Dirty Tricks

The relevance of skill, expression and authenticity in contemporary clay-based art

by
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STATEMENT

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SUMMARY

Description of creative work

The creative work consists of figurative and other sculptures made in glazed ceramic and arranged in an installation with video, plinths, sand and refractory bricks. The figurative sculptures are inspired by sources such as Hindu representations of gods with multiple arms, Mesoamerican figurative ceramics, pop culture monsters and aliens, pornography, and drawn together into a personal mythology of phallic characters exhibiting an explicit, sexually charged energy. The title of this thesis Dirty Tricks hints at the complexities of this artist’s appropriation of imagery from various historical cultures, remixing sacred and sexual influences. The sculptures are rendered in a realistic way utilising detailed artisanal construction methods and decorated with drawings and coloured glazes and underglazes. The work was exhibited at the SCA Galleries from the 3rd - 6th December 2015 as an installation entitled Valley of the Dings, in reference to monumental ancient art and the current return to hand-making objects. Video was incorporated into the installation on a screen and consisted of a varied compendium of work including video performance, documentation of live performance, studio based accumulations of still images of work in progress, and movement performances digitally treated with effects and composited with other imagery.

Abstract of thesis

This thesis addresses the renewed interest by contemporary artists in clay and ceramics, situating this phenomenon in the wider trend in current art of reconsidering traditional and overlooked forms of cultural production. The author proposes that this interest in clay can be argued to be the result of a decay of confidence in progressive post-conceptual and post-minimal contemporary art, a return to traditional skill, expression and authenticity that is a critique of the pervasive relativity of the post-critical condition where nothing really critical is possible. It is proposed that this return can be read as a heritage issue, a recognition of cultural value, an attempt to retrieve traditional practices and prevent the loss of knowledge, and also as a utopian project fuelled by Studio
Pottery’s rustic dream linked to a contemporary desire for sincerity and personal expression. Nevertheless, these positions of reengagement with tradition are shown to be open to the critique that they are reactionary moves, a naïve search for certainty that can be seen as politically dubious. Within these complex conditions of ambiguity and reaction, it is argued that an attempt at reconnection to authentic practices is at least a positive, creative and affirmative alternative.

The artists discussed in relation to these questions include Urs Fischer, Daniel Dewar and Gregory Gicquel, Richard Prince, Tino Sehgal, Ugo Rondinone, Thomas Houseago, Arlene Shechet, Nicole Cherubini, Rohan Wealleans, Sterling Ruby and A. A. Bronson. The theorists referred to include Edmund de Waal, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, Georges Bataille, Glenn Adamson, Rosalind Krauss, Glenn Barkley, Hal Foster, Johanna Drucker, Marcia Tucker, Christos M. Joachimides, John Zerzan, William Morris, Victor Li, Ann Stephen and Andrew McNamara, Friedrich Nietzsche, Slavoj Zizek, Tanya Harrod, Yuko Kikuchi and Soetsu Yanagi.
INTRODUCTION

Years ago…I predicted that ceramics will be co-opted by the fine arts leaving us (the Fortress Ceramica residents) [the ceramics world] sidelined. But we are at the edge of that precipice right now. Non-ceramic artists by the score have 'discovered' the medium and many are staying, making it a permanent part of their material vocabulary.¹

My research addresses the phenomenon in contemporary art that American ceramics historian Garth Clark described in 2007 as the co-option of ceramics by the fine arts. Since 2007 the trend of non-ceramic contemporary artists taking up ceramics and clay either as a principal medium and material or as additional elements in multi-media practices has continued to accelerate. As a response to this unavoidable change, Clark believed ceramics had to shed its historical roots and accept the take-over by contemporary art as inevitable. He said,

Let us leave behind Renaissance craft guilds and rural potters of the 19th century and meet the 21st century head-on...Some doors need to close.²

Countering Clark’s advice that ceramics must jettison its past to be relevant in the present and future, my thesis identifies skill, expression and primitive authenticity as aspects of ceramics traditions that can be usefully retained and deployed not only as critical positions within contemporary art, but as positive creative influences. English artist/ceramicist Grayson Perry highlighted the appeal of ceramics to contemporary artists in 2004,

But craft is a hot word in the art world at the moment, because people are tired of conceptual art where the ideas aren’t even that good, ideas that wouldn’t stand up outside the flimsy theatre of the gallery.³

² Ibid.
Though Perry’s dismissal of conceptualism is sweeping, it has a strong element of truth in it. Because conceptual art is context and institution dependent with little independent aesthetic value, a return to material and object making is an alternative to what can be seen as issues of ambiguity and inauthenticity that have developed in post-conceptual ways of working. I will argue this current situation parallels the way American curator Marcia Tucker and others such as English curator Christos M. Joachimides articulated neo-expressionism in the early 1980s, as a critical reaction to what they saw as the failure of the idea of progress in art. Tucker said,

_Bypassing the idea of progress implies an extraordinary freedom to do and to be whatever you want. In part, this is one of the most appealing aspects of ‘bad’ painting - that the ideas of good and bad are flexible and subject to both the immediate and the larger context in which the work is seen._

Joachimides said,

_The overemphasis on the idea of autonomy in art...was bound to be self-defeating...the development of art is not characterised by linear progress. ...[neo-expressionist art] conspicuously asserts traditional values, such as individual creativity, accountability, quality, which throw light on the condition of contemporary art and, by association, on the society in which it is produced._

It is not only a matter of art, the contemporary return to clay and ceramics can be seen as part of wider movements in culture that reengage with traditional knowledge in response to failing confidence in progressive philosophies in capitalist society.

Although I employ abject and experimental strategies in the decoration of my sculptures and in my performance and installation work, the main focus of my practice during my doctoral research has been the investigation of clay’s responsivity to complex construction techniques in the building of large scale figures and other sculptures. I was initially concerned that my skilled approach was retrogressive in the context of

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contemporary practice, looking backwards to craft in Clark’s sense, because most non-ceramic artists, in contrast, use clay and ceramics to make loose, expressive, materialist, low skilled work. However, I realised my use of skill wasn’t a drawback after all, it had positive value not only as a creative method to construct imaginative sculptures, but it also had value in Perry, Tucker and Joachimides’ sense as a contrary position. My skilled work could operate as a critique of aspects of contemporary art such as institutionalised conceptualism, and also of the limits of the new materialist approach to clay that underappreciated traditional knowledge I believed was worth preserving and was relevant in contemporary art.

Based on my observations of the field I identify three creative aspects of traditional practice - skill, authenticity and expression - around which to form a critique. They are ideas that have been previously deconstructed, overlooked, or regarded as outmoded and only partially acknowledged in recent contemporary art and clay-based practices. I use the word ‘skill’ in the sense of artisanal skill, craftsmanship, the manual expertise and knowledge that can be applied to making artworks. The word ‘expression’ is used in a way related to the term expressionist art. Expressionism is an aesthetic mode that looks inward to personal subject matter often emotional, psychological or troubling, that is assumed can be externalised and represented in artworks. I intend the word ‘authenticity’ to mean realness and genuineness. For example, the term ‘primitive authenticity’ suggests that the conventional idea of the primitive as a purer state of being still has value and legitimacy despite its deconstruction within post-colonial discourse.

To formulate these issues in terms of a question, it would be, can a reengagement with traditional aspects of ceramics and art, namely skill, expression and authenticity be used to critique issues in contemporary and clay-based art and offer something new, or is this strategy a reactionary ‘return to the verities of tradition’ as American theorist Hal Foster described neo-expressionist art in the early 1980s?

In order to answer the question about the relevance of these terms in contemporary art and clay-based practices, my methodology has been to test each traditional term against

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a related and contrasting issue in contemporary art. Each contrasting pair forms the basis of a chapter. In the first chapter the contemporary practice of loose materiality is placed in contestation with traditional skilled making; in the second chapter, critique is critiqued by its antithesis expressivity; and in the last chapter post-colonial critique is challenged by bringing back the previously demoted idea of primitive authenticity. The objective of this method is to identify issues in conventional contemporary clay-based art through these contrasts and to propose alternatives. The argumentation is not completely oppositional in nature however, as complexities on both sides - arguments for the former and critiques of the arguments against them - are also developed. Conclusions are evaluative and often propose inclusive solutions. In each chapter I present the contrasting pair, construct the argumentation with analysis of concepts, histories, theorists and artists associated with each, draw conclusions and place my work in relation to the issues.

In Chapter One the conventional idea in contemporary clay-based practice that loose materiality is an easy path to a magical, innocent and pure experiential encounter with clay and reconnection to the earth is contrasted with a counter argument against the abandonment of traditional skilled practice. Other assumptions that loose materialist handling is truer to the material, and that deskilled working has automatic transgressive and conceptual credibility are challenged. I argue these assumptions are based on a limited theorising of clay and ceramics and the philosophy that underpins some of them, exemplified in the less than critical arguments of English writer and ceramicist Edmund de Waal who references French phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea of immersion of the body in the world. I contrast de Waal’s position with the argument that ceramics can have greater critical value and relevance in contemporary art based on its medium specific conventions of traditional skills and knowledge, concepts drawn from American art historian Rosalind Krauss and American craft historian Glenn Adamson. My intention is not to reject materialist ways of working, but to demonstrate that a positive re-evaluation of overlooked traditional skills and the acknowledgement of the interconnection of skill and material can contribute to a more critical position for clay-based art. This is supported by arguing that the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of materialist and medium specific positions, phenomenology and post-structuralism, are not mutually exclusive, but intricately interlinked. I contrast the clay-based work of Swiss artist Urs Fischer who rejects
technique, with the highly accomplished work, but still intensely materialist work of Algerian artist Adel Abdessemeed, the French duo Daniel Dewar and Gregory Gicquel, and American artist David Zink Yi.

Chapter Two is concerned with expressive content in art, which I define as turning inwards as an aesthetic method, away from overt cultural critique towards personal subject matter. I propose that expressive content in art can be both a critique of the failings of critique and a positive alternative to its negativity. The argument is constructed as a parallel to the classic 1980s debate between critical art and neo-expressionism. Neo-expressionism and its earlier incarnation bad painting - theorised by American curator Marcia Tucker as expressive, figurative and art historical - were held by their detractors to be reactionary art that served the repressive cultural status quo, unlike critical art that was argued to contest and deconstruct conventional culture. Neo-expression, however, because it rejected minimalist and conceptual art and embraced a return to historical models of representation was regarded by its defenders as a critique of the exhausted model of progress in modernist art and modern culture generally. I will question whether contemporary representational clay-based and clay-related art is similar, not a retrogressive move, but a contemporary critique of current post-minimal, post-conceptual, post-critical, post-studio, post-medium art (‘post-art’). I will argue that radical critical art that employed critique as a methodology in the 1980s to reveal the hidden mechanisms of culture, is now mainstream, its critical faculties and philosophical base in the constructed nature of subjectivity absorbed and neutralized by success and conformity. I argue that post-art contributes to pervasive ambiguity in culture with reference to the immaterial practice and uncertain institutional critique of contemporary English performance artist Tino Sehgal. I propose a return to universal principles of personal expression, hand-making and figuration constitutes a critique of failed critique. American critic Johanna Drucker’s idea of the affirmative potentials of complicity and creativity is referenced to contextualise my work within the field of new expressive and universalist practices by artists Ugo Rondinone and Thomas Houseago. I argue that my sculptural appropriations from history and other cultures are expressive, personally meaningful, and therefore bad clay art, ironically affirmative art.

In Chapter Three my objective is to argue in favour of affirmative values of creativity and authenticity in contemporary art, values associated with traditional ceramics
practices and primitive art. I defend authenticity, utopianism and aesthetic values as valuable cultural knowledge against the deconstruction of them within post-colonial discourse and consider their potential as a counter-critique of the limitations of post-colonialism. This argumentation rests on the chapter’s central critique of Hal Foster’s dichotomy of politicisation and aestheticisation. In his review of the 1984 exhibition *Primitivism* Foster rejected aesthetic appreciation of primitive art as assimilation to Western ideological systems and proposed a contrary politicisation of primitivism that returned as rupture to expose those mechanisms. Foster’s position is criticised as partisan, exclusionary and ultimately as exploitative as aestheticisation. Contemporary post-colonial theory, represented by Australian academics Dr Ann Stephen and Professor Andrew McNamara’s recent formulation that contemporary artists are caught in a bind of simultaneous attraction to primitivism and negative self-critique, is also questioned. I read their theory as still bound to a moral dichotomy of good and bad and counter this ambiguity with German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of repressive Christian morality and his positive alternatives of creativity and self-realisation. I revisit Japanese craft theorist Soetsu Yanagi’s Zen values of simplicity and authenticity, reconsidering them against their deconstruction within post-colonial discourse by Japanese American theorist Yuko Kikuchi. Yanagi’s ideas are then juxtaposed with the contemporary American sculptor using ceramics Nicole Cherubini, whose work exhibits ambiguous post-colonial features of critical inauthenticity. In contrast to Cherubini I discuss contemporary American artist Sterling Ruby’s search for innateness and Canadian A.A. Bronson’s embrace of the therapeutic potential of performance art as alternatives to deconstructive and post-colonial negativity and anxiety. Bronson’s affirmative orientalist, primitive appropriations and shamanistic performances provide the context for a discussion of similar appropriations and performances in my own work. Reaffirming the outcome of the second chapter, I propose that a personal, genuine and creative approach that incorporates cultural appropriations can, nevertheless, be affirmative and authentic.

The arguments I make in each chapter on the three main issues are not only to theorise aspects of the field of ceramics and clay-based practices in contemporary art, but also to position my own practice within these terms. My interest in and defence of skill has developed because I want to make large scale figurative sculptures that are complex compositions, but also strong and durable. Technical skill is necessary to realise my
sculptural ideas. I refer to Krauss and Adamson’s ideas of medium and material specificity to back up my use of skilled working as a specific condition of ceramics and a critical position contrasting with low-skilled materialist clay art, which despite its focus on materiality, tends to the post-medium condition of absorption into generic art. I contextualise my work within the field of new skilfully made figurative art. Within the technical field of ceramics, my work connects with that of artists such as Kathy Venter who uses similar building techniques. Complementing this I frame my work within the current trend in contemporary art of hand-made figurative work by artists such as Daniel Dewar and Gregory Gicquel who are an inspiration for the renewed relevance of the artist as craftsman, the nude male figure as a subject, the use of clay for making figures and the depiction of sexual content.

Figurative art leads to Marcia Tucker’s idea of bad art, expressive, personal and historicising art that is considered outdated and irrelevant. My bad desire is to develop a personal iconography of idolatry, a mythology of hand-made divinities adapted from Hindu, mesoamerican and pop iconography that exhibit sexual and spiritual qualities. Bad is not only personal, but according to Tucker’s theory, it is also political. My sculptures are provocative because they are representational art in the context of contemporary post minimalist-conceptualism and new materialism, unconventional icons in a literally iconoclastic art world attached to political and cultural abstraction. They are part self-portraits, part ideal, part warped version of historical and pop culture types. I relate to Houseago’s monsters, scrappy versions of modernist masterpieces and action heroes, and Rondinone’s figurative works that seek fundamental feelings and material expression, because these artists are interested in representing humans and their desires. Tucker’s freedom to express and Drucker’s promotion of creativity over politics provide the theoretical ground.

My bad appropriations from other cultures and historical periods, which are bad from a post-colonial point of view, are actually good because they have an authentic personal agenda, the belief in a positive and genuine creative endeavour, contrary to the moralistic negativity of critique and post-colonial theory. Looking from the position of Nietzsche or Tucker, I try to avoid good and bad altogether and draw on innate qualities that Ruby describes to see where creativity takes me in the development of my figurative sculptures. My approach connects in some ways to Arlene Shechet’s studio
process of fostering something new into existence, Urs Fischer’s fun, and A.A. Bronson’s counter culture idealism. These artists don’t work in a vacuum though, their creative methodologies are developed in relation to knowledge of the histories of conceptual and critical art which they knowingly react against or intend to expand. My work reacts against the same limitations, taking a slightly different route by reconnecting to and retrieving skilled making and the idea of authenticity from ceramics tradition, and expression from expressionist art.
1 THE MAGIC OF CLAY

I don’t play accurately - anyone can play accurately - but I play with wonderful expression.\(^7\)

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My objective in this chapter is to question some of the assumptions underlying the materialist clay-based art of contemporary artists working in loose, lumpy or low-skilled ways. Rebecca Warren (UK) (fig.3), Klara Kristalova (Czech) (fig.2), William O’Brien (USA) (fig.7), Angela Brennan (Australia) (fig.4), Jessica Jackson Hutchins (USA) (fig.1), Donna Green (Australia) (fig.10) and Emily Hunt (Australia) (fig.12), work in this way and have been influenced by artists of earlier generations such as Andrew Lord (UK) (figs.8,9), Xavier Toubes (Spain) (fig.6), Lucio Fontana (Italy) (fig.11) and Alice Mackler (USA) (fig.5). (The images above are grouped together and the captions are separated from the images to emphasise the visual similarities between the works and encourage the reader to make assessments based on looking at the visual evidence first before reading the credits.)

Generally, these non-ceramic contemporary artists seem unconcerned with the particularities of the disciplines and histories of ceramics and pottery while nevertheless being attracted to hand making objects, engaging with a sense of the materiality of clay in a loose expressive way and seeing their interest as a return to something more authentic and real in a digitalised world. However, within the vast array of possibilities offered by ceramics in all its traditions and techniques dating from pre-history to post-modernism and the present, contemporary artists tend to use clay within the limited range of materialist possibilities, often ignoring traditional skills such as refined techniques of construction, decoration and firing, finish, function, design, the vessel, ambitious scale and sculptural figuration. Generally rejecting craftsmanship, non-ceramic artists making ceramics seem to be more attracted to earthier aspects of pottery’s histories, for example working on a small scale, taking up the idea of reconnection with nature, with an aspect of pottery’s emphasis on the humility of the encounter with clay. The ceramic work of contemporary non-ceramic artists is sometimes compared to, or thought of as mimicking the rough Zen pottery of the Japanese tea tradition and to ceramics styles such as funk and abstract expressionism. In some cases it is possible non-ceramic artists are not fully aware of these connections, and their work just appropriates a look based on general ideas about earth, spontaneity, and rough, unfinished qualities.

Non-ceramic artists seem to graft this ‘natural’ approach to clay onto process-oriented and deskilled practices derived from fine art styles such as process art, conceptualism,
abjection, art brut, abstract expressionism and unmonumental sculpture. The result of these influences is that non-ceramic artists often produce loose, lumpy, expressive, materialist, small-scaled, provisional and low skilled work, and exhibit something of a ‘born again’ attitude of those who have discovered the primal and unmediated joys of working with clay. The material outcomes and objects produced often become additional elements incorporated in artists’ cross-disciplinary installation practices within the wider contemporary art context.

Are these ectoplasmic, saggy, wobbly blobs fabulous, or too easy material solutions? Despite this work having strong materialist qualities in the way the clay and glazing is handled, I think it is necessary to question it because of its unquestioned prevalence in new ceramics and clay-based art. My intention is to defend skilled making by interrogating the assumptions loose, materialist clay-based art is based on. This is necessary to demonstrate that there are ways to work other than the purely materialist, to account for my own skilled way of working and to resist the potential loss of knowledge resulting from the rejection of traditional skill. Lumpy clay art’s defining characteristic of limited technical skill and the assumptions underpinning it that low skill is transgressive, expresses clay’s natural qualities more truthfully, and that clay is a magical, innocent and primal material that is an easy path to creativity and phenomenological reconnection to earth will be questioned. I will counter the idea that decoupling materiality from the discipline of ceramics constitutes a radical break and argue the contrary that skilled making is relevant, materialist, critical and full of creative potentials. Skill exploits the innate properties of clay such as its responsivity to virtuosic handling and, as a traditional convention in ceramics that is marginalised by recent materialist clay-based art, constitutes a critical position in relation to it. My intention is to defend skilful making against the attitude that seems implicit in lumpy clay art that skill is conventional, outmoded and to be rejected.

These two contrasting approaches to clay are associated with two conceptual frameworks, lumpy deployment of clay with materiality, and skilful building with the concept of medium specificity. The theorization of ceramics and clay-based art as an experiential encounter with material will be linked to the ideas of English ceramics theorist and ceramicist Edmund de Waal. It will be argued that de Waal’s experiential interpretation of materialism’s underlying phenomenological position is simplistic and
representative of a general view by artists that clay is easy. I will argue to the contrary that de Waal’s phenomenological explanation is only partial, and more of the story - and better ceramics and clay based art - can result from a more thorough understanding of ceramics histories and conventions, particularly its specificity of skill.

De Waal’s view will be juxtaposed with Krauss’s theory of medium specificity, a more critical attitude that challenges the primacy of material encounter. I also reference Adamson’s related idea of the critical potential of inferiority in craft’s conventions, particularly skilled making, to critique low skill. I propose that skilled making is a medium specific convention of ceramics that can challenge de Waal’s under-theorized position and assert that lumpy and deskilled phenomenological clay-based art is not the only way to go with clay and ceramics.

This is not an argument for the exclusion of materiality and loose working methods from ceramics practice, but rather an argument for the interconnection between it and skilled making. It is an argument to support my own ceramics and clay work, which encompasses both approaches, each within the other. I employ a looser and more spontaneous attitude to clay and ceramic objects in my performance videos that nevertheless intends to retain critical content; and I embrace the possibilities of a slower, more considered and skilful approach in my hand built and fired ceramic objects that depends on an open-ended creativity in the processes of developing ideas and building the work.

The interconnection of materiality and medium specificity will be argued by rebutting the conventional view that their underlying philosophical positions of phenomenology, behind de Waal’s position, and Krauss’s post-structuralism, are mutually exclusive. While post-structuralism is conventionally thought of as suggesting critical distance and phenomenology immersion, they will both be shown to rely on theories of fragmentary subjectivity that interconnect experience and critique.

De Waal’s referencing of the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, materiality and the encounter with clay in 20th century ceramics can be found in his essay ‘High
Unseriousness: artists and clay’ in the catalogue\(^8\) for the exhibition *A Secret History of Clay, from Gauguin to Gormley*, held at Tate Liverpool in 2004. The essay was later reproduced in the catalogue\(^9\) of the show *The Magic of Clay* at the Danish museum Gl Holtergaard in 2011. In this essay de Waal makes much of artists’ interest in chaos, the primal material, the experience of clay, its responsiveness in the hand, a return to the elemental and to the earth in our alienated age. While this is a seductive argument, it can be asked whether this is the full story, and not just a revival of ideas from his background in English studio pottery and its particular mystique, and an overly easy way to view clay and ceramics that results in dubious claims about the magic and innocence of clay.

