function refuses to go away – or to be settled once and for all. Engaging with it touches upon our beliefs, behaviors, and dreams. It allows us to converse both with history and with the ways people now live. Whether we make everyday pots or elaborately formal ones, we are choosing (and choice is an important and significantly modern factor in this) to state that food and drink, human interaction, and domestic space are vital subjects of inquiry in art.

Missing from this issue's collection of articles are the voices of users. This speaks of the growth and progress of our field, which can now furnish many more opportunities for us to talk and argue amongst ourselves. But the enlargement of that internal conversation may mean that we are more occupied with the maker's perspective than with whether and how function matters to those on the far side of the objects. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the needs and desires of users have been an engine of ceramic change for thousands of years, and should continue to engage us.

In 1978 Michael Cardew asked, "Why make pots in the last quarter of the twentieth century?" and then went on to forge an answer out of his own passionate conviction and well-stocked mind. For modern people engaged in an anachronistic and marginalized practice, constructing a framework that holds is a necessary task – one that each new potter, encountering the disconnect between twenty-first century economic realities and time-based practices (whether raising children, producing food, or making pottery) must work out all over again. Indeed, the point may not be to seek an answer, but to be energized by the questions and to welcome the contradictions. It is a piece of ground in constant need of re-mapping, and one always worth revisiting.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Vases by Louise Rosenfield.
COVER: Maya's Mug. Photography by Louise Rosenfield.



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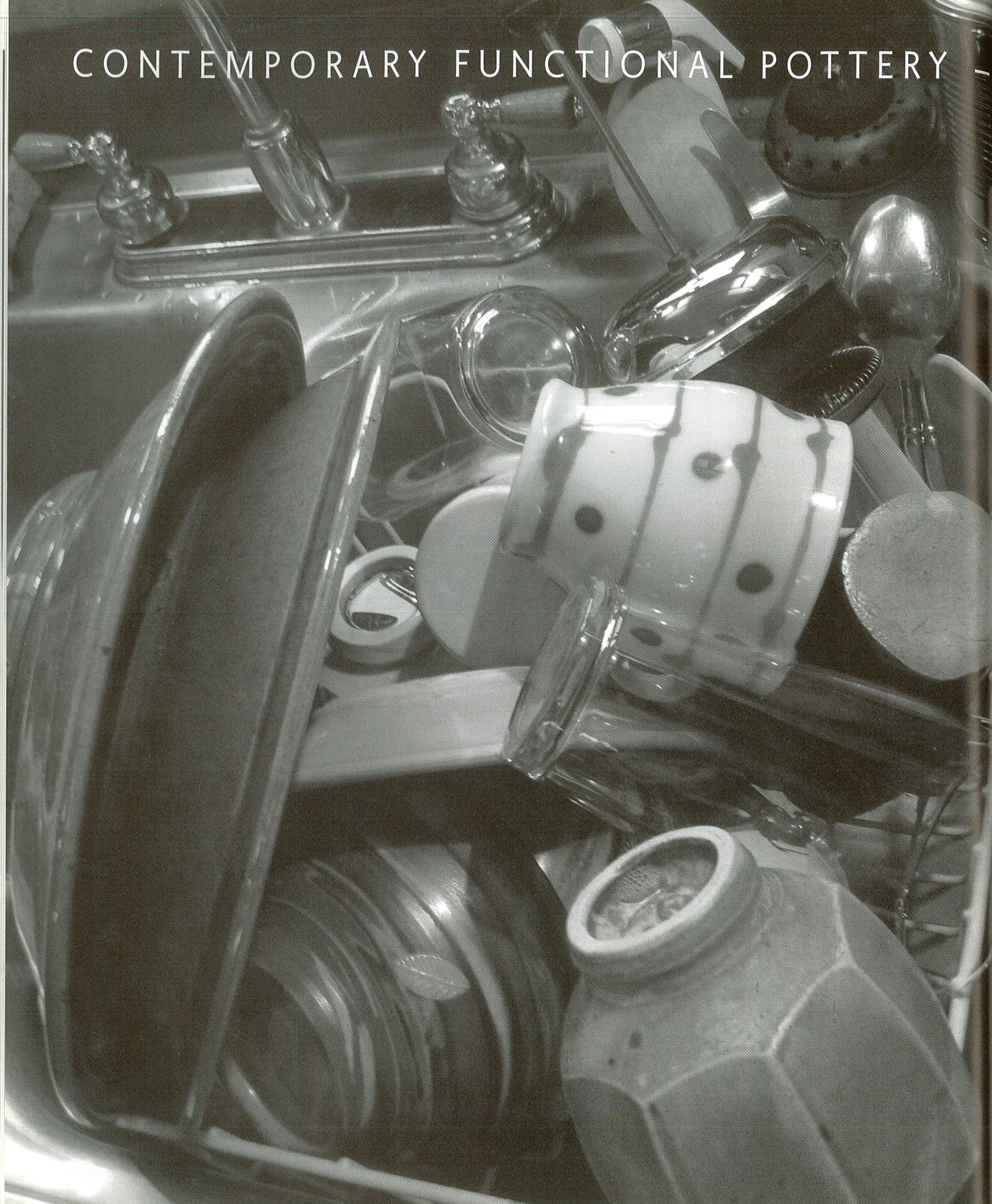
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CONTEMPORARY FUNCTIONAL POTTERY