De Waal’s position on materiality will be followed by a description of Krauss’s concept of medium specificity as a counter position where she argues for a renewed and critical reflexivity within mediums to strengthen their own positions against what she calls the ‘aesthetic meaningfulness of the post-medium condition.’\(^10\) She believes this condition is exemplified in the blurring of disciplinary distinctions - for example within mixed-media installations - that produce an uncritical relativity in today’s art. Krauss might argue that the phenomenological position of de Waal, based in the artist’s experience of clay, is too modernist and reductive as a critical base from which to reflect on the particularities of the medium of ceramics. She might argue that concentrating simply on an immersive response to the physical properties of clay encourages a non-critical attitude in ceramics that abets relativism where artists can easily appropriate clay and ceramics within an uncritical, multidisciplinary approach.

Although Krauss rejects material as the sole constituent of medium specificity, when she focuses on mediums such as film in the work of Marcel Broodthaers, animation in William Kentridge’s and books in Ed Ruscha’s work, she retains a strong modernist interest in the materials themselves such as acetate and charcoal. Given that Krauss retains the idea of materiality in her term for the underpinnings of a given medium, ‘technical support’, and that ceramics is a discipline embedded in the theory and

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practice of materiality, this connection between material and medium points to the opportunity for a more critical conception of ceramics as a material practice than that offered by de Waal.

Adamson is discussed and his ideas shown to reference both phenomenology and critique. His suggestion that contemporary ceramics is an expression of a hedonistic moment for artists working with clay will be considered to see how it relates to his critical idea of the potential of craft’s inferior status, in particular the inferior status of the conventions of materiality and skilled making. I will argue that because skilled building exploits clay’s material properties just as much as loose, hedonistic, lumpy sculpture does, skilled ceramics can be both critical and materialist. Clay based art can fulfil the joint condition, in Adamson’s words, of ‘material specificity,’ linking Krauss’s condition of medium specificity and de Waal’s materialist immersion through the idea of material and skill as critical categories.

I discuss briefly the history of anti-skill in modernism before using the Swiss artist Urs Fischer as an example of someone working with raw clay in this way outside the discipline of ceramics. I query the contradiction in his clay work which deals with themes of temporality through the processes of drying and crumbling in clay objects, objects that are subsequently made permanent by casting in bronze.

In contrast to Fischer, and to demonstrate the relevance and currency of traditional craft in clay-based practices, I mention several artists who work with clay in skilled figurative modes, from the labour and technologically intensive, but non-clay-based processes of Charles Ray and Reza Aramesh, to the skilled clay work of the French duo Daniel Dewar and Gregory Gicquel, Adel Abdessemed and David Zink Yi. These artists provide a context for my own skilled figurative and building practice, which I briefly describe.

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1.1 Phenomenology and post-structuralism, Edmund de Waal and Rosalind Krauss

Although the basic positions of phenomenology and post-structuralism seem contradictory, the former essentialist and the latter critical, it can be shown that Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault aren’t such antitheses of each other, because both rely on the interconnected ideas of the experiencing and de-centred subject; Foucault relying heavily on the idea of an experiencing subject formed within and transgressing power relations and space, while Merleau-Ponty’s experiencing subject is not separate from the world but entwined in it. Both these positions share the idea of the subject’s deep interconnection with the world. This is common ground between materiality and medium specificity in the complex field of subjectivity where there is no absolute critical distance, and experience can be seen as critical of the wholistic subject.

An extended discussion of the interconnectedness of the philosophies of post-structuralism and phenomenology is provided in the appendix ‘Foucault, Bataille and Merleau-Ponty.’ What can be drawn from this discussion supports the contention that arguments for and against the separation of phenomenology and post-structuralism into discrete and opposed systems can go on indefinitely and they are in reality intricately interconnected. The purpose of establishing this point is to support the idea that the discussion that follows of the positions of Rosalind Krauss and her idea of medium specificity which seems so rigourously poststructural, critical and distanced and which seems to be the antithesis of the enveloping experientiality argued by Edmund de Waal, may be more closely connected than first thought, that de Waal’s idea of a purely phenomenological interpretation of clay’s appeal to artists does not take into account its critical potential, and that there are connections between Krauss and phenomenology. For example, in the appendix discussion, Mazis says, ‘whatever one wishes to designate as a discrete entity, probably is likewise an interrelation of its constituents,’ which is very similar to Krauss’s idea that the medium - and the subject - is an aggregate entity. As well, Krauss sounds a bit essentialist when she talks about ‘the bedrock of its medium,’ as if to suggest that the artists she supports in her theorization of medium specificity are still searching for some essential feature of their mediums in a
Greenbergian modernist way. Krauss acknowledges in her analysis of Sophie Calle’s *The Shadow* that the artist’s deconstructive project doesn’t occupy a purely distanced objective point of view on her themes, but is entwined and embedded in the world, the work revealing the complex interconnection and ambiguity of the constitution of the subject in relation to the world.

### 1.2 Edmund de Waal and the magic of clay

In ‘High Unseriousness: artists and clay’ Edmund de Waal writes about the use of clay as a medium by artists throughout the 20th century, describing this history as an overlooked but integral part of the history of modernism. De Waal theorizes this history in phenomenological terms, as an encounter between the materiality of clay and artists’ bodily and sensory connection with the material and world. He uses words such as immediacy, spontaneity, transformation, metamorphosis and ‘experience of the essential’ to describe this encounter, saying,

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\text{This is clay as a challenge. In the small figure from Field [by Antony Gormley] or in a clay wall [by Isamu Noguchi, John Mason or Andy Goldsworthy] we can see the movement of the human body and how it has affected the clay body. This is an immersive movement, a loss of self in materiality described powerfully by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty: ‘Every perception is a communion and a coition of our body with things’. This coition of the body is one of the secret stories of the century of artists working with clay: it reveals what can be described as a phenomenological approach to clay.}^{13}
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De Waal constructs 20th century artists’ interest in clay and ceramics as a return to materiality and the experiential possibilities of clay:

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\text{For some artists using clay has been the recuperation of unmediated materiality: they had a powerful sense of clay as earth, as being the great formless primal matter that allowed them a kind of expression they could}
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not approach through other materials. Indeed, the image of ‘a returning to earth’ carries with it the apprehension, the almost visceral feeling of having been separated, alienated or disconnected from the earth. Clay allowed for a return to self, a return to the body, a return to the earth. Kazuo Shiraga (1924-2008) of the [Japanese] Gutai group showed this in 1955 in his performance “Wrestling in the Mud”, writhing around in clay until he was so exhausted that the earth had won.14

De Waal’s argument is that the return to clay as phenomenological materiality was a radical move by artists who risked working in a second class medium to access these new kinds of aesthetic experience offered by immersion in the materiality of clay.

Besides Merleau-Ponty, de Waal also uses Freud’s idea of the primitive as an antidote to civilization’s discontent to back-up his repositioning of clay. De Waal uses Merleau-Ponty and Freud to update the ideas and ideal ethos of the return to the basic materials, processes and reconnection to earth that characterised 20th century craft movements such as studio pottery in the West and Mingei and Sodeisha in Japan. De Waal updates these ideas for a fine art audience today familiar with post-modern and contemporary theory by replacing the language of pottery with more current terms. For example, the traditional craftsman at one with his material now becomes a theory about the body and the world, an exploration of the interconnection of experience and materiality. The characteristic of effacement in clay performance art, such as Jim Melchert (.112), where artists literally immerse themselves in clay, dunking their heads in buckets of clay slip, or by putting the bucket over their heads, effacing their faces, selves and subjectivities, is a good example of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘communion and a coition of our bodies with things.’ This updates the Mingei and studio pottery ideal of non-self or absence of ego when throwing a pot on the wheel, an ideal developed by the theorist of Mingei, Soetsu Yanagi, and his collaborator English potter and founder of studio pottery, Bernard Leach. (Their theories are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 in relation to the ideas of authenticity and primitivism.)

14 Ibid., p52.
De Waal’s phenomenological theorization of clay as a return to authenticity and renewal could be read as a critical repositioning of formerly outmoded ideas, as a return to save valuable and threatened former ways of making, experiencing and living in the world as an antidote to alienating contemporary life. However, it could be seen as the retrospective construction of a myth about naivety to serve a purpose in the present. For example, in the late 1940s Pablo Picasso turned to working with vernacular forms made at the Madoura pottery in southern France, decorating objects made by skilled craftsmen, but he could hardly be considered naïve, so was he contributing to a myth of authenticity surrounding that tradition to help sell his work or was he helping to save the tradition from disappearing? Is his theory a reactionary and romantic fantasy with clay positioned as natural and new again that serves a market driven strategy, or does it propose a critically motivated return to basics that indicts alienating contemporary post-industrial culture?

My argument is that de Waal’s materiality is very appealing and attractive in the argument that clay is magical, vital and innocent and facilitates immersion, effacement and return to earth. I will argue, however, it is easy to criticise this attitude as naïve or exploitative of naivety. For the materialist phenomenological approach to contribute to a successful reappraisal of the value of ceramics and pottery traditions, I argue it needs to have greater critical value and not depend on the idea of naïve clay.

The flawed claim of the materialist approach depends on the exaggerated and prevalent assumption that clay can effortlessly (on one’s own part) reconnect one with truth and the earth through child-like play (read, low or no skill). For example, it is explicit in the title of the exhibition *The Magic of Clay* held at the Danish Holtegaard Museum in 2011 that included artists Grayson Perry, Ai Weiwei, Jonathan Meese, Clare Twomey, Peter Cushway and others, and to which de Waal contributed his earlier essay ‘High Unseriousness: artists and clay.’ In his foreword to the catalogue (fig.15) Holtegaard Director Mad Damsbo says, ‘We all know the magical fascination of a lump of wet clay,’ and, ‘essentially, clay is for playing with.’ Similarly, in 2013 Tate Britain curator Bice Curiger discussed in terms of magic Urs Fischer’s giant clay installation

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15 Ibid., 10.
16 Ibid., 11.
YES! at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art’s Geffen Contemporary, an installation made up of innumerable sculptures modelled with the help of 1500 volunteers using 300 tons of clay (figs.19,21). She said,

*the whole thing *[is] hugely cheering and exerts a magical, even hypnotic attraction…one gains a quite physical idea of a joyful experience…of earth-bound sensual making…And the longing to overcome alienation and connect with the surge of life.*

Magic is also assumed to be an inherent quality of clay by Australian painter Ben Quilty who, in an interview published in the *Australian Journal of Ceramics* about his 2013 foray into porcelain (fig.16), enthused about ‘the magic of actually using your hands to create an object, that immediacy and physicality, leaving your fingerprints!’ and said ‘clay is a fundamental medium for an artist…although I’ve never actually fired anything.’ Quilty can’t be unknowing, so he must be consciously dealing in a cliché about magic. He is an unrepentant ceramics tourist boasting about child-like discoveries that are not likely to impress the professional ceramics readership of the *Australian Journal of Ceramics.*

The naïve assumption - whether intended or not on the part of established art world figures – that magic is an embedded property of clay seems to be confirmed by the popularity of the idea with community organisations and children’s education (figs.13,14). A quick online search will show the widespread use, and over-use of this idea.

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The link between childhood and clay in contemporary art has also been made in a clichéd way by contemporary art by commentator Lily Wei (or perhaps by editors) in her online article ‘Claytime! Ceramics finds its place in the art-world mainstream.’

Wei provides a useful overview of the phenomenon, mentioning artists and issues and discussing numerous exhibitions of ceramics in New York during 2013, including shows of major figures in 20th century ceramics such as Robert Arneson, Ken Price, Lucio Fontana, Viola Frey and Beatrice Wood, work in ceramics by major artists who occasionally made ceramics such as Rosemary Trockel and Jeff Koons, as well as the new wave of ceramics artists like Arlene Shechet and Nicole Cherubini. Her central idea centres on the pun of child’s play and return to primal matter and implicitly, to shit.

Clay is a common material with an ancient history. Populist as well as elitist, its inclusive nature might be one reason for its current appeal. It has

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infinite versatility, from the purely formal to the functional. It is sensuous and malleable, a substance every child has played with, and it is responsive to the primal instinct to make things by hand. Clay allows the artist to create form in spontaneous and direct ways that other mediums do not.\textsuperscript{21}

The currency of magic in contemporary art and the problem of its cliched use as a rationale for art is addressed by the forthcoming \textit{2016 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Magic Object}. The Art Gallery of South Australia’s website makes the point that magic is not only about enchantment but must also involve a critique,

\textit{‘Magic Object’ offers a space where free associations and insights are made possible by artists and audiences, where artists’ interests in the sacred, the talismanic, in cultural rituals and material riddles can be indulged, and artists can work their magic to enchant the viewer. This enchantment however, is not without caution – the Wunderkammer offers itself up as tool with which to not only view the world but to critique it.}\textsuperscript{22}

The critique offered on the website promotional blurb is self-reflexive, perhaps a warning of the potential dark side of magic, and suggesting that a more developed attitude to the idea of magic has emerged among artists and institutions recently.

\textit{Much of the work presented in ‘Magic Object’ looks like one thing but is really another, possessing a materiality akin to trickery or magic. This tendency seen in contemporary painting, photography, sculpture, moving image and object based installation, rebounds to the Baroque love of paradoxes, the taste for the bizarre and the duplicitous.}\textsuperscript{23}

Another concept associated with childhood, innocence, also comes up in writing about ceramics. Perhaps it is in reaction to the over-sophistication of art now and the over-designed, over-skilled, porcelain perfect whiteness of institutional ceramics since the 1990s, for example, Kirsten Coelho’s work (fig.17). English craft historian Tanya Harrod discusses the work of Norwegian ceramics artist Jens Erland, who has

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
juxtaposed industrial porcelain waste with ‘innocent and nonchalant’\textsuperscript{24} ancient Korean Joseon pottery in his installation work. Harrod suggests that Erland’s focus on the ‘natural’\textsuperscript{25} products of machines - natural presumably because the machine doesn’t think, it just does – reveals how interested artists are in ‘an investigation of ideas about unmediated innocence and spontaneity.’\textsuperscript{26}

Artists may aspire to innocence, but is it possible or is it just another sophisticated posture? Australian curator Glenn Barkley thinks it is possible. He discusses Australian artist Angela Brennan (fig.4) in his 2014 article ‘So Hot Right Now? Contemporary Ceramics and Contemporary Art’\textsuperscript{27} saying her ceramics, ‘possess an innocence that can come only from fresh eyes and the discovery of a new material.’\textsuperscript{28} Maybe this isn’t innocence at all, but freshness due to novelty, like beginner’s luck that will fade as the novelty of a new medium fades. Even if it is genuine, it is hard to imagine that a feeling like innocence is sustainable as a serious practice over time unless one is uniquely gifted, or burdened, in a child-like way. What about everyone else in Barkley’s formulation, all the potters and ceramics artists who aren’t fresh to the material, can their work never be innocent? Is he saying Brennan’s is the innocence of freshness, but other kinds exist? Or perhaps his formulation reveals that artists newly engaging with ceramics now are not interested in sustainability.

The attractions of amateurism and innocence is notable in the philosophy of Troytown Art Pottery in London, an alternative, community-scaled project that aims to operate outside the ceramics academy. In its manifesto artist Aaron Angell writes about rejecting studio pottery traditions, in particular the vessel form, saying ‘TTAP resists the influence of the vessel form on ceramics by prohibiting the production of functional or quasi-functional wares within the pottery.’\textsuperscript{29} Instead he wants to reconnect to sculptural moments in ceramics history and ‘delineate ceramics as an accessible means of sculptural production.’\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{25} Ibid.
\bibitem{26} Ibid.
\bibitem{27} Ibid.
\bibitem{28} Ibid.
\bibitem{29} Ibid.
\bibitem{30} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
It seems that high skill is rejected as part of this, as undemocratic and excluding maybe. His work consists of small scaled, intriguing sculptural scenarios, roughly built, with a strong abject feel of decay, collapse and natural regenerative forms which exploit the material’s ‘natural’ tendency to sag and behave ‘organically’ (fig.18). Angell set up TTAP to address a shortage of accessible facilities for ceramics, and I admire his pro-active approach to creating opportunities, nevertheless he makes assumptions that deskilled working, basic amateur skill levels, and the fast and loose manipulation of clay necessarily equal a more authentic way of working. Angell legislates against the vessel form, and the skills, histories and traditions behind it to take a political stand against institutional ceramics. But, however interesting his work and determined his innocence and well-intentioned revolutionary amateurism are, they risk losing things of value such as, for example, knowledge about how to make a large scale ceramic sculpture, a pot that can stand up and hold water, or even to fire a work beyond basic methods.

1.3 The deskillced present

Art as a notion designating a form of specific experience has only existed in the West since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Fine arts were the progeny of the so-called liberal arts. The latter were distinguished from the mechanical arts because they were the pastime of free men, men of leisure whose quality was meant to deter them from seeking too much perfection in material performances that an artisan or a slave could accomplish.31

Low skilled working is currently the favoured method amongst contemporary artists using clay and ceramics. Low skill as a strategy can be traced to the origins of modernism. Modernism is the revolt of the elite against its own values and anti-skill could be regarded as one of its key characteristics, simultaneously aristocratic and revolutionary, above trying too hard and also critical of repressive, bourgeois propriety. Anti-skill has pervaded modernism as a form of transgression since impressionism was criticised as unfinished work and challenged the technical perfection of academic art. This tradition can be traced through post-impressionism, fauvism, expressionism, dada, art brut, funk, pop, conceptual art, process art, neo-expressionism, abject art, and the provisional nature of unmonumental sculpture to today’s lumpy clay-based art that Adamson sees as hedonistic and a reaction to the overbearing industrial finish of Japanese artist Haruki Murakami, American artist Jeff Koons and English artist Anish Kapoor. When the character Algernon in English playwright Oscar Wilde’s play The Importance of Being Earnest observes in defence of his bad piano playing, that ‘I don’t play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression,’32 he encapsulates the hierarchical attitude of modern and contemporary art, the relegation of craft to low status and the defence of the badly made lumpy contemporary object. Although Wilde intended to satirise Algernon’s attitude as a lazy and misinformed reading of the creative freedoms envisaged by the Aesthetic Movement (and possibly a dig at his rival the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne), accuracy and perfect construction

have come down to us as fit only for the artisan and assistant because art is above such mundane technicalities.

Conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s was particularly critical of the art object and its status as a commodity and it rejected skill as a bourgeois practice. However, the situation is more messy and ambiguous now. Whereas the deskilled, then, was proof of resistance and revolutionary credentials, now it proliferates in contemporary art and has considerable commercial appeal. This ought to compromise the original purpose of deskilling which was to critique the commercial object. However, because conceptualism is now standard and an expected element in all contemporary art and does not cut like it used to, the two formerly oppositional positions of deskilled and commercial happily co-exist in contemporary art, especially in the badly made clay object, which nods to the history of the critical stance while selling itself on that positioning. Because of its art historical pedigree anti-skill attracts institutional support while high levels of technical skill, unless performed by technicians, are looked upon with suspicion as redundant craft, so much so that these attitudes can be thought of as prevalent and as prejudices.

The attitude of anti-skill is ironically visible in the industrial finish of the work of artists such as Koons who devalues material skill by outsourcing it to assistants and technicians and eliminating traces of the hand from the perfect surfaces of his finished work. He won’t be brought down by the taint of artisanal skill and makes a point of his separation from those processes by always wearing the suit and tie of a manager. He makes his point clear, he’s the ideas man, the conceptualist, he doesn’t touch the work, but he nevertheless exploits the ideas associated with the material.

Low skill is assumed to reveal clay’s truth as a material. Materiality was central to Clement Greenberg’s concept of medium specificity that held that a medium, for example painting, must follow and reflect on the nature of its own materials, its support structure, canvas, paint and flatness. Truth to materials was a widely accepted idea in the mid-20th century art, and Herbert Reed’s 1934 book *Art and Industry* was particularly influential in its reception.33 Greenberg’s concept was redeveloped by

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33 Tanya Harrod discussed the influence of this book in her ‘Born not made’ address. Harrod, “Born Not Made.”
Krauss into the more contextual version where social and historical conditions of the medium take priority. However, today’s clay art seems to have returned again to Greenberg’s focus on the physical properties of a material defining the medium, and the materiality of clay - lumpy, messy, and plastic – has returned as the defining characteristic of ceramics and other clay-based practices. American ceramics historian and entrepreneur Garth Clark has commented,

For ceramics to play a central role in the sculptural aesthetic of an artwork it has to employ the qualities that are unique to the medium, from the fire to ceramic history, which lock the work into a dialog with the material.  

What Clark says suggests that Krauss’s idea has come back but in a more materialist form, referring back to earlier twentieth century ideas and Greenberg’s modernist formulation of truth to materials.

Low skill is now linked to this renewed interest in materiality leading to clay enjoying a revival of interest among artists exploiting the appealing coincidence of easily manipulated material and no technique. The two go together well because skill is regarded as an impediment to the actualisation or activation of material by the artist. A lump presented with minimal intervention by the artist satisfies both criteria, the absence of skill and the presentation of the material as such. Lumpy clay art is like a parody of medium specificity, the most obvious characteristic of clay, its malleability, becomes its prime and self-justifying specificity, and is expanded into spectacular displays, while clay’s other possibilities are ignored.

1.3.1 Urs Fischer's lumpy spectacles

There are hundreds of sculptures that grow to massive proportions or crumble to nothing, rising as clumps and clusters or presenting themselves to our eyes as erratic individual pieces in the labyrinthine rooms and halls of Geffen Contemporary. The exhibition covers almost every centimetre of available space, including stairs, landings and door handles - an intricate, fantastical tectonic with cleared walkways. That’s what the presentation of collectively exploding creativity looks like in concrete terms. With the title Yes! the whole thing …[is] hugely cheering and exerts a magical, even hypnotic attraction. Looking at it, one gains a quite physical idea of a joyful experience: the concentrated happiness of earth-bound sensual making… It is about all of us in the age of the internet, given the spontaneity and mass creativity coursing digitally through the universe, and the resulting desire for crystallisation, for something to hold on to, for a valid set of values. And the longing to overcome alienation and connect with the surge of life.35


35Curiger, Tate Blogs.

Swiss born and New York resident artist Urs Fischer is a good example of a contemporary artist who uses clay as a materialist medium in a deskilled, hedonistic way that exploits the specific characteristic of clay to be easily manipulated into free-form shapes. Fischer uses clay as a low, experimental, and relational material to comment on the high values of the history of sculpture and art to bring them down. He creates spectacular installations with the help of volunteers who work quickly to make the innumerable objects necessary to fill exhibition spaces and create immersive environments. At the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art’s Geffen Contemporary gallery in 2013 he used 1500 volunteers and 300 tons of clay to create the third in his series of YES! installations where the experience of creativity and materiality was foregrounded in a phenomenological interaction of clay and human. The raw clay sculptures sprawled over the floors of the gallery’s interconnected spaces and appear to have been mostly built using the basic techniques of piling up and modelling solid clay. In essence it was a deskilled event where the immersive materiality of the clay and the fun, social and relational aspect of the show were highlighted. The artist was framed as facilitator of a collaborative process for participants to do exactly what they wanted with the clay, to experience a joyful moment, a giant play-pen and social scene, a once in a lifetime experience and opportunity, some clay-time! and a foot in the door.

This relational interpretation comes slightly unstuck when what the clay is not being used for is considered. Clay is not used skilfully to make fired ceramic artworks, with no evidence in the installation of the use of more sophisticated and time-consuming methods of construction such as coiling, slabs or throwing. Instead all the work was solid, low skill, raw clay sculptures that dried out, cracked and disintegrated (or washed away in the rain if they are in an outdoor location.) Why is Fischer not interested in firing his clay sculptures? The most likely reason is that he’s not interested in ceramics as a discipline, but in clay as a material, and is working in the tradition of sculptors using clay to make maquettes, but challenging this established use of clay by diverting it into a more experimental process. From his other work it can be seen that he is interested in chaos and disintegration, and clay is perfect for this, because initially it is highly manipulable, as it dries it becomes brittle and is easy to break or dissolve in
water, and then it has the potential to be reformed into soft clay again. It is endlessly recyclable in its unfired state. It is great for the theme of the cycle of creation and destruction, life and death, a perfect loop. This loop would not work as well if the extra step of transforming clay to ceramic was added, because although ceramic is brittle and breaks and disintegrates - for example the missing pieces of reconstructed archaeological vases are likely to be dust, broken or crushed into particles too small to be glued back together - after firing it is no longer clay and cannot be clay again; on its own it can’t be soft and malleable remodelled again into new objects although as vitrified dust, or grog, it can be recombined with raw clay and refired.

Although there is no reason why an artist using clay should be expected to enter the discipline of ceramics when experimentation with raw clay has so much potential to challenge sculptural traditions and forms, it is interesting to speculate on other potential reasons why an artist like Fischer doesn’t fire his clay objects. It is interesting to note that non-ceramicist contemporary artists like William O’Brien, Klara Kristolova, Cameron Jamie and innumerable others fire their small clay objects in kilns as traditional ceramics, while Fischer and others like Adrian Villa Rojas leave their large scale clay works raw. A possible reason they do this is because large clay sculptures are too difficult to fire. If this is the reason, then there are exceptions to this rule, such as Adel Abdessemed’s 1:1 scale burnt out car of fired terracotta, Practice Zero Tolerance, 2008, (fig.42) and Fischer’s earlier small scale raw clay works. Nevertheless a pattern is suggested that small scale clay work made by contemporary artists is fired because it is easy to fire – and easier to sell – while large scale clay works by contemporary artists are not fired because they are too difficult to fire. Not only would exceptionally large kilns be needed, but the sculptures would need to be extremely well constructed to survive the firing process without collapsing or exploding. It is likely that most of the large pieces made in clay by Fischer and his volunteers would not survive the kiln due to their unskilled construction. Because they appear to be made from solid clay, uneven drying and the difficulty of achieving consistent release of water during firing would make these works particularly susceptible to exploding. If an artist wants to make a large work from modelled clay, it is easier to build it to last a few weeks, let it fall apart and document it, than it is to figure out how to build it so that it fires successfully in a kiln. Rather than seeing the issue as the material of clay being well suited to the expression of impermanence as a critical sculptural theme, temporality and the
ephemeral could alternatively be read as excuses for badly made work. Villa Rojas’s clay constructions are intricately crafted, nevertheless in their scale and temporary construction methods they would be impossible to fire successfully and would collapse in a kiln or bonfire.

Countering this criticism of evading difficult technical problems, the argument could be made that Fischer’s clay installations are consciously made to be ephemeral, not (or not only) because they are an easy way to make a big, impressive, immersive work with limited technical expertise, but because the artist is working in a post-conceptual mode which actually requires the work to disintegrate to support the themes of temporality and impermanence, the primacy of the social, and to be critical of the highly crafted artwork as a historical form and as a commercial commodity. But these things don’t seem to be true of Fischer’s work, he seems to be only partially addressing them.

Fischer seems to be interested in the relational aspects of the work insofar as they deliver him a monumental installation made by others in his name. Despite listing all the volunteers’ names in the credits of a video on the museum website, they remain relatively anonymous workers constructing his monuments. The argument that he is critiquing the art commodity using clay as a conceptual strategy is undercut because his impermanent, unsaleable clay work is nevertheless supported and funded by the most powerful commercial galleries and museums in the world who get their payoff in the end in the form of permanent and saleable bronze casts of these sculptures. The fact that Fischer has begun to cast his roughly made clay sculptures in bronze, following in the footsteps of Rebecca Warren who began casting some of her fragile clay sculptures in bronze around 2006, suggests that Fischer has come down on the side of permanence and commerce and not critical and relational aesthetics. His most recent commercial show (at date of writing) at two Gagosian galleries in New York in April 2014 showcased a number of clay sculptures from his MOCA survey but now cast in bronze, including Mermaid and last supper.

If his work is intended to be about ephemerality and temporality, why make permanent versions in bronze? One answer might be to freeze the moment into a permanent reminder of transience and mortality, but another equally probable reason is to make work to sell to collectors who don’t want to buy a raw clay sculpture that will fall apart in their living room, foyer or private museum (although a few adventurous ones might,
though few would not prefer a bronze to a fragile fired ceramic version.) While permanent, commercial art commodities about impermanence, like still life paintings, have a long history, Fischer’s strategy becomes ambiguous and maybe cynical when his artwork appears to start out its life ephemeral and relational, but then gets made over or subverted by commercial interests.

Maybe Fischer is not cynical, but is attempting something expressive and authentic. Although it is not clear whether the particular pieces he chose to cast for the commercial show such as Mermaid were made by him personally or by volunteers, last supper, in its scale, ambition and concept seems likely to have been devised and worked on by Fischer. The handling of the clay is an interesting mixture of crudeness (the lumpy figures and the stick-like fingers) and expressiveness, visible in the deep sweeps of finger markings in the material and the dynamism of the figures and gestures, especially the contrast between the serenity of the central Christ figure and the turbulence of the other figures and the sharp cutting of table edges. Viewed from behind, the original blocks of clay straight out of the packet can be seen piled up to form the figures.

The idea of using the cracking of the drying clay as a feature to bring out the themes of life and death adds an extra visual and critical element to this kind of expressionist work. Judging by the regular placement of the featured cracking in the final bronze version, the cracks were probably assisted by the artist to aid in the casting process by breaking up the sculpture into more manageable pieces. But is it critical or self-defeating to make a monumental bronze sculpture with decay visually embedded in it, because in bronze the cracks are no longer real the way they were in dry clay where they are part of a temporal process of decay. Despite or because of these problems, Fischer seems to want to be expressive, commercial and critical at the same time.

In common with Ugo Rondinone and Thomas Houseago, this work appears to share an engagement with the idea of a return to humanistic values and is loaded with connotations of the history, authority and permanence of traditional bronze sculpture, nevertheless, Fischer seems to intend a more subversive and paradoxical edge. Based on Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper painting, Fischer’s version, because it is made by unknown hands, seems to juggle homage to grand themes with critique of that history and its ideas of genius and the masterpiece. Known for his irreverence, Fischer is likely to be playing with art history to see what fun he can have with it. He has said, ‘You can
have big thoughts, but maybe many small ones which undermine them. You are subversive to yourself—not for the sake of it, but because you can't help it. Rather than being engaged in an earnest debate about expression and critique, Fischer may be just trying to cause trouble and upend expectations, based on his innate subversive nature and exasperation with the overbearing authority of the way things are, saying, ‘Every narrative is welcome for all of us at all times. Some are very refined and some are very simple, but when you think about what's going on around us, you can either give up or throw up.’ In response to authority, maybe he challenges it by throwing up paradoxes, expression versus critique, individual genius and shared authorship, homage and parody. ‘I enjoy paradox. I enjoy that there is no clarity. I like things all open and parallel. But they're just things.’ When he says this, it seems he’s claiming to be a conceptualist, or a process artist who isn’t concerned about producing finished works, he’s only interested in the ideas and the making. If this is the case, why does he make bronzes, hyper-things, and not just let the clay crumble away?

Fisher’s subversive stance is a paradox in itself, because it has a context where it is acceptable, the art world, where anti-art is a commercial commodity. Selling nothing can be justified as revealing the mechanisms of the art world, a revelation by artist, dealer and collector, a claim to authenticity and ethics. He dug up the floor of Gavin Brown’s white cube gallery, a work entitled You, 2007, returning the space to an uncivilised chaotic state, but this could be read as the ultimate in conformity since subversion is the law in the art world. By producing permanent high art commodities in the form of bronzes, he intends to subvert himself. He is pushing the paradox to the limit, but if even this gesture against himself still plays by the rules, in the end who wins? Will he have been bought off by the gallerists and collectors and be shown to be a slave of the Art World just like every other artist because the subversive hole was bought by collector Peter Brant and redug at his private foundation in 2010, and both gallery floors were presumably restored to their original immaculate polished concrete condition afterwards as if nothing had ever happened? Is Fischer a pet of the rich and

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
powerful who have the last laugh, or is he working a paradox, making spectacular art while also holding onto the idea of the revolutionary artist?

Is he a political artist with a critical agenda, an ironic and playful artist, or a cynical artist? Are his monumental aluminium sculptures of digitally enlarged hand prints on
clay, for example *Untitled (Big Clay #3)*, homages or critiques of the idea of the hand of the artist, either the genius hands of the great artists of art history or his own hands? When he says of his work, ‘they’re just things,’ he could be saying he doesn’t want them to be immortalised by history. When asked about the similarity of *You* to a hole dug by Chris Burden, *Exposing the Foundation of a Museum*, 1986, Fischer said, ‘I come from an emotional point of view, not from a didactic point of view.’*40* He generates work through his studio process, where things never turn out the way he envisaged,

*I'm not so crazy about design and technique. To me it is important that I put the work together with my own hands and that I can stop with it when I want. It is the challenge of bringing about something that makes being an artist fun.*41

Of political content he says ‘Ideas about revolutionary art are all bullshit, even the futurists just did what they had to do,’*42* but he then qualifies saying, when asked if his work is politically motivated, ‘I don't know. Not directly.’*43* Maybe he feels destruction is an emotional and fun act that is political as a secondary effect. He destroyed the floors of galleries, destroyed images of himself and Bernini’s *Rape of the Sabine Women* made of melting candle wax, and destroyed the ancient Greek marble sculpture *Victory of Samothrace* by making a monumentally lumpy rendition of it, his finger prints all over it, mimicking the marble folds of the figure’s garments. Maybe this work is a homage to Italian artist F.T. Marinetti’s ‘Futurist Manifesto’ of 1909, in which he stated ‘We want to demolish museums and libraries…We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed… a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.’*44* His rationale was,

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
It is in Italy that we are issuing this manifesto of ruinous and incendiary violence, by which we today are founding Futurism, because we want to deliver Italy from its gangrene of professors, archaeologists, tourist guides and antiquaries. Italy has been too long the great second-hand market. We want to get rid of the innumerable museums which cover it with innumerable cemeteries. Museums, cemeteries! Truly identical in their sinister juxtaposition of bodies that do not know each other.\textsuperscript{45}

Maybe his work is about mortality and death and in digging holes Fischer was looking for the body. The body of art? Maybe it was a disinterring of art, trying to find it to bring it back to life.

Fischer may not be as punk and radical as the Futurists, but he has regard for them. But there’s a problem that his destruction of history and museums is all hollow gestures, simulations of revolt enacted within the confines of those institutions, perverse rather than subversive revolt.

The paradox of subversion and the ambiguity of Fischer’s position can be viewed more negatively. Fischer’s use of every kind of material could fall within Krauss’s definition of the post-medium condition, where any and all possible mediums are, as she sees it, co-opted, homogenised and critically neutralised within the context of depoliticized art discourse where ambiguity rules. Looking at it from this point of view it is possible that ceramics constructed, decorated and fired according to more traditional methods, and therefore still associated with the low reputation of craft and pottery as Adamson has discussed, is actually more critical than spectacular deskillled clay-based (or dirt-based) contemporary art.

1.4 Rosalind Krauss

1.4.1 Medium specificity

This constellation of issues, magic, innocence, the child-like, the primal, amateurism, deskillled working and materiality create an attractive alternative to the high finish of
industrial contemporary art and institutionally white ceramics, a return to the earth, nevertheless they rely on the amorphous idea and lazy assumption that clay has a power, an inherent material property that can be easily manipulated to produce authenticity, reconnection and depth. While messy lumpiness is a valid reaction against the limitations of over-designed white ceramics, small-scaled naivety has limits itself and can’t guarantee effortless and magical vitality, ceramics radicalism, or technical variety, it is one possible response among many. Maybe it is because simply having fun with clay, some *claytime*, isn’t enough on its own. In the following sections, Krauss and Adamson’s ideas about medium and material specificity will be presented to defend the idea that skill is a legitimate condition of clay-based art.

The problem with de Waal’s theory is that while immersion and magic are attractive they lack critical strength and dismiss historical conventions of ceramics such as skill. Krauss’s concept of medium specificity that aims to ground mediums in their own particular characteristics and counteract the widespread and negative generalising of art in what she calls the post-medium condition, could complement the deficiencies of de Waal’s approach.

Krauss’s concept had its origin in a rejection of Clement Greenberg’s idea of the medium specificity of the autonomous modernist artwork, in which the disciplines of painting and sculpture would purify themselves of all the physical characteristics that were not essential to them. In particular Greenberg addressed painting, which he theorized would become essentially flat, the medium of paint fused with the canvas support, best represented in Colour Field painting. It was a theory developed in his essays ‘Avant Garde and Kitsch’ of 1939 and ‘Modernist Painting’ of 1960 and it aimed at producing an irreducible purity and unity of medium as a counter to what he viewed as the kitsch and decay of mainstream culture where pandering to the lowest common denominator of public taste in the form of entertainment corrupted culture.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s when Greenberg’s theories were being widely challenged and rejected, and the distinctions between high and low culture were being consciously blurred, Krauss came under the influence of ‘post-structuralist theory, citing Jacques Derrida’s arguments for the individual’s dependency on and constitution
through external sources. Krauss rejected Greenberg’s idea of medium specificity as the bare bones of physicality and replaced it with the idea of the medium as a complex aggregate condition that,

*can be understood as referring to a heterogeneous universe that also encompasses the discourses, institutions, physical support structures and their technological implications...It is not the medium that is the object of examination but instead those factors that contribute to its individuation.*

Krauss changed the ideas of medium and medium specificity to account for new mediums which she added to the very limited number accepted by Greenberg (painting and sculpture). She looked to film, photography, mixed media installation, ‘sculpture in the expanded field’ and particularly video as equally valid mediums that needed more complex theorisation to take into consideration not only their inner workings, but the new external relationships they brought to light such as context, history and politics. In order to theorise them Krauss had to dispense with the modernist idea of the essential ‘material support’ of the medium as the object that needed to be investigated because the new mediums were becoming too complex and immaterial and therefore harder to pinpoint physically. Paint and canvas are obviously medium and support, but she queried, what is the material support of film, for example? Is it the film itself, the camera, the projector, the projected light, the screen? Video, because of its ‘temporal simultaneity of instantaneous broadcast,’ ‘occupied a kind of discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent or conceived of as having something like an essence or unifying core.’ Addressing this problem, Krauss introduced the new term ‘technical support’ to describe the physical vehicles of new mediums, such as ‘cars or television, which contemporary artists exploit in recognition of the contemporary obsolescence of the traditional mediums, as well as acknowledging their obligation to wrest from that support a new set of aesthetic conventions to which

48 This is the title of Krauss’s essay that investigated new sculpture in the 1970s that didn’t conform to traditional object-based formats. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," October, no. 8, Spring (1979).
50 Ibid., 31.
their works can then reflexively gesture.\textsuperscript{51} The word ‘medium’ was reserved for an artwork’s conceptual framework not its physical materiality.

1.4.2 The post-medium condition

Krauss’s uses the term ‘post-medium condition’ to describe the condition of contemporary art that she sees as having become complacent, moralistic and complicit, long term consequences of the absence of medium specificity. Krauss traces the absence of medium specificity to 1970s conceptual art which she argues replaced Greenberg’s modernist reduction to the specifics of medium with the general question ‘what is art?’, and transformed ‘art from object into statement.’\textsuperscript{52} She holds Joseph Kosuth, with his manifesto ‘Art after Philosophy’, and his claim, ‘Being an artist now means to question the nature of art,’\textsuperscript{53} and before him Marcel Duchamp, responsible for generalizing and flattening out art from a number of separate traditional mediums with their own specificities, into one general category of ‘art.’\textsuperscript{54}

Krauss describes the post-medium condition as, ‘characterized by the term installation art [which] is engaged in the constant rehearsal of Duchamp’s inaugural gesture…the general question – ‘What makes this art?’ – rather than the specific one of the medium.’\textsuperscript{55} Krauss argues that this generalizing of art has led to, ‘both the eventual complicity between theory and the culture industry and the ultimate absorption of ‘institutional critique’ by exactly the institutions of global marketing on which such ‘critique’ depends for its success and its support.’\textsuperscript{56} She says, ‘twenty-five years later, all over the world, in every biennial and at every art fair….Whether it calls itself installation art or institutional critique, the international spread of the mixed-media installation has become ubiquitous.’\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{56} “A Voyage on the North Sea”: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition, 30.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
In his review of Krauss’s 2011 book *Under Blue Cup*, American academic Godfre Leung provides a concise summary of how medium specificity challenges the post-medium condition. He says,

*In producing aesthetic spaces that conceal rather than “figure forth” the conditions that support their existence...contemporary installation art, Krauss argues, takes on the placeless and disemboding effects of our all-encompassing mass media...For Krauss, these artists [that she supports such as Sophie Calle, Marcel Broodthaers, William Kentridge, Christian Marclay and others] defend against the post-medium condition by inventing new artistic mediums from mass cultural forms. She defines “medium” not as the physical limits and possibilities of a given art form...but rather recovers the older sense of medium as traditions passed from generation to generation in artist guilds: as a historically malleable set of rules and conventions... every artwork’s support carries within it... the history of its own mediumistic conventions...In interrogating their technical support, her “knights” [Calle et al] dig through palimpsests of conventions and invent from what they recover a new medium... For Krauss, this “figuring forth” of mediumistic conventions should be the goal of all artistic practice, and against this she explicitly poses contemporary installation art as “Under Blue Cup’s” bad object.*

The post-medium hides itself in the ‘black cube’ of ‘placeless and disemboding effects’ while, in contrast, the medium specific ‘artist must invent their own personal medium’ that’s in open and discursive relation to its own histories.

Krauss identifies French artist Sophie Calle’s grounding specificity as ‘the investigative journalist’s documentary research.’ Photojournalism is a technical support upon which Calle constructs her personal medium which is capable of reflecting on its own history and conventions while being malleable enough to serve the artists need to investigate

60 Ibid.
61 Krauss, “Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition,” 59.
personal subject matter. In ‘Two Moments From the Post-medium Condition’ Krauss describes Calle’s 1981 work *The Shadow* to reveal the medium’s self-reflexive complexity and uses the term ‘invagination’, from Derrida, to interpret its inter folding fictional and real elements. Calle arranges for her mother to hire a detective to follow Calle, and take surveillance shots of his subject as she goes about her daily life. The detective is unaware of the charade he is participating in. A friend of Calle’s, in turn, watches the detective and photographs his activities while Calle keeps a diary of her emotional responses to what unfolds. In this work the layered operations of the medium are fully on view. The photographer is photographed taking photographs, initiating self-reflexivity in Calle’s personal journalistic medium.

Calle’s diary, forming part of the work, reveals her emotional involvement as she began to act up to seduce the detective, to perform for him. Krauss possibly sees Calle’s work working not only because of its medium reflexivity but also because it has human emotional content embedded in its formal machinations, form and content reflecting each other. The work reflects on the complex nature of subjectivity and surveillance, which reflects on the medium. Calle knows she is being watched so is she acting or is she being herself? Is she selfconstructing or trying to act natural? Is her performance of daily life earnest or ironic? Similar questions reflect on the medium; what is the relationship between reality and the apparatus that records it, is it recording or constructing reality? How objective is documentary photography anyway? Krauss calls Calle’s medium a ‘parody of investigative journalism,’ suggesting a complex of ambiguous issues at work, in contrast to the certainties of the ‘political moralism’ of post-medium art, which has simple messages of correct political positions to promote. Or is ambiguity just another position, a refusal of certainty?

### 1.4.3 Can ceramics be medium specific?

Can ceramics be self-reflexive in the way photography can be, as it is argued to be in Sophie Calle’s work? Can ceramics reflect on itself the way photography can photograph itself or video can video itself? Do contemporary ceramics artists have something to say that is relevant and critical and that sets the discipline apart from other

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62 Ibid.
mediums? Do ceramics artists find and investigate particular things in clay and ceramics rules and history to self-reflexively contemplate or is clay just another material to be exploited for its mystique? Krauss rejects the modernist version of medium specificity, arguing that medium specificity cannot be about materiality alone because that leads to reductiveness and the autonomous artwork. It seems that in her terms ceramics is too limited by its materiality. But not only is the material clay not fixed but extremely versatile, ceramics has long histories, traditions and mediumistic conventions that can provide a vast array of opportunities for research, to be dug through and reinvented to challenge its easy appropriation in contemporary art as merely magical, hedonistic material. Although magical, hedonistic materialism could be argued to be part of ceramics and clay’s medium specificity, their reduction to these features alone oversimplifies them, reducing them to clichés, and drawing them into the erasure of difference that typifies the post-medium condition.

Using Krauss’s definitions, new lumpy clay art is ironically not medium specific, because it rejects ceramics histories, traditions and mediumistic conventions. Lumpy clay art is post-medium, just another material absorbed into the multi-media practice of an installation.

1.5 Glenn Adamson: hedonism and inferiority

Glenn Adamson has proposed contrasting ideas of clay’s hedonistic appeal to artists and craft’s inferiority to explain the attraction and potential of clay and craft-based practices in contemporary art. These two ideas could be read in terms of the dichotomy presented in this chapter between materiality and medium specificity. Hedonism could be seen as an aspect of a phenomenological materiality like that theorised by de Waal where artists are attracted to the material possibilities of clay while the potential of craft’s conditions of inferiority to provide it with critical positions in relation to art could be read as an application of Krauss’s concept of medium specificity. I suggest that Adamson’s interest in both these positions reveals interconnections between them and demonstrates that skilled making as a critical medium specific convention can coexist with the current materialist approach to clay. Adamson says that ‘because of its plastic structure, clay
can be fashioned into thin walls of surprising elasticity and strength.\footnote{Adamson, \textit{Thinking through Craft}, 45.} It could be argued then that skilled making is just as materialist an approach to clay as loose materialist hedonism is, it is just exploiting different inherent properties in clay, its properties of internal adhesion and strength (particularly in paper clay) rather than hedonism’s exploitation of clay’s opposite tendency towards entropy and flow.