by Linda Sikora

A SAMPLING OF VIEWS

ALONG WITH ALL VISUAL ART, CERAMICS CONTINUES TO BE EXPANDED BY NEW technologies and new forms; it embodies a diverse group of artistic practices that cross boundaries and categories both theoretical and practical. The practice of functional pottery is the focus of the following group of writings. A productive discussion of contemporary functional pottery can cut fresh paths into terrain that includes both an extended history of objects and cultures and a recent history of practices and philosophies. The journey entails complex perceptions of what is being made in the field, how “making” is being taught, the level of critical discourse, and the caliber of relative scholarly pursuits. These in turn raise queries about where the field sits in relation to other art practices and how/where functional pots exist in the broader culture.

Significant in a discussion about contemporary functional pottery is the unassuming word “contemporary.” We can agree on the standard definition of contemporary as that which is current or modern. But what qualities make something current and modern, or relevant to present culture? What are the criteria that contemporary functional pottery – made by trained studio artists working within a traditional genre – must meet in order to be contemporary? To develop a valid viewpoint, it seems important to understand the context in which the studio practice of functional pottery has matured. From there, we can begin to see how changes in the cultural or social realm have affected the field. We can also start to distinguish between what has already changed culturally, and what is still changing.¹ This examination of how change occurs over time, and what is currently undergoing change, may help us avoid presumptuous and conventional notions about the qualifier “contemporary” and its counterpoint, “historical.”

A conventional notion of “contemporary” with regards to functional pottery might claim that to be modern, pottery should exhibit one or more of the following: be made in a way that employs new technologies or new materials, be associated with industrial production, have a “modern” aesthetic, refer to or deny particular histories, be made for a contemporary “use.” A conventional notion of “historical” may reason that objects such as a 13th-century Persian bowl or an 18th-century Staffordshire cup are principally historic and primarily discussed as relevant to a past people or culture. While the above views of “contemporary” and “historical” foster a certain analytical approach, they risk neglecting less tangible, more entangled qualities. This would include, for example, qualities that cause contemporary or historical objects to be resonant and significant in their original context and to remain resonant over time

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Teapot, 2004. Porcelain with polychrome glaze. H. 5 1/2 in.

and across cultures – even though the reasons for that resonance may change. In this paradigm, the qualities that make a functional pot relevant to current culture, or “contemporary,” have less to do with definitions and distinctions of old or new and more to do with sustained significance – even as cultural contexts shift or are lost. It takes into account that looking “back in time” is not inherently passive, nor is looking “forward to the future” necessarily progressive. We have all experienced how the historical has resonance and consequence in contemporary imagination and life. This is true not only for personal/political/social events, but also for physical objects, although we may be tempted to consider objects as existing in a condition of stasis. Practices or objects described as traditional are also prone to misperception. Tradition means, in part, “long established” or “time-honored.” Tradition is also characterized by the occurrence of being “handed down.” Traditions and traditional practices exist today because they are vital and alive. Otherwise put, tradition is current. The above considerations, albeit incomplete, are important not to overlook. They expand conventional notions about what is relevant in today’s society, and add a less conservative, less hierarchical approach to understanding the contemporary, although less categorical and tidy. They complicate the linear Modernist logic through which we have been, and still are, tempted to assess progress within functional pottery and the culture as a whole.

There was a moment when Western culture had the optimism to expect that we would enter the twenty-first century overnight, with extra supplies of food and water and a backup of our electronic files. It has proven a much more enduring and demanding transition. If the “cultural plan” for contemporary artistic practice is, as Nicolas Bourriaud states, “learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution,” then functional pottery, at its most rigorously considered and practiced, is poised to contribute. The ability to navigate complex terrain through both the new and the established, to confront preconceived and conventional notions, to re-think and re-know, are essential means by which to expand and “inhabit” a future. New paths have been cut into the terrain of contemporary functional pottery. The most effective of these paths do not simply push against the boundaries of established territory. Critical paths travel into the depths and complexities where territory will not only be discovered, but also invented.

Julia Galloway, Mark Pharis, Mark Shapiro, Jane Shellenbarger, and Paul Greenhalgh in conversation with Walter Ostrom address functional pottery in the following articles. The premise for this compilation was broad: to offer a current perspective about the field and/or movement of contemporary functional pottery. Regard this as a collective, where the specific focus and substance of each piece materializes through individual approach, personal experience and conversations. This is a sampling of thought in time, salient points of view identified amid a changing cartography.

¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*. Les Presses du Reel, 2002 (English translation), p. 11.