In his 2007 book \textit{Thinking through Craft}\footnote{Ibid.} Adamson wrote, ‘My central argument…is that craft’s inferiority might be the most productive thing about it’.\footnote{Ibid., 4.} He describes how craft is perceived as inferior because it is supplemental (to art), material (Ruby, Fischer), skilled (me), pastoral and amateur (Ruby, Fischer). Adamson proposes that craft should not abandon these qualities in order to ascend to the status of art but embrace them. Craft would then be provided with critical tools where ‘the limits embodied by craft …provide a kind of friction that keep pressing questions… [about art].’\footnote{Ibid., 5-6.} For example, ‘material’ would allow craft to position itself in relation to and question conceptualism in art, and ‘pastoral’ would press questions about intrinsic value, spiritual content, tradition and ethics – or their absence - in art.

Adamson possibly drew on Krauss’s ideas about critical potential after she first wrote about the post-medium condition in her book \textit{“A Voyage on the North Sea”: art in the age of the post-medium condition}\footnote{Krauss, \textit{“A Voyage on the North Sea”: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition.}} published in 1999, which pre-dates Adamson’s own theorising of the potential of inferiority in relation to art in \textit{Thinking Though Craft}. In that book Adamson looks to Krauss’s ideas from her early career, when she observed art’s dismissive attitude to ceramics in her 1978 essay ‘John Mason: Installations from the Hudson River Series.’ Her explanations for this attitude may have inspired Adamson’s categories of inferiority. He quotes her:

\begin{quote}
To be a ceramicist-sculptor in the 1950s and 1960s was in some way to be marginal to ‘sculpture’…in the semantic associations to pottery, ceramics
\end{quote}
speaks for that branch of culture which is too homey, too functional, too archaic for the name of ‘sculpture’ to extend to it.\textsuperscript{68}

The close similarity between Adamson’s five categories of \textit{supplemental, material, skilled, pastoral} and \textit{amateur} revisit, rework and extend Krauss’s three original \textit{homey, functional} and \textit{archaic} conditions. They have been expanded and - under the influence of Krauss’s further ideas of medium specificity and the post-medium condition - turned from negative drawbacks into contemporary categories that enable ceramics to lay claim to critical status and to be \textit{sculpture}.

Adamson wrote about hedonism in his essay ‘Sloppy Seconds: The Strange Return of Clay’\textsuperscript{69} for the catalogue of the ceramics exhibition \textit{Dirt on Delight, Impulses that Form Clay}\textsuperscript{70} at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia in 2009, and that he doesn’t address a possible contradiction between what are sometimes considered opposed positions of critique and hedonism suggests he doesn’t see a problem but thinks they are interconnected. In ‘Sloppy Seconds’ Adamson doesn’t argue that hedonism is a critical self-reflexive strategy, but that contemporary artists working with clay and ceramics nevertheless achieve relevance in their attention to ‘the act of making itself.’\textsuperscript{71} He argues they are not expressionists since, he says, they ignore their pottery forebears of the 1950s such as the expressionist Peter Voulkos and his obsession with turning pottery into art, but are interested in a return to the studio, and a hedonistic, small-scale practice engaged with the materiality of clay. Adamson suggests,

\begin{quote}
\textit{the current crop of ceramic sculptors…attend to the act of making itself, not to some external narrative of ceramic history. What is at stake is not the status of clay, but the viability of human-scaled works in general. Perhaps it is only under the present circumstances, with their unprecedented profusion of the larger-than-life [for example Anish Kapoor] that a total commitment to object-making could seem radical again… This seductive quality may only be in fashion for a moment. Artists will move on to other things. But for
}\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{68} Adamson, \textit{Thinking through Craft}, 47.
\textsuperscript{70} Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter, eds., \textit{Dirt on Delight, Impulses That Form Clay} (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2009).
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 80.
now, clay offers sculptors that rare thing in contemporary art: the chance to come clean on their own dirty pleasures.\textsuperscript{72}

If Adamson is right that contemporary ceramics is interesting because it is about a reengagement with hedonistic materiality and a return to object making, nevertheless its doubtful ceramics can have deeper significance if it ignores its own history. This would leave little chance of it being self-reflexive in a critical sense. If contemporary ceramics is not self-reflexive, it could be the very thing that Krauss criticizes, the merely post-medium, dabbling in a fashionable materiality, where clay is just another possible material in creative processes with multiple medium outcome options.

It is probable that Adamson was correct to say that the moment of hedonism in ceramics will pass, but it may have a long way to go because it has already crossed over from ceramics to mainstream contemporary art. Artists everywhere are using clay and ceramics for their material possibilities. In contemporary art interest in all kinds of materials is ubiquitous where traditional craft mediums are often engaged, but skill downplayed and materials used in unconventional or experimental ways. For example, contemporary artists like Urs Fischer are totally unconcerned about the discipline of ceramics, but have nevertheless taken clay to a new scale by making grand materialist installations using clay in its raw state.

Adamson doesn’t overtly bring together the hedonistic and inferiority, in fact he seems to veer away from a more critical medium specific position when he discusses hedonism. Nevertheless hedonism, small-scale making and a return to the studio, in opposition to the dominance of ‘larger-than-life’ sculpture, seems to imply the construction of a critical position, because they challenge the status quo of the industrially fabricated and gigantic on one hand, and the post-studio, social and overtly political on the other. The contemporary artist returning to the studio to make small-scaled, hedonistic ceramics fits exactly the model of inferiority; returning to a supplemental medium, to work directly with material, and employing a medium still regarded as pastoral and amateur. Small scale contemporary clay art therefore has the potential to stake a claim to a critical position based on a self-reflexive and

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
knowledgeable medium specificity, but it is often let down by its ignorance of ceramics histories and generalised lumpy character that has become a generic look.

1.6 Reskilled

Figure 26. The author, Cock Pot, 2012. Glazed ceramic, three parts. Photo: Michael Myers.
Figure 27. The author, *Cock Pot*, 2012. Glazed ceramic, vessel part. Photo: Michael Myers.
Figure 28. The author, Cock Pot, 2012. Glazed ceramic, cock part. Photo: Michael Myers.
Figure 29. The author, untitled three headed lingam, 2012. Glazed ceramic, three parts. Photo: Michael Myers.
Central to my work is the intention to make durable objects on an ambitious scale, necessitating good technique so the objects stand up and last (figs.26-31). I want to make the sculpture as sturdy as possible, but also visually complex and beautiful. This is against Australian curator and artist Glenn Barkley’s injunction to play it safe and be satisfied with the domestically scaled and easily built. (See the appendix ‘Refutation of Glenn Barkley’s rejection of skill’ for a critique of his justification of low skill)

Skill provides a position from which to critique the easily and badly made object, so it is not so surprising that when I took up ceramics I jettisoned the lo-fi critique of my previous work - badly made excremental wank videos and abject installations - and followed the subversive path of high technique, subverting myself. I rejected contemporary art’s conventional way of mud and the making of lumpy, floppy, materialist clay sculptures that sag and barely stand up, and instead discovered a talent for hand building using the pre-historic coiling technique. I went monumental,
exploiting clay’s other material propensity to be stacked high on itself in thin self-sustaining walls. In contrast to Peter Voulkos’s deliberately crude way of working, Adamson has pointed out this other potential of clay to ‘be fashioned into thin walls of surprising elasticity and strength.’ As discussed earlier, clay-based art doesn’t need to be thick and lumpy to be medium specific, responsivity to manual skill is just as innate to clay as sagging and responsivity to squishing. Taking this path, I construct elaborate ceramic idols, sexy, violent, earthy deities, and build crumbling temples to house them to demonstrate that good technique and a bad attitude aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive.

Instead of repressing the impulse to build, within logistical limits of kiln capacity and transportation and storage issues, I try to give it full expression. My sculptures are always constructed by elaborating on the basic technique of coil building. Lengths of rolled clay are coiled around on top of one another to create circular walls that spiral up. These hollow tubes are strengthened with internal struts (fig.32), modified in width and curvature and built on top of one another to create legs, torso, heads and hanging arms. This precise process of construction is labour intensive. The work often changes direction multiple times during construction and can deviate a long way from the outcome originally envisaged.

During the construction phase the natural inclination of the clay to sag or collapse is countered. Clay’s inclination to submit to gravity is acknowledged and every addition of more material during the coil building process needs to be calculated to prevent collapse. Monitoring the drying of the clay so that wet clay is added to firmer clay which can support it is an essential technique. Nevertheless wet clay has properties of elasticity and cohesion that allow it to be quickly stacked on top of itself to a certain point while maintaining its shape, so there is scope and freedom in the construction phase. The process of building is therefore a matter of juggling the limits of clay - primarily its ability to be stacked against its inclination to sag – with creativity.

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73 Adamson, Thinking through Craft, 45.
My working method results in sculptures that would not be possible if technical limits were placed on them. This way of working is counter to prevailing methods and attitudes that favour loose, process oriented techniques and provisional outcomes.

Figure 32. The author, work in progress, July 2015.
1.6.2 Skilled, clay-based, figurative and contemporary


Figure 41. Daniel Dewar & Gregory Gicquel, *Legs*, 2012. Three frames from gif animation, objects sculpted with raw clay. Source unknown.

Although American sculptor Charles Ray and Iranian born sculptor Reza Aramesh do not use clay as a significant material in their work, I mention them to provide a context of contemporary, high-tech, figurative sculpture in contrast to my purely hand-made work. Unlike mine their work employs complex technologies which allow the creation of photorealistic sculptures of incredible verisimilitude, possibly utilising 3-D digital scanning and outputting processes. Charles Ray’s sculptures, such as Young Man in solid stainless steel (fig.35), take years to develop through complex design and industrial processes. Aramesh’s figures are sourced from mass media images of arrested young men in conflict zones and transferred into 3-D marble, perhaps using skilled artisans, 3-D printing or laser cutting. These fabrication methods would not satisfy Krauss’s definition of medium specificity that requires transparency and reflection on material methods, their processes are completely invisible behind their immaculate surfaces.

French duo Daniel Dewar & Grégory Gicquel are different however, they are craftsmen who make their own work. They have worked together since 1998 and are known for figurative sculptures in materials that range from concrete (fig.40) and carved stone (fig.39) to ephemeral figures in raw clay for stop motion animation, such as Legs (fig.41). Website Spike Island says about them,

*The pair’s work resists much that has become commonplace in contemporary sculptural practice, such as the use of readymade objects and the outsourcing of production to fabricators. They instead favour a physical reengagement with materials and processes. That this appropriation of the handmade and the crafted is a critical, rather than reactionary response, is made evident by the artists’ knowingly absurd pop- and folk-inflected artworks.*

To the rejection by these artists of readymades and outsourcing could be added unskilled materialist practices. Dewar and Gicquel exemplify current art that is figurative, made by the artists themselves, crafted skilfully in clay, materialist in its

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engagement with the various particular properties of the materials they use, and made without the mediation of photographic and hi-tech processes. Dewar and Gicquel create their figures from their imaginations, and this can be seen in the anatomical inaccuracies and awkwardness of their figures, unlike the photorealism of Ray and Aramesh. These distortions, however, give their work a rawer visual power that the perfect surfaces of Ray and Aramesh’s sculptures lack.

The political content of Aramesh’s work is worth questioning. He depicts young men who have been arrested and often have had clothing removed, their pants pulled down by police as a form of humiliation. He empathises with their condition, taking a stand of moral indignation and immortalising them as heroes in marble. The work is political art that raises issues about conflicts that have arisen in a neo-colonial global context. Armesh typifies the problem for political artists that in addressing issues, nevertheless, he is a privileged artist appropriating images and benefitting from them. Probably his views surrounding the value of his work as political commentary outweigh his personal benefits.

Algerian sculptor Adel Abdessemed’s work, *Shams* (fig.34) which combines visual and tactile power in its skilful but imperfect renderings in raw terracotta of workers, could also be critiqued on its political content. There is the same anger about social, political and economic injustices that Aramesh’s work evokes. This is visible in the way the clay bodies dry out and crack, like the bodies of workers which are endlessly disposable and replaceable. The geographical context of the work is significant. It was installed in the Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, one of the most criticised countries in the Persian Gulf in relation to its treatment of guest workers on its rapid development projects. This proximity could be read both ways though, an up-close and dangerous critique of an exploitative and controlling regime, or an empty gesture of critique carried out by a complicit and privileged artist. Again the artist is probably aware of these issues and argues that despite the drawbacks the commentary has to be made.

Although it is probable Abdessemed used skilled technical assistance to make this work and his famous burnt-out black terracotta car, *Practice Zero Tolerance* (fig.42), the craft is very evident in the work, and gives it an aura of authenticity. American sculptor David Zink Yi’s *Untitled (Architeuthis)* (fig.43) is another example of large scale
ceramic work that depends for its success on extremely high levels of craft skill. Whether this is the work solely of the artist, or assistants or both working together is not known.

Canadian Kathy Venter (fig.37) and other ceramicists like Americans Tip Toland, Justin Novaks and Monica van den Dool employ very high levels of technical skill to make figurative sculpture in a traditional ceramics context. Venter uses no high tech processes and works alone on the sculpting of her work, but probably has assistance moving and firing her work. Her sculptures are life size but not cast, they are coil built directly from observation of life models and constructed without the use of support armatures. The construction methods of Venter are very close to my own in the use of coil building to create figures and forms with internal struts that support and strengthen their skin-like surfaces (cf. figs. 32,33). However I don’t work from life, my creative process is closer to Dewar and Gicquel’s, imagining the figure as it is being made.

1.7 Chapter summary

I am not arguing that loose and chaotic materialist practices have no value, but against the naïve assumptions that the material clay and the encounter with it are automatically easy, magical, innocent, and immersive and necessarily result in worthwhile art. The problem with this model is that skilled practices are assumed to be redundant and irrelevant because of their association with craft. Craft is not only thought of as an outmoded and unnecessary obstruction to conceptual and materialist processes, but it has the taint of manual labour. Craft is the other of art, the worker to art’s thinker. The absence of skill is thought to guarantee art’s difference and the ironically bourgeois revolutionary credentials of the artist and his/her work.

The artworks discussed in Section 1.7.3 demonstrate the redundancy of the limited assumptions of low skilled practices. Clay is actually very versatile and traditional methods that exploit clay’s other material properties of elasticity, internal strength and propensity for virtuosic handling open up innumerable other creative possibilities. Traditional methods are just as materially specific to clay as process visibility, entropy, sagging, and collapse that artists wrongly assume more authentically acknowledge the true nature of clay. Skilled practices expand clay’s potentials and enhance a self-questioning attitude to material practices not reliant on easy assumptions.
The need to retain an analytical stance does not exclude the possibility of creativity and expression. In Chapter Two, I argue expressivity can be a critical response to the exhaustion of post-conceptual, post-minimal and post-critical art.
2 BAD CLAY ART

Maybe we shouldn’t be so certain about who won the Neo-Ex vs. Pictures Generation bout. Lately, I’ve sensed MFA students responding to the oeuvres of Sherman and Prince with yawns or sneers, but when I bring up Schnabel their curiosity awakens. Could it be that, 30 years on, we are once again ready to take up “the Expressionism Question”? 75

And there was a Julian Schnabel broken plate piece, which I don’t remember very well, but just thinking, as a kid, “Wow, you can make art out of broken plates!” 76

In this chapter I want to propose that expressivity - turning inwards as an aesthetic method, away from overt cultural critique towards personal subject matter - has renewed validity as a way of making art. I suggest the return to expressionism in current art - in particular in art that incorporates clay as a significant material - is a reaction to the failure of critical art to ‘expose and analyze art’s actual social functions under capitalism.’ 77 I will argue that critique has been absorbed and neutralised by capitalism, creating a pervasive ambiguity in culture. Because it was previously marginalised by post-conceptual and post-minimalist contemporary art, expressionism’s revival and reengagement with essentialist and humanist ideas now has the potential to constitute a critique of failed critique. I propose that the re-alignment in new clay-based art towards self-expression, ambitious hand making and figurative content is bad clay art, an alternative critical strategy. I will consider other possibilities that the return of expression is a reactionary or complicit move, indicative of a pluralistic relativity in current art.

Whereas Glenn Adamson believed that the contemporary lumpy ceramic art in the exhibition *Dirt on Delight* was not expressionist, but rather revealed artists’ interest in the hedonism of using the material clay to make objects, I believe there is a strong current of expression in contemporary clay-based art as well that should be acknowledged. Expressionism acknowledges a greater psychological and personal investment in the work produced giving it more critical effectiveness. The idea of expression comes up in other writing about clay-based art suggesting it is an idea that is being reconsidered as a positive new potential in contemporary art. For example, there are frequent uses of forms of the root word ‘express’ in the catalogue of the 2011 Public Art Fund exhibition *Statuesque*, an outdoor show of large-scale contemporary bronze and aluminium figurative sculpture in New York’s City Hall Park. Among many references curator Nicholas Baume notes the artists’ shared interest in ‘expressive materiality,’ and co-writer Miguel Morcuendo Gonzales says about Rebecca Warren’s huge, lumpy, female figure, ‘this restless preoccupation with the degradation of existing form frames a provocative stance on self-expression, gender, and artistic influence.’

Without ever calling the artists ‘expressionists’ which might have necessitated revisiting old debates on neo-expressionism that perhaps he did not want to get tangled up in because of neo-expressionism’s bad reputation, Baume’s show seems to be, in part, an effort to re-establish the idea of expression as relevant again.

American curator Marcia Tucker first described ‘bad’ art in her 1978 show of neo-expressionist “Bad” Painting at New York’s New Museum. I have appropriated the word *bad* to talk again about expressionism, because Tucker’s argument that the art in her show was ironically bad, and therefore actually good is paralleled by recent expressionist art that I argue also intends to be bad in a similar way. *Bad* art then was expressionist, personal and sometimes clumsy in character and took a contrary position in relation to the avant-garde art of the time, minimalism and conceptualism, which Tucker regarded as abstract, distant and disconnected. *Bad* was good because it operated in the tradition of modernist transgression by taking a critical position in relation to the mainstream. In this chapter I propose that clay-based art now is like *bad* painting then.

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79 Ibid., 28.
80 Ibid., 125.
expressionist and a critique of critique, positioning itself in relation to post-conceptualism and post-minimalism which are the mainstream of contemporary art, putting personal expression before abstract cultural critique, which it views as exhausted or corrupted.

Tucker’s argument that neo-expressionism reacted against exhausted minimalism and conceptualism is replicated almost exactly by Baume more than thirty years later when he contextualises recent expressionist sculpture in opposition and reaction to ‘the distancing strategies of post-minimalism and post-modernism,’ saying, ‘In the development of each of these six artist’s work there often appears to have been a sense of frustration with dominant artistic styles and a desire to break away from what had become the prevailing orthodoxy.’ I propose to ask whether expressive art now breaks the rules of post-minimal and post-conceptual art like bad painting (and neo-expressionist art that followed it in the 1980s) broke the rules of minimalism, conceptualism and critical post-modern art by reintroducing the gestural hand of the artist, a sense of authenticity, privileging the hand-making of objects and freely allowing historicist, personal and subjective content.

If recent expressionist art does break the mould, does that make it radical, a critique of exhausted critique and of the post-critical and post-medium moment, or is it a reactionary move? In his article ‘The Expressive Fallacy’ Hal Foster claimed that expressionism was the official rhetoric of capitalism and pluralistic culture that progressive critique opposed, and Owens, in his article ‘Honor, Power and the Love of Women’ argued that neo-expressionism was authoritarian art posing as anti-authoritarian art. Are Foster and Craig Owen’s criticisms of reactionary neo-expressionism then still relevant now as a criticism of new expressionism?

Another possibility is that new expressionism isn’t especially reactionary or critical, it is just another style in an anything goes pluralistic present. Hal Foster argued recently in

81 Ibid., 27.
82 Ibid., 28.
his essay ‘Post-Critical’ that the post-minimalist, post-conceptual present is symptomatic of a neoliberal culture of indifference and conformity, where genuine critique has almost disappeared and art and culture are subsumed into non-critical relativity. If Foster is correct that we are now indifferent and conformist, and Rosalind Krauss is correct that art now is so diffused across post-medium conditions that there’s no real centre to oppose anymore and no contrary or peripheral positions left to provocatively occupy, if lumpy expressive clay-based sculpture intends to take an oppositional position within contemporary art will it necessarily fail because all art conforms to a borderless relativity? Is new expressionism just another opportunistic position that tries to resuscitate and exploit the redundant modernist strategy of transgression and an obsolete post-modern style for institutional and commercial success, or is it radical and resistant and trying to re-establish a critical edge in a universe of relative post-medium art?

Before assessing whether expressionism offers a critical alternative it will be argued that critique has failed in its radical project to reveal the hidden workings of art under capitalism because it has been absorbed in a superficial form as the official rhetoric of capitalist culture and degraded as a reliable method for uncovering hidden truths. Examples from popular culture such as self-reflexivity in movies and television, and the doubts cast on critique by the proliferation of conspiracy theories will be used to argue this. Johanna Drucker’s argument that contemporary art must accept its complicity within culture and reject objective critique as a redundant method will be considered to back up the proposal that critique has become empty and rhetorical. The work of appropriationist artist Richard Prince and post-conceptual performance artist Tino Sehgal are discussed in appendices as examples of problematic contemporary art that can be read as the failure of conceptualism’s original vision to critique the institution of art because it has become institutionalised itself and compromised. Contemporary artists using clay to make objects – Thomas Houseago and his neo-modernist reaction against conceptualism, Ugo Rondinone’s revival of the concept of ‘human nature’ and Arlene Shechet’s strategy of doing everything wrong (Shechet is discussed in an appendix) - will be discussed to determine whether these artists offer radical alternatives to

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redundant critique (if radicalism is possible), are complicit in Drucker’s sense or are reactionaries returning to exploitative neo-expressionism.

2.1  Neo-expressionism versus critique in the 1970s and 1980s

2.1.1  Marcia Tucker and “Bad” Painting

The word bad was used by Marcia Tucker to describe painting that appeared to be bad but was, she believed, actually good. The artists Tucker selected for “Bad” Painting, she says, didn’t come from one particular locality or represent a cohesive movement, but exemplified a widespread continuation and resurgence of figurative painting during the 1960s and 1970s in American art. “Bad” Painting focussed on expressive and emotive work representing the human figure and its condition utilising loose or rough painting technique. It was theorised as strategically and provocatively bad, consciously transgressive as a challenge to the conventions of minimalism and conceptualism that dominated art at that time, hence, ‘the ironic nature of the title, “bad” painting, which…is really “good” painting,’

\[86\] (good because it was transgressive and critical). Tucker continues,

“bad” painting emerges from a tradition of iconoclasm, and its romantic and expressionistic sensibility links it with diverse past periods of culture and history... What does link the work is its iconoclasm, its challenge to the conventions of minimalism, which have been prevalent from the late 1960’s to the present... Thus it is possible that the work of many of the artists in the exhibition is functioning in an avant-garde manner, i.e., breaking away from or discarding accepted conventions in favour of an art that is clearly not art for art’s sake. Yet, the notion of progress usually associated with avant-garde ideas is in question here, given the openly nostalgic, figurative, and art-historical character of the work... The freedom with which these artists mix classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies, constitutes a rejection of the concept of progress per se. . . Bypassing the idea of progress

\[86\] Tucker, “Bad” Painting.
implies an extraordinary freedom to do and to be whatever you want. In part, this is one of the most appealing aspects of ‘bad’ painting - that the ideas of good and bad are flexible and subject to both the immediate and the larger context in which the work is seen.\(^{87}\)

By linking bad painting to the traditions of iconoclasm and modernist transgression, and by involving it in a rejection of the concept of progress \textit{per se}, Tucker gave bad painting conceptual and critical weight as a serious art style with radical intentions. However there was a flaw in using the idea of a return to outmoded styles of figurative painting to critique the perceived exhaustion of the idea of progress. The flaw was that this art in its appeal and references to history was open to co-option by a conservative agenda that sought to constrain progressive tendencies even though the art itself might not have been intended for that purpose. It could be argued that this is what happened to bad painting; after a brief moment when it seemed to represent freedom from the strictures of minimalism and conceptualism, neo-expressionism quickly emerged as an international art movement taken up wholesale by institutions and particularly the art market, undoing its peripheral position and radical potential.

2.1.2 Neo-expressionism

Neo-expressionism developed very quickly in late 1970s and early 1980s and was felt to be metaphorical of the alienated condition of the Cold War period when relations between NATO and the Soviet bloc were at a very low ebb. Depressed economic conditions also contributed to contrasting feelings of malaise in the mainstream culture. Neo-expressionism was influenced by the German expressionist artists of the early 20th century such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Max Beckmann and was prevalent throughout Europe where the transavanguardia group in Italy and the neue wilden in Germany were proponents of the style. In the US neo-expressionists such as Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquiat painted on a grander and more heroic scale than Tucker’s bad artists and became the epitome of the perceived overblown failings of neo-expressionism in the 1980s. In New Zealand and Australia neo-expressionist artists such as Philip Clairmont, Jeffrey Harris, Peter Booth, and Davida Allen were active

\(^{87}\) Ibid.
although they usually painted on a more modest scale. Like bad painting, neo-expressionism was often seen as a revival of painting in reaction to the disappearance of the art object and the hegemony of minimalism and then conceptual art during the 1960s and 1970s. Alternatively it could also be argued that the various neo-expressionisms sprang from local traditions tracing back to German expressionism and had been developing for several decades before coming to prominence. For example in New Zealand, Clairmont and other neo-expressionists such as Phillipa Blair and Philip Trusttum were influenced in the 1960s by their teacher at Ilam School of Art, Rudolph (Rudi) Gopas, a German speaking post-war migrant from Lithuania. His style came from a long tradition of German expressionism dating back to medieval and renaissance German art that continued on in the peripheries of German modernism (for example in Lithuania and New Zealand) after its high point in early 20th century avant-garde art and subsequent suppression during the 1930s and early 1940s.

Neo-expressionism achieved wide public exposure in the controversial exhibitions A New Spirit in Painting at the Royal Academy, London (1981), and Zeitgeist (1982) at Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin featuring many of the new international neo-expressionists as well as precursors such as Francis Bacon and Pablo Picasso. The curators of A New Spirit in Painting made an argument in support of neo-expressionism that seems to be derived from Tucker’s earlier exhibition, that representational painting challenged the exhausted notion of progress in art, thus justifying a rejection of minimalism and conceptualism and a reengagement with history and mining it for imagery and new energy. In the catalogue of A New Spirit in Painting co-curator Christos M. Joachimides criticised the idea of linear progress in art, writing,

*The overemphasis on the idea of autonomy in art which brought about minimalism and its extreme appendix conceptual art, was bound to be self-defeating...devoid of all joy in the senses... A reaction to such a thoroughgoing prohibition on subjective experience to the exclusion of sensuality and pathos [was the realisation that] the development of art is not characterised by linear progress. The path art has taken from earliest*

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88 Look, for example, at the thorn pierced and rotting bodies of Renaissance German painter Matthys Grunewald’s crucified Christs.
times is anything but smooth; it is full of surprising mutations and unexpected contradictions that only reveal their meaning for the whole in their particular dialectic context.  

Joachimides went a step further than Tucker by saying that neo-expressionist art not only transgressed the idea of progress in art, but was itself progressive by linking it to trends in society such as environmentalism and reaction against technological progress which because of their political stance of resistance were not retrogressive but progressive. He wrote,

This exhibition presents a position in art which conspicuously asserts traditional values, such as individual creativity, accountability, quality, which throw light on the condition of contemporary art and, by association, on the society in which it is produced.  

A weakness in Joachimides’ argument is that he provides no direct link between the return to expressive figuration in painting and, for example, ‘planting and harvesting by traditional methods,’ except that they both exemplify a positive reassessment of what progress has rejected. However, he turned out to be very predictive of the advent of relational art in the 1990s which has made the link between horticulture and art. For example, socially driven collaborations such as Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija’s the land foundation (all lower case), a working farm at Chiang Mai in Thailand, the Tending project at Sydney College of the Arts and City Farm in Chicago, all of which are ongoing, ethically motivated, collaborative experiments which challenge autonomy in art by bringing people together and bringing life back into art.

Although Joachimides was not proposing an ethics of collaboration, he did spot the cultural conditions of questioning in that period that underlay the return to figurative painting, questions that are again at the forefront of public debate about the environment and could be seen again as a backdrop to the current return of figuration and materialism in art. Although Joachimides and Tucker may have been wrong in the short

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90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
term about the trajectory of neo-expressionism that faded from favour during the 1980s and has only recently begun to be reassessed, their prediction of the end of progress in art turned out to be true. Despite progressive and critical photography-based art of the 1980s taking up the idea of progress from conceptualism, progress has since unravelled and been ‘full of surprising mutations and unexpected contradictions,’ especially in the return of painting, sensuality and expression, the long term pluralistic condition of contemporary art and ongoing reworkings of minimalism and conceptualism. The recent emergence of ceramics and the use of clay as a medium of interest to contemporary artists could be seen as part of this pluralism and as another mutation away from progress, and potentially as part of a critique of it. The failure of progress and the return of clay may be something a proponent of progressive art such as Hal Foster would never have dreamt of and would now probably find deeply reactionary and disturbing because he might find that the potential has been lost for art to, if not to change culture and society, at least critique them. Alternatively, it could be said that the loss of faith in progress is justified because of impending environmental catastrophes and this is reflected in, and has been predicted by, the failure of progress as a teleological model in art.

2.1.3 Critiques of neo-expressionism

Vito Acconci

In the 1980s the arguments of Tucker and neo-expressionist historicism were derided by many critics as reactionary, and heated debate took place about neo-expressionism’s validity as a style. Among other criticisms it was attacked as commercial opportunism directed at revitalising and expanding the art market in the USA and Europe that had contracted during the 1970s due to the combined effects of economic decline after the oil crisis and the domination of less marketable minimal and conceptual art. American performance artist Vito Acconci said neo-expressionism brought back the body for a new generation of upwardly mobile collectors at a time when video art had failed to produce unique products for sale.

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92 Ibid.
Neo-expressionism was, for one thing, a last desperate attempt to retain the body in an electronic world where the body was in the process of disappearing...just as it brought back the body to a world at large that was becoming bodyless, brought back “body,” substantiveness, to art at the time it was talked about as being object-less, neo-expressionism courted collectors by giving them something they could, at the same time, put their minds to and put their hands on; neo-expressionism confirmed the body consciousness of a wealthy class [who, Acconci previously observed, liked jogging and aerobic dancing] and, at the same time, gave collectors something to do again, something to collect. The desperate American attempt at hegemony, then, advertising video art as the product, was still-born: it concentrated too much on production and not enough on accumulation – since video art was inherently multiple, it couldn’t attract the collector, who needed to acquire something unique.93

Acconci may have been wrong about the body’s return in neo-expressionism being a last desperate attempt to retain it in art, as the body has returned again and again, for example in Abject art and in recent figurative sculpture. However his criticism could be read as particularly relevant again in the current context of recent expressionist art, where artists such as Houseago, who is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, have become very popular with collectors at a time when video art is ubiquitous in institutional exhibitions such as the 2014 Sydney Biennale, but not as evident in the art market (where painting and sculpture dominate) because it is still difficult to sell.

Craig Owens

In his essay ‘Honor, Power and the Love of Women’ Craig Owens theorised neo-expressionism as authoritarian, describing the neo-expressionists as ‘pseudo-expressionists’ falsely posing as anti-authoritarian. He argued that,

The expressionists [of the early 20th Century] ...abandoned the simulation of emotion in favor of its seismographic registration...Whatever we may

think of this project today – whether we find its claims to spontaneity and immediacy hopelessly naïve or whether we believe that the expressionists actually tapped a prelinguistic reserve of libidinal impulses – we should not overlook its radical ambition. In ‘neo-expressionism’ however…expressionism is reduced to convention, to a standard repertoire of abstract, strictly codified signs for expression. Everything is bracketed in quotation marks … ‘spontaneity,’ ‘immediacy.’ (Think of Schnabel’s ‘violent’ brushwork.) The pseudo-expressionists retreat to the pre-expressionist simulation of passion.94

Owens argued that because anti-authoritarian modernism (and expressionism) had become ‘a dominant cultural mode,’95 neither embracing nor rejecting transgression worked anymore and this posed an insoluble contradiction for artists. He believed that the neo-expressionist response was pseudo transgression; ‘what we are witnessing, then, is the emergence of a new – or renewed – authoritarianism masquerading as antiauthoritarianism. Today, acquiescence to authority is proclaimed as a radical act.’96 He says of the artists,

[Sandro] Chia, [Enzo] Cucchi, [Francesco] Clemente, [Carlo Maria] Mariani, [Georg] Baselitz, [Markus] Lupertz, [Helmut] Middendorf, [Rainer] Fetting, [A.R.] Penck, [Anselm] Kiefer, [Julian] Schnabel… these and other artists are engaged not…in the recovery and reinvestment of tradition, but rather in declaring its bankruptcy – specifically, the bankruptcy of the modernist tradition. Everywhere we turn today the radical impulse that motivated modernism – its commitment to transgression – is treated as the object of parody and insult. What we are witnessing, then, is the wholesale liquidation of the entire modernist legacy…97

Why was Owens insulted that the ‘entire modernist legacy’ of transgression was being ‘liquidated’ when he was a post-modernist who must have held that transgression as

95 Ibid., 11.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 9.
modernist ideology would have been in need of deconstruction? Maybe he felt respect for what modernism had achieved, that transgression had been possible in its time and that achievement needed to be defended from exploitation. Perhaps he felt nostalgic for a simpler, earlier pre-electronic time when life and art were not so densely mediated, when an artist may still have been able to tap into a pre-linguistic, pre-oedipal, oppositional state.

Owens quotes the Belgian political economist Ernest Mandel and his ‘neo-fatalist’ ideology that he argued was specific to late capitalist society. It was a belief that science and technology have coalesced into an autonomous power of invincible force, where,

*to the captive individual, whose entire life is subordinated to the laws of the market...All that is left is the dream of escape – through sex and drugs, which are in their turn promptly industrialized.*

To this list Owens adds neo-expressionist art as a means of pseudo escape from reality through pseudo self-expression. For Owens, this makes neo-expressionism, 

*an ‘official’ art which provides an apology for the existing social order; collaboration with power which replaces the oppositional stance of the modernist artist.*

Despite the persuasiveness of his argument, the fact that most of the artists on Owens’s list above were Germans and Italians suggests that envy of the success of the European invasion of the New York art scene of the early 1980s could also have been a factor in Owen’s offensive against neo-expressionism. It can’t be ignored that the strong oppositional stance that he and others like Hal Foster took against neo-expressionism advantaged them in their careers, allowing them to emphatically establish their emerging post-modernist presence in art discourse and the market. The fact that the artists they supported would eventually become much more successful than the neo-expressionists undermines the ethical superiority that Owens and Foster’s criticisms of neo-expressionist complicity with capital claimed or implied. The fact that their critique

98 Ibid., 11.
99 Ibid.
of neo-expressionism was a blanket critique of all neo-expressionist artists without exception also supports the criticism of bias.

**Hal Foster’s expressive fallacy**

Parallel to his contemporary and colleague at *October* magazine Owens, Hal Foster took an oppositional stance against neo-expressionism, contrasting the post-modernism of resistance with the post-modernism of reaction, saying, ‘In cultural politics today, a basic opposition exists between a post-modernism that seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo and a post-modernism which repudiates the former to celebrate the latter.’

Foster asked, ‘How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working?’ His answer was, ‘if truly radical (in the sense of radix: to the root), the reading will not be another accretion of the discourse; on the contrary, it will cut through the layers of paraphrase and pastiche that have obscured its theoretical core and blunted its political edge.’

On this basis, Foster supported appropriationist artists such as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger, whose revival of photography and montage literally cut and critiqued visual languages of power, through the use of negative aesthetics which were intended to reveal and resist traditional codes. In contrast Foster thought of neo-expressionist appropriation as ‘an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms,’ a ‘return to the verities of tradition,’ that exploited rather than critiqued cultural codes. Neo-expressionism was the ‘post-modernism of reaction…a gratuitous image drawn over the face of instrumentality.’

In his essay ‘The Expressive Fallacy’ Foster rejected neo-expressionism, arguing it rested on the fallacy that the self is ultimately a pure expression. In opposition to expression he believed the self is a construct and therefore there was no true self to express or be expressed. He believed ‘expressionism is…the official rhetoric of both our

100 Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, xii.
102 Ibid., 6.
103 *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, xiii.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 “The Expressive Fallacy.”
old metaphysical tradition and our new consumerist society. By linking self-expression and consumption he might critique his contemporary Madonna’s exhortation to *Express Yourself* as exemplary of this rhetoric, an affirmation of consumerist society in which to be in love (and to be free to choose to go shopping for records or neo-expressionist art perhaps) is the fulfilment of self-expression. In contrast to Madonna and official reactionary culture that sees and promotes it as essential and individual, Foster critiqued expression as a language and a code, undercutting its claims to immediacy, authenticity, and the expression of a pure interiority and supporting the view that the self is constructed from without socially and ideologically, to the extent that language speaks the subject. In the case of expressionism, Foster would argue that to express yourself, even with conviction and the greatest earnestness, is to speak the language of expression encoded in the deepest parts of your psyche. He says,

> Contrary to expressionist belief, the unconscious is not at our transparent disposal; indeed, on the Lacanian reading not only is the unconscious structured as a language, it is also the discourse of the other...mediated expressions ‘precede’ the artist: they speak him [sic] rather more than he [sic] expresses them...the expressionist self and sign belong to a pre-existent image-repertoire.

Foster believes German expressionism of the early twentieth century retained an element of authenticity, ‘because it expressed the conditions of a subject newly decentred by its unconscious, fragmented by its senses (especially in the industrial metropolis), diminished by the monolithic structures of monopoly capital and the state.’ In contrast, and in agreement with Owens’s idea that neo-expressionism reduced expressionism to conventions, Foster believed neo-expressionism was an example of false consciousness. He argued that contemporary alienation had become so much more complex that neo-expressionism couldn’t work as protest anymore and had become ‘an ideological exhibition of ‘subjectivity’,’ a superficial response to

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107 Ibid., 66.
108 *Express Yourself* is a dance pop song released in 1989 by Madonna, written by Madonna and Stephen Bray.
110 Ibid., 64.
111 Ibid.
capitalist society’s ‘demand for the irrational,’ a compensatory effect of late capitalist rationality, a rationalization of the irrational.

2.1.4 Conclusions from debate

The critiques of neo-expressionism by Craig Owens and Hal Foster were so effective they probably contributed to the fairly rapid critical and commercial demise of neo-expressionism from the mid-1980s and the parallel success of the critical photography based art that they supported. In the early 1980s they believed critique was the best form of resistance against the reactionary emptiness of neo-expressionism art. Critique had the advantage of being in a peripheral position and it had the benefit of its new analytic tools derived from contemporary French philosophy in the form of the deconstruction of language and power. In the next section, however, I argue that critique no longer has the advantage of being peripheral, but has become institutionalised, neutralised and has replaced expressionism as the rhetoric of capitalism.

2.2 The failure of critique

One understands the fatigue that many feel with critique today, especially when, taken as an automatic value, it hardens into a self-regarding posture. Certainly its moral righteousness can be oppressive, and its iconoclastic negativity destructive.

In this section I argue that critique has moved from the periphery to the centre of mainstream contemporary art and culture today, has lost its oppositional power to criticize and has replaced expressionism as the ideology of power. Critique is a discredited and superficial form complicit with power which all contemporary art is nevertheless expected to conform to. This is a difficult problem for artists who nevertheless want to make critical art even while it is officially sanctioned. If you make critical art, or write critically you are rewarded for doing it, and must assume therefore that is not threatening to those in power. Can expressionism be brought back to break this loop? Have the tables turned and does expressionism which has long been on the

112 Ibid., 48.
periphery now have the potential to be a critique of critique, critical of the jaded critique that everyone conforms to?

Transgression has followed a similar trajectory from effective oppositional strategy to accepted institutional trope that is neutralized by its context. As Matthew Hyland already noted in 1994 in his *Art New Zealand* review of the exhibition *150 Ways of Loving*, a show at the institutional setting of Artspace in Auckland that explored the then pervasive topic of pornography and art, ‘you can’t play tricks that throw an event into sublime, lawless consternation when its already agreed that ‘transgression is the law.’ Transgression remains the ‘law’ even after the 2001 destruction of the World Trade Centre and the so-called and on-going ‘war on terror’ and the curtailing of privacy and freedom in the West that have been justified as necessary for the effective conduct of the war.

Transgression and critique are enshrined as official rhetoric in ideas such as democracy and freedom of speech, but this language is revealed to be fraudulent when genuinely challenging voices of minorities demand the right to speak contrary to acceptable political positions and are subject to repression. Genuine transgression that is thought to be impossible then becomes necessary more than ever to address these issues. An example of this is the appearance of Zaky Mallah on ABC television program *Q&A* on 22 June, 2015. On the program Mallah, who was aquitted of terrorism charges in 2005, criticised a government minister over proposed legislation that would allow the retrospective stripping of citizenZenship from dual nationals who fall into the loosely defined category, ‘involved in terrorism.’ Mallah, who does not support the Islamic State organisation (IS), said the minister’s hard-line attitude might radicalise some Australian Muslims to join IS. His comments have been widely condemned and the

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115 "Citizenship would automatically be stripped from a person convicted of entering an area declared to be a no-go zone by the Australian government. This would occur even if the person has entered that area for innocent purposes, such as to do business, visit friends or undertake a religious pilgrimage. The same result would follow for a person convicted of damaging Commonwealth property or possessing a 'thing', such as a book or downloaded file from the Internet, that is in some way connected with terrorism." Glyn Moody, "Australia's New Law Would Strip Citizenship for Possessing a 'Thing' Connected with Terrorism, or Whistleblowing," Techdirt, https://www.techdirt.com/articles/20150627/02314831478/australias-new-law-would-strip-citizenship-possessing-thing-connected-with-terrorism-whistleblowing.shtml.
ABC is subject to an investigation into how it allowed Mallah to appear on the program. This intolerance of an alternative voice has been criticised as counter-productive by Jan Ali, senior lecturer in Islam and modernity at the University of Western Sydney. The Sydney Morning herald reports that Ali thinks ‘Mallah's assertion was a "valid and important response” to the debate over what causes radicalisation and whether the Abbott government is erring in its tactics against extremism.’ Nevertheless her position is a minority one.

If the moral righteousness and negativity of critique have contributed to its decline, critique’s failure has also been a major factor in its success; it has succeeded because it isn’t really critical anymore. I propose that a diluted and fake critique has become the official rhetoric of capitalism and that this proposal constitutes a critique of critique. In the thirty years since Foster wrote ‘The Expressive Fallacy’ capitalism continues to grow with the expansion of credit in the West and industrial production in the developing world. Since the 1980s the critical art that Foster supports has paralleled this growth, ironically become extremely successful commercially and institutionally, with artists such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince now among the most successful artists in the world. See the Artfacts website which rates these and other critical pop, conceptual and photography-based artists such as John Baldessari, Sigmar Polke and Ed Ruscha among the world’s top artists. Contemporary art has colonised the peripheries on a geo-political scale with biennales and franchised museums in exotic places and the dramatic growth of local art scenes, particularly in China where artists such as Ai Weiwei have become extremely successful commercially and critically. A global, critically styled contemporary art has been created, morphing from the avant-garde in the late 1970s to centre stage in culture now. It must be surmised that the global success of the ideology of critique indicates that it is favourable to the operations of capitalism, or at least that an accommodation or symbiotic relationship has been worked out between capital and its critic. This can only mean that critique isn’t critical anymore, since our political system does not tolerate real criticism despite its ideology of democracy and free speech. Critique has become the official language of the institution.

117 Ibid.
of art and of the capitalist system as a whole, absorbed and neutralised by the things it set out to dismantle.

2.2.1 Critique, the official rhetoric of capitalism

It is argued in appendix ‘Richard Prince: critique gone bad?’ that American appropriationist photographer Richard Prince’s most recent work is an example of official critical art, fake criticality that tries hard to maintain the aura of the real thing, and in doing so serves the status quo, art with full institutional and commercial support. The following observations support the idea that critique has become official doctrine.

Foster defends himself against the criticism that his theory (that the subject is a construction) is superficial when he talks about the ‘cliché about…the consumerist modelling of the subject: that we can be made and remade in terms of new clothes, cars and cuisines…for many people “post-modernism” is not much more than hip, knowing consumerism.’ He is right that it is a cliché, however it is a cliché that reveals some truth because the phenomenon is so marked in everyday life where the subject complicates knowingness with constant critical questioning, negotiating guilt, irony and self-interest. In these critical loopings, self-expression could be said to have been replaced by critique; we are no longer obsessed with expressing ourselves but with critiquing ourselves (and others). For example, one might say or think, ‘I love online shopping,’ and this ironic emphasis signals both enjoyment of online shopping and a simultaneous self-critical post-Marxist commentary of that activity and its enjoyment, the emphasis implying an awareness of issues of post-colonial critiques of globalised markets, exploitation, third world sweatshops, child labour, slavery and other issues. Knowingness doesn’t stop the shopping though, it just makes it more complex, ambiguous, conflicted and possibly more enjoyable for those reasons, because the shopper is so cynical. Foster points out in relation to primitivism that remorse is an excuse (see Chapter 3.1.3). Applying that idea here, it can be seen that by feeling bad about what we do, we let ourselves off the hook of the consequences of our actions.

119 Hal Foster et al., eds., Art since 1900, Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 678.
Foster might agree that critique is now the law, but he sees the problem from a different point of view when he argues that critique has almost disappeared from cultural and intellectual life, especially in academia where he says a culture of affirmation and conformity has taken over reflecting wider political changes.\textsuperscript{120} His argument is similar to this author’s because critique that has disappeared is like critique that has become an official façade, spread so thinly over culture that it doesn’t work anymore as an oppositional position, but has become empty and rhetorical.

Evidence that critique has become official rhetoric is everywhere in popular culture. Movies, advertisements and TV are self-referential, ironic and acknowledge their conditions. For example, television news and current affairs presenters are often pictured against the background workings of the news room with people visible at computers or busily carrying around bits of paper, or as the \textit{Daily Mail} newspaper has exposed, doing things like stretching their arms, picking their nose, and other activities, as seen on the BBC News 24 Channel (fig.44).

These clever revelations could be staged as they actually provide a sense of authenticity (and publicity), a warts and all, you can trust us to reveal everything about what’s going on including what goes on in our own office. However, this revealing of the hidden apparatus is a superficial self-critique that is more like decor because it reveals nothing apart from the general idea that news is produced. The real apparatus of corporate decision making and political, economic and financial affiliations are kept well-hidden while the pretence of transparency works to head off deeper questioning of the construction of the news, the events that it depicts and the interests that shape them.

Another example is the reality TV genre which purports to present the behind the scenes as the content, the grooming of contestants on talent shows and the nuts and bolts of home renovation scheming as the truth, but these revelations become pseudo-critiques of those industries and TV formats, scripted and aestheticised. Mockumentaries - documentaries that mock and critique the objectivity of the documentary form by obviously faking it – have become so subtle in their fakeness and critical looping, that sometimes it is difficult to tell that they are not ‘real’ documentaries. Take for example

\textsuperscript{120} Foster, "Post-Critical."
the English film *Dreams of a Life* shown in the 2012 Sydney Film Festival about a woman forgotten by her friends who dies alone in her flat and whose body is discovered a year later. It is not clear whether the film is a straight documentary, a purely fictional mockumentary, a ‘documentary-fiction hybrid’\(^{121}\) based on a true story, but rewritten and acted, or a mash-up of elements of these types. It is possible this ambiguity is deliberate, designed to feed the critical appetites of its audience. Movies reference and cross-reference themselves, pop eats itself, and advertisements themselves have become an art form on the level of miniature movies, where they are advertised, hyped, anticipated, ‘released’, consumed and critiqued.\(^{122}\) *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter,* blogging and micro-blogging mean everyone is a critic, we are all ‘knowing’ (or ‘all knowing’), or think we are.

For a consideration of the idea that critique is so debased that it is hard to tell it from conspiracy theory, see the appendix ‘Conspiracy theory and the façade of transparency.’

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\(^{122}\) See this article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* online from February 1, 2013, which reports on, and/or previews, and/or is an advertisement for advertisements that will be shown at a major sporting event. [http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/hot-diggity-melbourne-musician-gets-4m-super-bowl-slot-20130201-Zdpeo.html](http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/hot-diggity-melbourne-musician-gets-4m-super-bowl-slot-20130201-Zdpeo.html).
2.3 **Complicity, institutionalised conceptualism and pervasive ambiguity**

2.3.1 **Johanna Drucker and complicity**

In her 2005 book *Sweet Dreams: contemporary art and complicity*, Johanna Drucker, agrees with the idea that critique has broken down and doesn’t work anymore in contemporary art, but she puts a positive spin on the issue by dispensing with critique altogether and replacing it with the ideas of complicity and creativity. What Krauss disparagingly calls the post-medium condition, the relative universe of contemporary art where the solid grounding of critical rigour is absent, Drucker sees as full of creative potentials and exuberance, ‘a reawakening of affirmative sensibilities,’ unfettered by moralising distinctions between art and commerce, or good and bad. She argues that art can never be outside culture and critique it from a position of moral superiority and so complicity with popular culture is the real and unavoidable condition of contemporary art. Because art is part of culture, not separate from it, critique’s negative and oppositional dichotomies don’t work anymore as critical tools, and this must be accepted as the beginning of a new approach.

It is ironic that Drucker uses the idea of complicity to criticise critique when more than twenty years ago Hal Foster, in his article ‘Subversive Signs’ of 1986, argued that the critical artists who interested him then, such as Allan McCollum and Louise Lawler, were already complicit, ‘ironic collaborators’ within the institutional art system. He says,

> it may be unclear whether the Lawler gambits subvert the mechanisms of art exhibition, circulation and consumption or play them to the hilt [...] Like a dye in the bloodstream, the work of these artists does delineate the circulation system of art, but it also operates within its terms.125

That complicity has its origins in the very kind of art and theory she criticises, doesn’t invalidate Drucker’s argument however. Foster’s description shows that the original

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124 Ibid., xvi.
critical art was flexible and responsive to its context, and Drucker’s argument that contemporary critique has become hardened into rhetoric, appears to actually fit in with Foster’s view. Foster after all has said something very similar to Drucker, quoted above, that critique now, ‘hardens into a self-regarding posture [and…] its moral righteousness can be oppressive.’

So although they agree that critique is in crisis, they disagree on how to respond, Foster still believes critique is possible while Drucker turns towards creativity.

Drucker traces critique’s failure to its origins in the moral division inherited from modernism which she says simplistically divided attitudes into good and bad faith. She argues that the canon of the formalist avant-garde was constructed by a process of purification through the separation of fine art from commercial art and popular culture and the deployment of a condemnatory attitude that excluded art that had not been purified by higher aesthetic purpose. This process excluded all art that didn’t fit into ‘one reading of one strain of visual work produced in that brief period from about 1913 to 1963 (Kasimir Malevich’s Black Square to Donald Judd’s Specific Objects).’

Drucker says of these exclusionary constructions of the avant-garde canon, ‘Mythic though they were, these belief systems do not accurately describe either our current condition or our past history.’ Drucker argues that critique and its avant-garde predecessors incorrectly assumed there can be an outside to contemporary culture, a superior objective position. She says, ‘…nor can it [fine art] assume superiority as if operating outside of the ideologies it has long presumed to critique. Fine art, artists and critics exist in a condition of complicity with the institutions and values of contemporary culture,’ and, ‘the ‘other’ [the state, religion, commerce and the culture industry that art was to critique], was never outside of culture but was an integrated component of its values, systems, and operations.’

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127 Drucker, Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity, 80.
128 Ibid., 252.
129 Ibid., 247.
130 Ibid., 9.
Drucker maintains modernism was never pure and separate from the things it critiqued, but always complicit and full of ‘bad faith’,

...the conditions of contemporary art do not present a fall from grace from an earlier state of modern purity ...The history of modernism contains every feature of complicity...Every instance of playful engagement, of serious exchange, of complex attraction and adoration and longing through which symbolic forms circulate in the social cultural world today, can be linked to antecedents.¹³¹

From the history of modernism Drucker cites examples to support her view that modernism was much bigger and more conflicted than the ‘pure’ story of the avant-garde. William Morris she says ‘is deemed the paradigm of correctness,’¹³² but is ignored because his work is ‘not interesting,’¹³³ compromised by commercialism, conflicted utopian impulses and its medieval references. She argues to the contrary that he is interesting ‘precisely because of the flaws it [his work] embodies and the challenges it poses.’¹³⁴ She also cites other artists excluded from the accepted critical canon of avant-gardism such as Gustave Moreau, Winslow Homer and Balthus, figurative painters who fall outside the formalist canon of the avant-garde, but who should be appreciated for their creative imaginations.

Following from post-modern critique’s inheritance of objectivity and critical distance from modernism - which are at odds with current ideas about subjectivity which hold that there is no outside to culture and no possibility of objective critical positions – is the problem of hypocrisy. Drucker believes critical ‘rhetoric has gone formulaic. The oppositional resistance has become aligned with entrenched interests, including its own. Artwork termed ‘political’ often serves a stabilizing function, helping to maintain the cultural status quo.’¹³⁵ She sees this problem as ‘flagrant’¹³⁶ because institutional

¹³¹ Ibid., 251.
¹³² Ibid., 250.
¹³³ Ibid.
¹³⁴ Ibid.
¹³⁵ Ibid., 5.
¹³⁶ Ibid., 9.
criticality does not critique its own power, but uses the formula to reinforce its political position.

In place of hypocritical critique dependent on the false idea of critical distance and self-immunity, Drucker’s idea of complicity rejects objectivity. The condition of immersion within mass culture is acknowledged as the first step to being genuinely critical. Speaking about the contemporary American photographer Gregory Crewdson, one of her key examples, she says,

*Clearly seduced by the artfulness of his own art, Crewdson doesn’t flinch from acknowledging his allegiance to major systems of cultural production on which the specific character of his work relies. His exposure of this particular ‘bad faith’ is what allows the critic to be honest, for a change. This admission of complicity, in which self-interest plays a part, rather than a claim to ‘resistance,’ or ‘aloof separation,’ or ‘distance,’ is the starting point of critical awareness. We are all within the ideologies that artistic means bring into focus and form.*

Drucker’s argument, as a critique of critique, is very convincing in its demonstration of the weaknesses of critique now, especially the latter’s reliance on a moralising division between good and bad, high and low, and inside and outside, which she argues does not represent the real situation now or in modernism. Drucker’s theory offers a way to engage with the complex realities of contemporary art through honesty and acceptance of the way things are, one’s unavoidable condition of immersion within culture. The negative side of it, however, is the difficulties it confronts the artist with in its complexity, making life harder by removing what may have been simpler and more useful positions of ‘resistance’ and ‘distance.’ The artist could find her/himself lost without clear signposts, caught in complex, ambiguous and contradictory forms of politics and positioning where the need to constantly negotiate and reposition leads to debilitation, alienation and cynicism. It could even be argued that Drucker is a cheerleader for rampant and promiscuous relations between contemporary art and capitalism where complicity is an open invitation to produce whatever kind of art is

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137 Ibid., 11.
needed to find a market, either in the openly commercial scene of galleries and auctions, or as art negotiating the political marketplace of the institutional context, or both.

Is it a weakness in her argument that Drucker must reintroduce good and bad into her theory of complicity; good complicity which acknowledges its complicit condition, and bad complicity which does not? Taking Marcia Tucker’s idea of *bad* which is actually good, presumably there are in Drucker’s universe such things as *good* complicity (read bad complicity because it hides its real motives behind a façade of transparency) and *bad* complicity. *Bad* complicity might initially look bad because it appears to hide its complicity behind transgressive but empty political gestures, but it turns out to be good complicity when investigated more closely. What appeared to be an empty gesture, for example, may have been an ironic presentation of an empty gesture to show it up. Within such a dance of good and bad, *bad* and *good*, innumerable recombinations are imaginable where complexity could quickly outstrip comprehension and lead to confusion and even a blanketing ambiguity.

*Bad* complicity might be a useful idea to consider in relation to artists Brooke Andrew and Tino Sehgal, to see whether they actually escape from a conformist kind of complicity. These two artists are discussed in appendices ‘The promotional use of a Brooke Andrew artwork,’ and ‘Tino Sehgal’s ambiguous immateriality.’ In particular Sehgal’s work is considered to evaluate whether or not it hides its complicity, is therefore corrupt and representative of conceptualism’s failed critique of institutional power and the art commodity, and therefore the kind of work new expressive materiality reacts against in its return to the object and authenticity.

### 2.3.2 Is the author’s work complicit?

How do I see my own position? It is inevitable that all contemporary artists are complicit one way or another because contemporary art, although it hangs onto the idea of criticality, completely rejects the possibility of positions outside itself. It all has to take place inside the system; as Drucker says ‘we are all within the ideologies that artistic means bring into focus and form.’\footnote{Ibid.} Contemporary artists do not take the idea of working outside the system seriously the way the post-impressionist painters Paul

\footnote{Ibid.}
Cezanne and Vincent Van Gogh did; that kind of radicalism is regarded as illusory, self-defeating or just plain daggy.

We are all thought to be inside the system, but despite its rhetoric of difference and the complexity of its politics, it is almost monolithic, with only limited acceptable kinds of art and pathways to success through certain networks, galleries, museums, exhibitions and institutional opportunities. Artists inevitably conform. The content of the work follows the same principle; it must be ambiguous and complex. (See my discussions of primitivism and authenticity in Chapter 3 for examples of this.)

I intend my work to be individual and different, using ceramic figurative sculpture with sexual content and exotic subjects to contravene expectations of technological, immaterial, abstract, bodiless and correct post-colonial content, but it could be argued that this intention is undermined because the work is made in relation to the system and is therefore part of it. I imagine my work contrary to the system while simultaneously aspiring to recognition of its contrariness. It is an unresolved position that could be the definition of bad complicity, equivocal, hypocritical, or even lost because it will ultimately submit to conformity, or does it admit to complicity while holding onto the hope (or delusion) of independence, making fun of complicity and conformity by being bad. Either way it is conflicted compared to say the young artists of DIS magazine, discussed in section 2.5.3. These artists are upfront about their commercial complicity, unequivocally into branding and selling fashion, and regarded by some as radical because of their unabashed complicity in contrast to hypocritical angsting about, but conformity to, complicity.

2.4 Expressive reaction to commodification and ambiguity of non-object art

Drucker’s answer to the problem of the failure of critique in contemporary art, is imagination and its vehicle artifice. She places them as the artistic keys to engaging with the complexities of the complicit condition. Of imagination she says, ‘Art made to serve an agenda - moral, religious, critical, political, therapeutic [to which could be added ‘curatorial’] - suffers from the limitations of those framing religiosities. Creative imagination must out-strip the program of its initial impulse, for that is where imagination lies – in a dynamic process of reimagining whose outcome is unknown in
advance of the act.’ Artifice, she says, is ‘the very essence of artistic activity…the potent instrument of insight into the machinations of the real.’ Artifice involves, not purity, but ‘facture as a complex, multivalent core of artistic production’ that would be much better suited than oppositional critique to reflecting, engaging with and commenting on the complex multivalence of contemporary life and culture.

Drucker quotes T. J. Clark in support of her ideas about imagination, saying that when Clark challenged the dominance of Greenbergian formalism in the 1960s, he, ‘provided a way to think beyond the sterile formulations of formalism and arrive at a sense of the social purpose of even the most esoteric aesthetic practices,’ and, his ‘major theme is that modern artists tasked themselves to ‘imagine otherwise.’ To imagine otherwise seems to be Drucker’s project, to imagine an otherwise to the redundancy of academic critique. She imagines, or observes, in the work of contemporary artists something new: ‘post-modern critique… inscribed an arch ironic distance to both making and representing. But in the place of this diffidence and disdain, a distinct mood of engaged, expressive affectivity has come into play…a reflective, self-conscious artifice.’

If critique has become the transparently empty rhetoric of culture, and conceptualism has become institutionalised, opaque and ambiguous, do Drucker’s idea of imagining otherwise and Tucker’s idea of the bad offer something new? Are they connected with the return of expressionist tendencies as a counter position, where expressionism seems potentially authentic and critical again, as it was for a moment when Tucker curated “Bad” Painting? Is expressionism more direct and honest than the alienating complexities of critique and irony? If it is authentic, will expressionism go through a cycle to exhaustion again? Or is expressionism just as complicit as all other art now, as it was criticised to have been in the 1980s?

With these general questions in mind I want to look at several artists who make sculptural objects in the traditional sense, using clay as an element in the process of making. Their work conforms to the ‘look’ of current lumpy art, roughly made,

139 Ibid., 251.
140 Ibid., 9.
141 Ibid., 10.
142 Ibid., 6.
143 Ibid., 10.
appearing to foreground the hand of the artist, dealing with emotive gestures, dramatic or expressive subject matter, reengaging with outmoded ideas such as universality, and sometimes in conscious confrontation with established conceptual practices.

2.4.1 Thomas Houseago and the anti-conceptual

Resident in Los Angeles since 2003, the English sculptor Thomas Houseago is a successful contemporary artist who rejected conceptualism in the 1990s and instead looked to the modernist and expressionist tradition of artists such as Auguste Rodin (cf. figs.45,46), Pablo Picasso (cf. figs.48,49 and 51,52), Eduardo Paolozzi (cf. figs.46,47) and neo-expressionists such as Georg Baselitz (cf. figs.53,54) and Jean-Michel Basquiat (cf. figs.49,50) for inspiration to work with the human figure. His monster action figures reject post-conceptual contemporary art and are personal and expressive. Cornelius Tittel, in the introduction to his interview with Houseago in 032c magazine, describes what the artist does as, ‘the single most unfashionable thing in the world…representative sculpture, produced in clay.’\(^{144}\) The irony is that what has been unfashionable right up until now,\(^{145}\) is now the latest thing, with Houseago and many other neo-figurative sculptors enjoying success in recent years. Houseago’s large scale grotesque figures made using clay and cast in bronze or high strength plaster (Tuf-Cal) with steel armatures, have been shown in exhibitions such as the 2010 Whitney Biennial in New York and The Shape of Things to Come, a 2012 survey exhibition of contemporary sculpture at the Saatchi Gallery, London.

Although his work draws on the history of monumental Western sculpture, it is seen by some as critical of this tradition. Carter B. Horsley quotes from the Whitney catalogue,

Thomas Houseago creates figurative sculptures that are at once physically imposing and emotively powerful in their scale and positioning yet purposefully disjointed and vulnerable in their construction. Houseago's


\(^{145}\) Unfashionable in mainstream contemporary art, though not so unfashionable in ceramics, see section 1.6.3 where other contemporary figurative artists are discussed.
roughly finished and fragmented creatures stand in pointed contrast to the macho and indestructible nature of traditional monumental sculpture.  

How true is this observation? Does Houseago’s work have a critical edge or are his monsters, as Acconci observed of neo-expressionism, satisfying a market need for traditional figurative art after so much unsaleable video?

Between 1991 and 1994 Houseago studied at Central St Martins art school in London where he says, ‘Art was meant to be this post-Duchampian proposition. I was looked at, as a sculptor, as a laughable, pathetic, hopeless character…back in those days it was deemed unacceptable.’ Of the art world which fosters conformity to post-minimal and post-conceptual art, he says,

*it is fine to have a system and people who feel they know what is or should happen and that they belong, it is great for them. But you also need people who are wandering in the forest.*

Although he now operates out of a vast studio with numerous assistants, Houseago sees himself in the image of the solitary romantic artist whose mission is to hand make sculpture with authority and monumentality.

*Everything looked so cynical in the 90s…I like that I couldn’t be this hyper-smug-savvy figure who is laughing at the world. I just wanna make sure that the act of sculpture and the act of looking at it doesn’t get lost…Society needs to see objects that have no reason to be made…without a practical reason [or a purely economic one]*

Houseago’s work is influenced not only by modernist sculpture but also by popular culture, particularly the movies, TV, comics and music of his childhood, including superheroes such as Spiderman. The hulky grotesqueness of his work is said in his press releases to express a heroic quality and a contrasting and affecting vulnerability. This is visible in the way the artist reveals the innards and skeletal construction of his
sculptures, and in the fast, expressive working process, crude modelling, lack of finish and DIY look, the montaging of disparate and awkward elements of drawing, flat planes, rounded forms and fleshy textures.

Houseago’s great lumpy pieces could be criticized as reactionary, macho posturing and expressionist excess in the vein of the neo-expressionists of the 1970s and 80s such as Georg Baselitz. There probably is a link with those artists because Houseago’s formative years were the 1980s when as a teenager discovering art he has said he was deeply affected by the exhibition *Late Picasso* at the Tate Gallery, London in 1988. Picasso’s late paintings had been regarded as the decadent and inferior products of a formerly great artist who had lost the plot, but they were beginning to be reassessed in the 1970s. Many of these paintings were included in the exhibition *A New Spirit in Painting* which helped define neo-expressionism. After another revival in painting during the 1990s and 2000s characterized by figuration, experimentation and diversity, Picasso again appears influential on artists such as George Condo who in his painting freely pastiches elements from various Picasso styles with pop culture references. Picasso’s late paintings were once criticized as childish scrawlings, but they now look spontaneous and mature, perfectly integrating complete freedom of expression with flexible formal structure. This is the impression I get looking at them now in the *Late Picasso* catalogue, in contrast to my memory of disliking them in the early 1980s. Houseago has looked at Picasso’s sculpture for ways of representing the figure, for example as monochrome spatial organisations, arrangements of flat plans to be drawn on, as weighty volumes planted on the floor with big feet, and as skeletal formations.


Figure 52. (top right) Thomas Houseago, title and date unknown. Bronze. Reproduced from Google, https://www.google.com.au/search?q=thomas+houseago+sculpture&biw=1561&bih=885&tbs=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0CBwQsARqFQoTCL7NxNOz58cCFYQipgod73cJ0A#imgrc=j1I7BQyZJd6cEM%. Accessed 9 September, 2015.


Although Houseago could be labelled a neo-expressionist (or neo-neo-expressionist), it is ironic that it is Los Angeles conceptual artist John Baldessari, and post-modernists Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley (as well as Thomas Schutte and Marlene Dumas who taught him at post-grad level in Antwerp) who he acknowledges as giving him support and encouragement to follow his own unfashionable modernist path.

_There was no dogma, you’re never gonna hear John Baldessari saying that one kind of art is better than another, or that a certain artist should not be shown. Like Paul McCarthy, I met him really early and he was like: ‘Go for it!’ Mike Kelly [sic] and Paul really set up a very free, strange, dynamic, exciting atmosphere for younger artists to enter. L.A. is a frontier town with a fantastic wealth of energy and that’s what really saved me._

A complaint against Houseago could be similar to that made against the neo-expressionists, that he makes art for dealers and collectors who want expensive and expansive grandly scaled works that don’t critique the art establishment. Houseago and his scary monsters are patronised by the most influential galleries and collectors in the world such as Hauser & Wirth and Gagosian Gallery, and collectors Charles Saatchi and Francois-Henri Pinault, so that interpretation is possible. However these same galleries and collectors also patronise artists who are considered radical such as Martin Creed and Urs Fischer, so the idea that commercial success invalidates criticality or radicalism doesn’t seem to hold, unless those radical artists aren’t so radical after all. Drucker’s idea of complicity might be more appropriate to Houseago. His work could be complicit and knowing expressionism; the artist knows that expressionism is probably viewed as a reactionary style but carries on anyway because he believes he is working with integrity on work he believes in, and is just lucky to have become successful.

People might yawn at this debate being gone over yet again, the evils of financial compensation for art, of compromise and selling-out. Drucker would say get over it, accept it and move on, that’s the way the world is and there are ways of operating and manoeuvring that are workable and that ethical research at these borders is valuable.

150 Ibid.
Drucker’s critique of critique’s hypocrisy is echoed recently by Christopher Glazek writing in *Artforum* online, where he identifies the embracing of commerce as an avant-garde strategy by young American artists of the post-internet generation associated with *DIS* magazine who are focussed on branding through ‘tribal affiliation’, aspiring to industrial production, foregrounding corporate sponsorship from the beverage manufacturer Red Bull, making their magazine pay and selling fashion in their exhibition *DISown*. Glazek says,

*DISown’s upfront commercialism served then to rebuke artists...whose market value relies on presenting their work as somehow outside the market system. DISown thereby issued a critique, not of mass commercialism, but of the hypocrisy of the market’s marketable pretence of art for art’s sake. Large corporations underwrite museum exhibitions all the time: The difference with DISown was that it highlighted Red Bull’s involvement instead of concealing it. The result, the show wanted us to believe, was aura without the hypocrisy.*

It is interesting to note that Glazek casts the *DIS* artists’ project not only as embracing the market, but also as a critique of its hypocritical workings; he does not abandon the idea of art having a critical role to play, although the critical element becomes secondary, an after effect of the open engagement with the market, their primary objective.

When identifying the origins of this new market-oriented trend in avant-garde art, Glazek suggests a background similar to Drucker’s, one of disenchantment with academic art, particularly the idea that transgression itself had become a formula. He says,

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152 The post-internet generation are those who have had no experience or memory of a time without the internet.
153 Glazek writes that he advised friends, of the same generation as the DIS artists, and with similar motivations and goals, who wanted to name their project, ‘If sounding contemporary was the goal, I argued, the vibe to cultivate was industrial and collaborative. “Leave the medieval blacksmith thing to the craft breweries.” Being a craftsman hadn’t been cool since 2006. Embracing the post-artisanal, pro-commercial turn was an important part of claiming membership in the rising contingent of tastemakers.
154 Glazek, "Shopkeepers of the World Unite".
For an emerging crop of Insta-queers, lonely girls, and slacker bros, the market—especially the digital marketplace, with its emphasis on clarity, preening subjectivity, and infinite accessibility—suggested an alternative to the onerous grant applications and bureaucratic ring-kissing that drove the art-academic complex. Weary of the rigorless ramblings of adjuncts, many art-school grads found themselves inspired by hot designers and dropout entrepreneurs. It wasn’t hard to see how these figures more readily suggested the cowboy ethos of the creative outlaw than did traditional artists, who came freighted with a “transgressive” framework that often eluded actual transgression.¹⁵⁵

From the point of view of Glazek’s groovy kids, Houseago’s commercialism would be no problem, but his persona of the macho expressionist might strike them as over-blown and outdated, not to mention hypocritical, acting the rebel while furnishing him with a marketable pose and the institutional, and rich with ‘transgressive’ art. Foster might agree with Drucker and Glazek that academic critique has become unstuck, but he would argue for its revitalisation and probably have no trouble denouncing an artist like Houseago as a reactionary neo-neo-expressionist, and perhaps the post-internet kids as naive.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.
¹⁵⁶ From Foster’s point of view, Baume could also be criticised as an apologist of reactionary institutional power, given the way Baume offers an uncritical account of expressionism that revives old arguments in its favour. Baume’s revival of public bronze statues could be seen as the ultimate in reactionary politics because although he hasn’t erected monuments to civic worthies or national heroes, he has referred to that history in establishing the credentials of his show in a way that sets a precedent for public art that celebrates political power structures.
2.4.2 Ugo Rondinone and universality

Ranging in height from 16 to 20 feet, they weigh up to 30,000 lbs each...these primal forms...the elemental material of stone...[are] archetypal...Mythic in scale and imagery, visceral in character and impact, 'Human Nature' reconnects the contemporary world with our distant origins.\textsuperscript{157}


If expressionism is returning to contemporary art in reaction to the decay of critique and its absorption into popular culture, it could be seen as returning in a more personal mode, where artists try to work out difficult and conflicted positions between expression and critique. I suggest that New York resident Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone works in this way making work that combines poetic and monumental expressivity that appeals to an audience on a basic emotional level while still retaining an element of critical commentary.
Materials and their processes play a big part in his work especially transactions between materials. These material games can be seen to combine the elements of poetry and critique by questioning the truth or permanence of materials, by interchanging them and dabbling in cosmic and poetic relativity. Clay plays a part in this as a fundamental element, as do other earthier materials such as rock and simulations of them. For example, his work *Diary of Clouds* (fig.60) consists of 64 small wax objects on wood shelves; the objects were cast from modelled clay and reveal the artists’ finger impressions, the markings transferred from clay to wax, only to disappear as the wax disintegrates. Rondinone’s *Big Mind Sky* (fig.61) is a more complex train of material exchanges. The work is twelve large scale sculptures constructed originally out of clay over Styrofoam cores, then cast in aluminium and painted to look like clay. This convoluted procedure seems intent on retaining the look of clay but in a more permanent form and on reflecting back from the permanent finished object to the process of its making. His group of seventeen sculptures entitled *we run through a desert on burning feet, all of us are glowing our faces look twisted* (fig.62) of 2013, are copies of original scholars’ rocks digitally scanned, enlarged and outputted in concrete. The long title is a haiku poem that Rondinone puts through multiple transformations. The rocks become concrete forms, becoming running figures melting into blobs under the elemental action of heat, molten bodies in motion.

In *Human Nature* (fig.55) Rondinone forgoes complex material exchanges for more direct action and expression, rough bluestone quarried and hewn into primitive stacked shapes closely reminiscent of Inuit *inuksuk* (fig.56), meaning ‘in the likeness of a human,’ ‘someone was here,’ or ‘you are on the right path.’ The Inuit stone markers were used to indicate and point to many things such as sacred places, directions to hunting grounds and the highest point of land. Rondinone’s appropriation turns venerated objects into corporate art, perhaps a sly critique on the Rockefeller Centre business context of the installation in Manhattan. It is interesting that the artist would have employed trucks and cranes to put his work in place, unlike the Inuit who presumably used stone age technologies in much more challenging conditions. The post and lintel architectural form of *Human Nature* also looks like the stone age monument

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Stonehenge. It is also likely to be indebted to the modernist sculptural tradition of primitivist post and lintel forms and abstract references to the standing figure, from Brancusi’s totemic stacks, through mid-century English modernist William Turnbull’s gates (fig. 58) and totems, Swiss sculptor Hans Josephsohn’s megaliths (fig. 59), to the stone piles of New Zealand artist Chris Booth (fig. 57).

Rondinone speaks about *Human Nature* in Jungian terms saying, ‘the stone figure is the most archetypal representation of the human form; an elemental symbol of the human spirit, connected to the earth yet mythic in the imagination. The image of the figure belongs to nobody, is timeless, and universal.’ He also says, ‘It is not an intellectual work, it is a work you have to feel.’

The Public Art Fund website repeats these terms in its discussion of the work, saying also that, ‘Rondinone’s poetic and evocative work explores the emotional and psychic depth of human experience.’ The universalism of this language might strike the contemporary post-post-modernist as incredibly modernist, dated and reactionary especially because Rondinone’s work is usually spoken about in more post-modern terms such as desire. Has Rondinone been reborn a modernist? Because Rondinone is a very successful operator in the contemporary art world it must be assumed that he is knowingly using outmoded and unfashionable aesthetic language, so why has he returned to something more naïve and authentic, going back to modernism, the pre-history of post-modernism? Are the sculptures about the indomitable spirit of New York City that won’t be crushed by adversity, but will prevail, anchored in such timeless truths as the strength, simplicity and permanence represented by the massive monumentality of the sculptures? Is Rondinone being direct and genuine about it because he is part of a Swiss diaspora in New York, along with other ex-patriot artists such as Urs Fischer and Olaf Breuning, and familiar with the city’s sensitive and long-term post-911 and post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) economic, emotional and psychic condition, where it must face a future where it is no longer the unassailable centre of the world (or art world.) He may have felt the need to make a statement of confidence in the city and its people. *Human Nature* is a commission from the Public Art Fund, an organization closely associated with the city.
of New York, providing it with public art projects, so the artist may have produced the work with a civic theme of solidarity and hope to suit his sponsors and the architectural context.

So has Rondinone created a work with a simple message of affirmation of human nature, a traditional and essentialist sculpture, or is he looking more critically, perhaps presenting a reflection on the collective desire for the sanctuary of such ideas? Maybe the diverging approaches co-exist in the work, appealing on different levels to his audience, giving to those who desire consolation the idea of spirit and timelessness, and to those who want reflection, the representation of that desire. If so, the work couldn’t be called critique really, because although it deconstructs the desire, it also soothes and placates its audience. Nor does it critique the broader political and power relations behind the work in any sense other than the way the figures’ architectonic squareness, verticality, stackedness and massiveness echo the surrounding Manhattan skyscrapers, and the way the work stands, perhaps ironically for the artist, next to flagpoles flying the flags of numerous countries in an apparent display of accord.

A critic might suggest that the absence of explicit critique means the work falls in line with reactionary politics. This critic might call the sculpture kitsch because its archaic Stonehenge reference with deliberately rough-hewn surfaces and post and lintel structures overstate the idea of the primitive. The work could be read as a fundamentalist political statement about permanence, authority and stature but there’s something incongruous or kitsch about the way the sculpture will be dismantled from its white platform after a couple of months and taken away. It is a portable Stonehenge, wheeled in and out again, exposed as a simulation that can be viewed as an uncritical affirmation of its civic and financial district context.

Judging from an interview, Rondinone is going all the way with essentialist concepts talking about making Human Nature as ‘basic’ as possible to make it work as effective and affective public sculpture. He says,

_These stone figures are the complete opposite of the site [Rockefeller Plaza]. Midtown is a very densely developed area, so I wanted to come in with something very fundamental in terms of material and subject. All the figures are titled after our fundamental feelings [e.g. ‘Sad’, ‘Ecstatic’]_,
‘Calm’... There needs to be a more direct approach. The work should get a universal reaction... The work should be as simple, dumb, or as stupid as possible... I wanted to bring something really ancient to something modern, almost like a reminder of our basic being.\textsuperscript{161}

‘Our fundamental feelings’, ‘a universal reaction,’ and ‘our basic being’ are essentialist concepts, and are usually thought to be based on the assumption of an integrated humanistic subject, the opposite of the post-modern deconstructed subject. Nevertheless the artist retains an escape clause, saying, ‘But I never say why I’m doing what I’m doing.’\textsuperscript{162} So if he is not telling us everything, the question remains about what his motivations are and how he really sees the work. Is it essentialist and reactionary, or is that just a temporary position he takes for the sake of that particular artwork? Maybe Rondinone wants to embrace those archaicisms, to express and experience fundamental feelings such as ‘the human spirit’ and ‘the universal,’ while simultaneously commenting on them to reveal that desire and human nature are constructions within the politicized field of culture. Maybe he wants to be a knowing and critical expressionist, or an expressive critic. Is this workable, or do these sculptures represent the end of critique?

2.5 Critical expression

Although Houseago can easily be criticised as a reactionary expressionist, his clear positioning in reaction to what he believed was cynical conceptualism - which could be exemplified by an artist like Tino Sehgal - gives him Tucker-like critical value. Shechet’s wild, lumpy forms are similarly bad because she consciously positions herself against post-minimalist/post-conceptualist art with a sensual, materialist practice. Ironically, when she returns to deconstruction in her Meissen work, it is less effective than her expressive work (confirming the failure of critique). By returning to essentialist ideas like human nature Rondinone is also clearly staking a contrary position in relation to the relativity of contemporary art and is bad for doing it.


\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
However, if, according to Adamson, the post-conceptual art world is ‘a world in which every artwork is expected to be, in some sense, a proposition about art’ then all this conscious positioning and badness could be criticised as post-conceptual itself, merely a relative game of strategy and counter propositions. So are these artists making genuinely expressive work, are they just strategists, or is their work critical not necessarily as its primary intention, but because of what it is, expressive, personal and different? Is it possible genuine expression and conscious positioning co-exist in a critical expression that is complicit in Drucker’s sense, negotiating the boundaries between authenticity and compromise, idealism and realism, self and politics?

To support the idea of a critical expression, some criticisms of Foster’s critique of expressionism follow. If Foster’s criticism of expressionism is that it is reactionary because it is based on the false (in his view) conception of essentialist subjectivity, then if Foster’s objections can be shown to be flawed, then the idea that expressionism has other more radical possibilities would have more support. The author proposes that Foster is incorrect in his assumption that expressionism depends on an essentialist view of subjectivity. Even if there is no pure self, no exterior or transcendental source of expression, this doesn’t necessarily prove that expression is not possible, because the constructed self, the subject spoken by language nevertheless suffers (because we know we are not real) and this suffering is expressible. This would challenge Foster’s argument that expression is a fallacy. This kind of argument might support the idea of a knowing and critical expressionist, possibly Rondinone (see previous section), the expressionist who knows that the self, desire, human nature and the world are constructed through language, but realises this is also an essential reality that can be expressed through art. This idea of an on-going and reflective linkage between essentialist and deconstructive points of view on expression echoes a similar link discussed in Chapter One between essentialist phenomenological and deconstructionist views on subjectivity; they can be argued in ever increasing detail, revealing their close interconnection. Critical expressiveness emerges as a more challenging alternative to the status quo of exhausted and hypocritical critique.

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163 Adamson, Thinking through Craft, 42.
This argument suggests that there are a range of expressionisms, from self-indulgent to politically motivated expressionism. Recently there have been several high profile interventions into the smooth running of institutional art in the USA: at the 2014 Dia Art Foundation’s Carl Andre retrospective there was a protest related to the 1982 death of the artist’s partner artist Ana Mendieta and claims about Andre’s not fully explained involvement in it and a possible institutional cover-up; artist Maximo Caminero’s destruction of a painted neolithic ceramic vessel by Ai Weiwei at the latter’s retrospective at the Perez Art Museum in Miami; and the cliterati’s feminist intervention in the recent 2014 Whitney Biennial in New York where a large group of women artists (not showing in the Biennial) staged low key performances within the galleries of the exhibition without permission. The Andre protest could be read as critical expressionism, motivated as it was by anger (expressivity) at a perceived injustice and blatant sexism within the art world, utilising the language of artistic intervention (criticality) in the placement of animal blood and organs on the pavement outside the doors of the exhibiting institution in reference to the fall of Mendieta from a window in her and Andre’s apartment. Similarly, Caminero’s action of picking up one of Ai’s vases and dropping it on the museum floor smashing it - echoing Ai’s own famous Dropping a Han Vase performance of 1995 - in protest over the lack of inclusion of local artists in the museum’s program, could be read as both expressive and critical. Though not violent or suggestive of violence, the cliterati’s protest was nevertheless an emotionally motivated action over the tokenistic inclusion of women and issues around the representation of artists of colour in the exhibition.

These protests demonstrate that intervention is still possible, and could be described as an expressive critique, very direct, timely and emotional. For example, if someone threw shit all over the car in front of the MCA, it could be regarded as critical expressionism; not just a cool political act, but a venting of frustrations, anger and inner turmoil. Revolutionary in German philosopher Walter Benjamin’s sense, a spontaneous act inspired by previous revolutionary moments bursting through history in jetztzeit, Benjamin’s idea of non-linearity and simultaneity across history. Shechet, Houseago and Rondinone are not radical like this, or like those artists described in the previous paragraph, nevertheless their work and their attitudes indicate that it is possible to strike out on different paths, to be ‘wandering in the forest ’ away from conformity to institutional criticality and conceptualism, and that returning to an expressive
engagement with materials using personal and universal subjects constitutes something new, different and potentially *bad*.

### 2.6 The author’s *bad* historicism

![Figure 63. (top) Two ink drawings by the author at National Museum, Bangkok, January 1991. Vishnu, Siamese 8-9th Century.](image)

![Figure 64. The author, *Raku Monster*, 2012. Raku fired and glazed ceramic, three views. Photos: Michael Myers.](image)

Figure 63. (top) Two ink drawings by the author at National Museum, Bangkok, January 1991. Vishnu, Siamese 8-9th Century.

Figure 64. The author, *Raku Monster*, 2012. Raku fired and glazed ceramic, three views. Photos: Michael Myers.


Figure 72. (bottom left) Vrishavahanadeva (Shiva), Early Chola, 1011 C.E. reign of Rajaraja. Bronze, unique, lost-wax and clay mould method. Found buried in the Svetaranyesvara temple, Thiruvenkadu. Thanjavur Art Gallery, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, India. Photo: the author.

Figure 73. (bottom right) The author, *Enlightened Being*, 2014. Porcelain paperclay.
How do I justify historical references to Indian, Greek, and pre-Colombian figurative art in my work? Tucker’s definition of *bad* seems very close to my work,

*...the openly nostalgic, figurative, and art-historical character of the work...The freedom with which these artists mix classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies, constitutes a rejection of the concept of progress per se...Bypassing the idea of progress implies an extraordinary freedom to do and to be whatever you want...*¹⁶⁴

I think my work aligns with Tucker’s definition of *bad*; it freely mixes all kinds of sources and in doing so contravenes current ideas about art such as post-colonial critiques of appropriation (whereas Tucker saw progress as the main issue), and instead claims creative ‘freedom to do and to be whatever you want.’ My work is figurative, makes art-historical references, mixes classical, traditional and popular sources with archetypal and personal fantasies and could be viewed as kitsch and nostalgic. To this list should be added sexual fantasies, and a cultish, religious or spiritual fantasy atmosphere. All the sources I take, from Indian classical sculptures of Vishnu and Shiva, to pornography and abject art, art and ceramics history and archaeology contribute to an intention to express something personal in representations of idealised and not-so-idealised states of being. Although the figures I build come out of a fragmented image saturated culture, my intention is to form a coherent idealised vision, but this always falls short. In this sense they are *bad*, they attempt to put back together a coherent subject from fragmented subjectivity, but despite the technical skill I bring to bear on the elements, melding them together, they are always pastiches, beautiful monsters.

I experiment to invent recombinations of sources that gel into new and unexpected expressive formations. For example, *Raku Monster* (fig.64) and *Fire Man* (fig.65), sample multi-armed representations of Hindu gods. The statue of *Vishnu* in the National Museum in Bangkok (fig.63) was very influential when I saw it more than

¹⁶⁴ Tucker, *"Bad" Painting.*
twenty years ago. When I began making three dimensional figurative sculptures in clay it was my ambition to make something as powerful as this. Both *Fire Man* and *Raku Monster* derive from this Vishnu, with elaborations particularly in the organic formations supporting their backs. The bodies are conventional male figures based on general knowledge of human anatomy to which the multiple arms with attributes are attached. *Fire Man* holds two attributes, a sex toy and a Molotov cocktail in an aggressive sexual pose, and wears a Mesoamerican mask derived from a Veracruz sculpture of the god *Ehecatl* (fig.71). Its back support structure is a rhizomatic complex of plant or tentacle like tubes that connect to the ground/base and coil in a kundalini formation against the figure’s spine and rise up phallic-like in front of the figure. The figure has a naturalistic erection and a separate phallic headdress, not shown.

*Raku Monster’s* back support structure is ectoplasmic, liquid, chaotic matter in flow, a formless, shadow body or amorphous cloud formation. It is similar to Rondinone’s *we run through a desert on burning feet, all of us are glowing our faces look twisted*, (fig.62), or the natural formations of Chinese scholar’s rocks. He holds a fleshy gun, a knife, a ceramics modelling tool and an unknown loop object in his hands as attributes. The violence suggested by these is reinforced by the reptilian features and elaborate frill of his head.

*Enlightened Being* (fig.73) is a porcelain paper clay figure (unglazed at the time of writing), inspired by a Chola Dynasty Indian sculpture of Shiva standing in a relaxed pose originally leaning on the head of a bull (fig.72). My intention was to capture something of the sensuality and rhythms of this sculpture. I only partly succeeded due to the complexity and subtlety of the original. Because the sculpture collapsed due to miscalculations in construction, it required intricate repairs and more rigid structures to support it, so some original success in capturing the feeling was lost. I combined the cross legged pose with sci-fi monster elements, a tentacle replacing his right arm, strange plant forms supporting his legs and arms, and a head featuring bulbous lumps on his cheeks, either the natural formations of an alien, or cosmetic implants. He also sports aquatic fins on his left arm and on the crown of his head.

These elements are inspired from diverse sources such as sci-fi movies, art history, contemporary art, yoga studies and taichi practice, sexual adventures, pornography,
internet browsing and academic research. They form a personal repertoire of images, ideas, feelings, moods and states of mind that I can sample from, attempt to replicate, adapt and recombine into new forms. My figures are closer to fictional alien creatures than to surrealist exquisite corpses because rather than remaining assemblages of dislocated or disassociated parts, they aspire to an affirmative and wholistic condition. They are more like Philippe Halsman’s _Portrait of Jean Cocteau_, (fig.66) than John Stezaker’s _Muse XII_ photo-collage (fig.70). By carefully hiding the joins Halsman has morphed the arms, clothes and bodies together to create a contemporary Shiva whose multiple talents make up the whole. In contrast, in Stezaker’s work the cut’s visibility is central to its statement about the divided nature of subjectivity.

My hybrids are not intended to stake a claim in post-colonial debate, although it could be argued they have this effect by claiming creative freedom and resisting subsumption to critiques of appropriation. Unlike my work, Australian artist Rodney Glick’s wood sculptures which also make reference to Hindu sculpture, are contextualised within post-colonial discourse. He conceives the work, takes photos of his subjects, then takes the (photoshopped?) photos to Bali to have them realised in wood and painted by Hindu master carvers and painters, including Made Leno, Wayan Darmadi and Dewa Tirtayasa. The sculptures are distinctly hybrid, and the two sources co-exist in a clear dichotomy, Western faces and clothes, and Hindu forms and iconographies. Glick entitles his contemporary updates of traditional forms ‘everyone’ in a numbered series, for example the multi armed portrait figure above is _Everyone no.12_ (fig.68). This titling suggests that despite the cultural differences between us, between Bali and Australia, between Hindu and Christian, and more broadly between all cultures, we as humans are all the same. Universal truths and cultural hybridity are suggested by the AGNSW website as the key conceptual underpinnings of Glick’s sculptures. It is stated in relation to another Glick sculpture based on the lovers Krishna and Radha of Hindu myth, _Everyone no.83_, 2009, that,

*the young lovers gaze at each other, embodying the continuities and universal truths of the traditions and mythologies this sculpture evokes,*
*while also suggesting contemporary uncertainties about love, desire and*
commitment. In working with Balinese sculptors Glick also looks to our nearest Hindu neighbours for collaborators, and brings into play the history of Australia’s fascination with Bali as a place of exotic wonder, carnal delights and hybrid art adapted for Western audiences.165

Although the similarities between Glick’s work and mine are obvious in the multi-armed characteristics of hybridity and cultural appropriation, I don’t actively position my work in the field of post-colonial discourse preferring to see it as an expressive project utilising appropriation in a personal way that nevertheless has political consequences. (In Chapter Three I address the issue of appropriation versus creativity in detail.) While Glick’s concepts are impeccably realised by distant craftsmen who bring their distinctive techniques to bear on his already exoticised images, my work though highly crafted, is more awkward expressively and technically. It reveals the struggle of its formation and attempts to achieve wholeness, in contrast, Glick’s demarcation of concept and execution intends to achieve an extreme clarity in its presentation of hybridity.

2.7 Chapter summary

My work is closer to Drucker’s ideas of creativity, artifice and affirmation, with ‘facture as a complex, multivalent core of artistic production,’166 ‘its power and affectiveness outstripping its conceptual beginnings.’167 It is complicit and bad because it freely appropriates from other cultures and assimilates these sources into a personal creative repertoire, is expressive because it tries to express internal conditions in material form, and unlike much contemporary clay-based art it is well-made.

It could be argued that Glick, Shechet, Houseago, Rondinone’s and my work is not bad in Tucker’s sense, or creative in Drucker’s, but reactionary in Foster’s sense, ‘an

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166 Drucker, Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity, 10.
167 Ibid.
instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms,’\textsuperscript{168} a ‘return to the verities of tradition,’\textsuperscript{169} that exploits rather than critiques cultural codes, a kind of ‘[neo] post-modernism of reaction…a gratuitous image drawn over the face of instrumentality.’\textsuperscript{170} However, if it is true that cultural critiques such as Foster’s have themselves become instrumental, rhetorical and exhausted, full of endless ironies and ambiguities, then \textit{bad} strategies of expressivity, personal statements, historicist fantasies, spiritual content, the hand-made object and skill can have some value. They attempt to revive personal investment in art making and require time spent on them, and even if they are idealistic and always failed pastiches, they constitute a renewed self-questioning. These differences give expressionism contrary critical value in relation to mainstream art, however the freedom I claim as an expressionist needs to be defended in relation to the problem of cultural appropriation, and this will be discussed in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{168} Foster, \textit{The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
To speak of nostalgia ... invokes a sentimental longing for something that probably never really existed. Van Gogh went peasant, Gauguin native, in search of romantically simple lives and imagined communion with the earth... And yet, nostalgie de la boue is not so easily dismissed, given all that it connotes. ‘That which is crude, unworthy, degrading’: the dictionary definition leaves it at that. But let’s not leave out the lingering allure of the primitive, the authentic, the native, the natural, the simple, the handmade: the very non-civilized conditions that Freud himself said every civilization longs for in its discontent... However correctly they have been deconstructed and disabused within post-modern culture, the critical power of these conditions remains intact.\(^{171}\)

\(^{171}\) Schaffner and Porter, *Dirt on Delight, Impulses That Form Clay*, 31.
Expressionism, universality and essentialism are ideas that are evident in contemporary art that reengages with traditional and often monumental forms and materials such as clay in the development of figurative sculpture. Related to Foster’s critique of the post-modernism of reaction and conservative politics, a major criticism of these positions is that they depend on an uncritical theorisation of the Western encounter with primitive art and cultures as a rediscovery of authentic states of being and reconnection to nature and the earth. Post-colonial critique, on the other hand, claims primitive authenticity is a naïve idea that falsely represents the primitive encounter as a positive one, covering over histories of exploitation with stereotypical images of savagery, innocence and harmony with nature.

I propose that authenticity - the idea that something is genuine and real - is useful in helping to preserve traditional knowledge that can be of benefit in the present. To defend the idea of authenticity I will consider the limits of the post-colonial critiques of primitivism and authenticity such as Hal Foster and Larry Shiner’s. While post-colonial critique is justifiable politically as a questioning of Western exploitation, I will argue it is a problematic and moralistic position based on contradictions and even exploitation itself. It relies on devaluing authenticity and reconnection that have other positive aesthetic, psychological and spiritual bases and uses not limited to post-colonial politics.

My objective is first to argue for the value of previously deconstructed ideas of primitivism and authenticity and second to position my work against the criticism of exploitative appropriation from other cultures. My position is that my appropriations are authentically motivated. Using the example of yoga, I will argue that the use of materials and systems from other cultures can be justified if they are personally genuine and meaningful in the context of shared, beneficial, cultural knowledge.

I will rely on American curator Ingrid Schaffner’s proposition that primitivism and authenticity are attractive ideas today that retain a nostalgic allure as well as critical power. Various attitudes to primitivism and authenticity will be discussed from modernism and the return to rustic ideals to the complexities and contradictions of post-colonial critiques of them. I will argue that despite their importance and relevance, post-colonial critiques are anxious, ambiguous and ultimately moralistic in tone, creatively restrictive and ignore what is valuable in rejected ideas about primitivism and authenticity, such as the well-made object, aesthetic values and utopian potentials.
Nietzsche’s critique of morality and his alternatives of self-determination and creativity will be discussed and defended. Nevertheless limits are suggested to the use of authenticity and primitivism because they can be used to justify bad work, particularly ceramics which rely on a misinterpretation of the Zen idea of distortion derived from studio pottery. Reflecting on my position and as a context to my shamanistic performances, I will defend queer aesthetics that incorporate primitivist and orientalist appropriations into positive, authentic and personal research.

3.1 Primitivism

The Ingrid Schaffner quote above from her catalogue essay for the ceramics exhibition Dirt on Delight offers an explanation of the attraction of ceramics for contemporary artists. Part of what attracted me to ceramics was the idea that a medium overlooked in contemporary art could have inverse critical value. It offered a peripheral position in relation to mainstream contemporary art where craft mastery and the possibilities inherent in the material of clay itself were underappreciated and even rejected, and its attachment to ideas such as the pastoral and amateur as discussed by Adamson had meant it was deeply unfashionable. Seeking the simple life had taken a hit during postmodernism, when primitivism had been deconstructed by theorists like Hal Foster, but it seemed to me that a return to ceramics echoed Tucker’s idea, discussed in her “Bad” Painting catalogue essay, that a return to history was itself a critique of the exhausted idea of progress. I felt a strong attraction to the outmoded, idealised vision of the potter working in relative isolation, but also caught in the knowledge that such ideas had been ‘deconstructed and disabused’, so if I felt a bit embarrassed about the possibility of bucolic bliss and wanting to return to it and build a kiln out west somewhere, and also a little reluctant to throw in my lot with a bunch of unreconstructed potters, I thought at least these ideas could have some value as a lever in the equally dubious zone of contemporary art where politics, bureaucratisation and technologisation contribute to severe conditions of conformity, cynicism and alienation. In this context, it seemed that the attractions of authenticity, simplicity and idealism

172 Hal Foster’s article “The “Primitive” Unconscious of Modern Art,” in October Vol.34, Autumn, 1985, in which he is critical of the MOMA exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern is central to the critique of the idea of primitivism.
173 Tucker, “Bad” Painting.
could open possibilities for deeper research and would be justified at least as a contribution to a cultural critique.

In their book *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*¹⁷⁴ Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas argue a similar point to Schaffner’s that a romantically simple life never really existed when they say that it is based on a false assumption that pre-industrial society was non-specialised. They reference Karl Marx rather than Sigmund Freud as the origin of the idea of alienation saying that ‘because value in human life [for Marx] came through productive labour, under capitalism neither labourer nor capitalist are that ultimately content – the labourer because they are alienated from the fruits of that labour, the capitalist because they enjoy what they did not produce.’¹⁷⁵ They claim this argument is problematic, ‘that there is lurking behind the Marxist critique of alienation the myth of the pre-industrial lifestyle as one of near self-sufficiency so that people lived directly off the products of their own labour [and were therefore happier.]’¹⁷⁶ They claim this is an over-simplification of history that, ‘ignores the processes of specialization and exchange that occur and have occurred in most pre-industrial societies.’¹⁷⁷ Presumably, it would be necessary to go back to prehistory, as anarcho-primitivist John Zerzan¹⁷⁸ does, to find societies that were non-specialised and happier than us, if Buchli and Lucas are correct that capitalism alone can’t be blamed for dividing and alienating us, however they might not accept that.

If pre-industrial self-sufficiency is a myth, I believe this does not necessarily discredit the aim of a return to simplicity as a creative adventure and an alternative to contemporary ills, so the attempt could be made anyway. It is possible the example Schaffner gives of French post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin’s failure to find paradise (whose Tahitian adventures not only killed him with syphilis but also resulted in his critical panning within post-colonial discourse as an exploiter of Polynesian culture) can be reread to undo the discrediting of nostalgia. Schaffner holds out hope for

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¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 21.
¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 22.
¹⁷⁷ Ibid.
¹⁷⁸ Zerzan’s primitivist idealist ideas about the greater wellbeing of pre-historic humanity are discussed in the appendix ‘John Zerzan and anarcho-primitivist theory.’
the power of nostalgia, saying, ‘However correctly they have been deconstructed and disabused within post-modern culture, the critical power of these conditions remains intact.’ Schaffner says they have critical power as an alternative to the excesses of consumer culture,

\[\textit{it is in the light of overproduction of things we don’t need, coupled with the avoidance and denial of the stuff that’s just there, that artist’s use of clay comes to seem not only prescient but also instructive.}\]

It is interesting that Gauguin is currently being reassessed, and he is now not the singular bogey man of post-colonial critique that he once was. New Zealand art historian Dr Caroline Vercoe says of Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s 1992 essay ‘Going Native’ that,

\[\text{she accuses him of “paradigmatic plagiarism” locating his [Gauguin’s] Tahitian paintings within the colonising problematics of Orientalism and primitivism. “In this respect,” she writes, “the image of the savage and the image of the woman can be seen as similarly structured, not only within Gauguin’s work, but as the characteristic feature in the project of representing the Other’s body, be it the woman’s or the native’s. Both impulses can be recognised in Gauguin’s representational practice.”}\]

In contrast Vercoe provides a more contemporary, multi-faceted picture of the artist, saying,

\[\text{Gauguin has come to represent the archetypal colonial Orientalist, the modernist hero, the bohemian traveller-adventurer, the romantic primitivist, the single-minded quester for personal and artistic enlightenment, the colonial oppressor, and the sexual predator.}\]

Of his legacy Vercoe says,

\[\text{__________________________}\]

\[\text{179 Schaffner and Porter, Dirt on Delight, Impulses That Form Clay, 31.}\]
\[\text{180 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{181 Caroline Vercoe, “I Am My Other, I Am My Self: Encounters with Gauguin in Polynesia,” Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art 13, no. 1, 2013.}\]
\[\text{182 Ibid.}\]
His place in art history’s canon...is a complex, polemical and contested place, however. Ironically, he seems caught in the liminal space that the colonial subject is often fixed in: as a potentially threatening yet alluring figure, at once known, yet always unknowable.¹⁸³

This broader and more open view of Gauguin offers the opportunity for a more positive reassessment and the revaluation of other aspects of his life and work that have been jettisoned in his deconstruction, such as his contributions to modernist painting as a formalist enterprise in the development of colour and compositional theory and practice, and his questor’s drive for knowledge and experience.

Gauguin was not the only artist to have ‘left town and gone bush’; Claude Monet, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse all left Paris for good. All presumably wanted, at least, some peace and quiet away from the politics and negative effects of the city and its art scene. Many other artists have left or avoided the centres in the early modern period and artist colonies proliferated. For example, the profound association of New Zealand painters Rita Angus (fig.75), Doris Lusk, Colin McCahon (fig.77), Toss Woollaston (fig.76), and Leo Benseman far from urban centres in Nelson district in the late 1930s and early 1940s was a formative moment of modern art in New Zealand. The area has also been a centre of studio pottery and alternative lifestyles such as the communal Riverside Community where Angus worked in 1944 picking apples. Woollaston never went back to live in the city and developed his unique style there in isolation.

Even if there never was a pure simple happy society that we could hope to return to, the attempts that have been made by the primitive modernists can be justified as creative searches for reconnection and as critical strategies.

¹⁸³ Ibid.
3.1.1 William Morris and his rustic ideal

Zerzan’s anthology Against Civilisation enlists a wide range of philosophers and writers including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry David Thoreau, Theodor Adorno, Friedrich Schiller, Sigmund Freud, Max Horkheimer, Peter Sloterdijk and Fredric Jameson to
support his critical view of civilisation. Among these authorities, he quotes from nineteenth century English designer and radical William Morris’s letters,

*I have no more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future of “civilisation,” which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long; what a joy it is to think of! And how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.184*

What are these wretched hypocrisies? Morris identifies the debasement of the working class as the main one,

*the necessary results of this so-called civilisation are only too obvious in the lives of its slaves, the working-class - in the anxiety and want of leisure amidst which they toil, in the squalor and wretchedness of those parts of our great towns where they dwell; in the degradation of their bodies, their wretched health, and the shortness of their lives; in the terrible brutality so common among them, and which is indeed but the reflection of the cynical selfishness found among the well-to-do classes, a brutality as hideous as the other; and lastly, in the crowd of criminals who are as much manufactures of our commercial system as the cheap and nasty wares which are made at once for the consumption and the enslavement of the poor.185*

In Morris’s idealistic and socialist vision for a better world, work still existed but was reconfigured as a return to meaningful craft work and a rejection of the dehumanisation of the capitalist factory. English writer Mark Bevir identifies several key influences on Morris.

*Romanticism led him to seek self-realisation in an art based on naturalness and harmony, and Protestantism led him to do so in the everyday worlds of work and domestic life. From [English art critic and social visionary] John*

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Ruskin, he took a sociology linking the quality of art to the extent of such self-realisation in daily life.\textsuperscript{186}

The idea of work, still central to Morris’s ideas, presumably comes from the influence of Protestantism and its famous work ethic, but this is tempered by the pursuit of pleasure and something like freedom of sexual expression. Bevir incorporates the same quote as Zerzan to illustrate Morris’s position,

\textit{Morris’s sociology of art suggested good art also required an honest and simple social life resembling that of the middle-ages. People had to recognise that "fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death." Morris’s ideal, therefore, was a society of neighbours in which people would assist each other gladly, taking pleasure in being of service. People would live rude, simple lives. They would find happiness in animal acts such as eating, loving, and sleeping - Morris liked "to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrites." Children would learn by play, not the methods of the schools, with an emphasis on swimming and carpentry, not on books, and they would spend the summer camping-out in the woods. Adults would eat in large communal dining-halls before sitting around telling and retelling heroic stories. At harvest time, everyone would carouse in the fields.}\textsuperscript{187}

This vision of medieval or Homerian life is picturesque, and it wouldn’t entail giving up all the material benefits of civilisation, as Zerzan’s return to the savannahs would. Morris’s Arts and Crafts vision and legacy persists today in the values of rustic studio potters who still try to live the pastoral dream. If one were a conspiracy theorist one might theorise that the critique of utopian values was designed to keep people from seeking alternatives outside mainstream capitalism, to keep them working. Even if this is a bit far-fetched, nevertheless the search for alternative possibilities shouldn’t be

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 20.
judged too harshly because even if the image of the potter seems hopeless naïve, maybe it does have some value as a critical position in opposition to the excesses of capitalism.

### 3.1.2 Hal Foster’s critique of primitivism

*Historically, the primitive is articulated by the West in deprivative or supplemental terms: as a spectacle of savagery or as a state of grace, as a socius without writing or the Word, without history or cultural complexity; or as a site of originary unity, symbolic plenitude, natural vitality. There is nothing odd about this Eurocentric construction: the primitive has served as a coded other at least since the Enlightenment, usually as a subordinate term in its imaginary set of oppositions (light/dark, rational/irrational, civilized/savage). This domesticated primitive is thus constructive, not disruptive, of the binary ratio of the West; fixed as a structural opposite or a dialectical other to be incorporated, it assists in the establishment of a Western identity, centre, norm, and name.*

*I want briefly to pose, to collide, two readings of the primitive encounter with the West: that of its progressive eclipse in modern history and that of its disruptive return (in displaced form) in contemporary theory. The first history, as we have seen, positions the primitive as a moment in the "luminous spread" of Western reason; the second, a genealogy, traces how the primitive, taken into this order, returns to disrupt it.*

A possible problem with John Zerzan’s and William Morris’s utopian visions is that they are exactly the opposite of what they set out to be. Instead of being ideas that challenge capitalism, they could be products of it. In Hal Foster’s terms, they would be constructive of Western identity rather than disruptive of it, because as an outside or other, they act in binary opposition to reinforce the primary position of capitalist Western culture. Zerzan’s anarchistic primitivism would be a misguided romantic notion that poses no problem for civilisation and is reactionary in its nostalgia. His

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189 Ibid., 64.
primitivism would be like what Foster derisively described as a ‘spectacle of savagery… a site of originary unity, symbolic plenitude, natural vitality.’ But before discussing potential outcomes to this question Foster’s ideas and, in particular, his dichotomy of domesticated versus disruptive primitivism will be discussed.

In 1985 Foster discussed his ideas about primitivism in the article ‘The “Primitive” Unconscious of Modern Art.’ He attacked primitivism as a repressive, imperialist Western concept that absorbs and depoliticises tribal and indigenous cultures and he countered it with an alternative idea, simply the primitive, which he argued can be disruptive rather than constitutive of domination. This disruptive primitive is exemplified within Western art in the transgressive practice of bricolage that ‘politicized rather than aestheticised the primitivist-imperialist connection.’ While the term primitive could be argued to be still patronizing as it retains suggestion of the privileging of technological advancement over lack of progress in other cultures and therefore still connected to the Enlightenment idea of culture as an evolutionary teleology, the distinction allows Foster to construct a more radical position from which to critique assimilative primitivism.

For Foster the idea proposed in the 1984 MOMA exhibition “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, that primitivism is visible in the formal affinities between primitive and modern art exemplified by Picasso’s indebtedness to African masks for his painting Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), concealed the reality behind the show that the other is absorbed into Western universality and ways of seeing and its difference denied. Foster calls this process ‘the fetishistic recognition-and-disavowal of the primitive difference,’ and says, ‘The founding act of this recoding is the repositioning of the tribal object as art. Posed against its use first as evolutionist trophy and then as ethnographic evidence, this aestheticization allows the work to be both decontextualized and commodified,’ and more easily incorporated.
Quoting the co-curator of “Primivitism” Kirk Varnedoe, Foster attacks the construction of primitivism, ‘as a ‘spiritual regeneration’ (in which ‘the Primitive is held to be spiritually akin to that of the new man’). The primitive as a potentially spiritual concept is pervasive today when we believe, for example, in the authenticity of uncontacted Amazonian tribes who we see as having been continuously connected to the earth since the time of our own prehistory. We see this authenticity as unattainable to us due to our alienation from the earth, but yearn for it. This desire for reconnection appears in movies such as The Emerald Forest, Dances with Wolves and Avatar where primitive tribes are threatened with annihilation at the hands of ‘civilised’ invaders bent on colonisation/exploitation/deforestation, and we ‘connect’ to the tribes through central characters who defect from the invaders and ‘go native’ to discover the truth and profundity of indigenous ways of life. However, following Foster’s critique of Varnedoe, we can view our identification with the renegades and their hosts and our passionate support of their resistances as a cynical position since outside the movie theatre we do nothing about the destruction of forests and traditional tribes taking place in the real world and, as well, we benefit from this destruction through the interconnectedness of global capital.

Foster might have seen a similar cynicism at work in “Primivitism,” where identification with primitive tribes on a spiritual level is a ruse that provides a safety valve of ‘remorse’ to help paper over our colonialist destruction of them. Foster argues that because we allow ourselves to feel bad about destroying primitive tribes, that’s enough for us to let ourselves off the hook for doing it. Or as Patrick Wolfe calls it, ‘the alibi for positionality that accrues from feeling good about feeling bad about being on the up-side of the international division of labor.’ Foster says of the

194 Ibid., 59.
198 Foster, "The “Primitive” Unconscious of Modern Art," p61. Foster quotes anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, "If the West has produced anthropologists," Levi-Strauss writes in Tristes Tropiques, “it is because it was tormented by remorse.”
exhibition, ‘no anthropological remorse, aesthetic elevation, or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate this loss because they [and we] are all implicated in it.’

If Foster’s critique is correct and reveals how primitivism is embedded and implicated through Western colonialism and imperialism in our thinking about non-Western cultures, providing us with self-justifying and fake empathy, can we ever look at indigenous art or make reference to the primitive from outside our exploitative privileged point of view? Won’t any use of the primitive, however critical, always be exploitative? Though he says he’s wary of constructing a simple dichotomy, Foster nevertheless proposes an alternative to primitivism in the uncanny return of the primitive, repressed by modernist primitivism that is disruptive and not constructive of exploitative Western identity. He says,

As for a cultural counterpractice, one is suggested by the ‘primitive’ operation of bricolage and by the surrealist reception of the primitive as a rupture. Indeed, the dissident surrealists (Bataille chief among them) present, if not a ‘counterprimitivism’ as such, then at least a model of how the otherness of the primitive might be thought disruptively, not recuperated abstractly [...] they prized in the tribal object not its raisonnable form but its bricole heterogeneity, not its mediatory possibilities but its transgressive value. In short, the primitive appeared less as a solution to Western aesthetic problems than as a disruption of Western solutions. Rather than seek to master the primitive - or, alternatively, to fetishize its difference into opposition or identity - these primitivists welcomed ‘the unclassified, unsought other.’

Foster’s view of ‘bricolage as a counter to assimilationist primitivism’ is useful in that it counters simplistic assumptions about primitivism’s aesthetic and political neutrality. However, a problem with Foster’s critique of primitivism is that although he says in relation to the content of surrealist artworks that ‘these primitivists welcomed the unclassified, unsought other,’ his dichotomy of absorption and disruption seems to be

200 Foster, "The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art."
201 Ibid., 65.
202 Ibid., 62.
foremost a political and strategic one with which to critique an exhibition he dislikes. He looks at and analyses only one artwork from the exhibition in any depth, Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, preferring the complexities of context, generating a dichotomy of incorporation and disruption, and promoting a radical political program which, ‘might take its own colonialist condition of possibility as its object.'

At the time in the 1980s, contextual deconstruction was radical and justified by a perception of reactionary art history, and ignorance of critiques of Western imperialism. Foster’s critique offered a reinterpretation of the context of the primitive in art. Knowing how things work theoretically and politically is essential, but is it the only thing worth knowing? In his privileging of the political over the aesthetic, didn’t Foster lose something, the formal, visual and aesthetic values of art? Why is Foster not interested in the aesthetic values of the works themselves and only interested in the curatorial, theoretical and political implications of the show? As an art historian, wouldn’t he be expected to analyse works of art as his primary method before, or in parallel to, constructing the implications that derive from these analyses. Without analysis of the artworks and objects to support his contextual positioning, his arguments risk the criticism of being too intellectualized and abstract while ignoring aesthetic, affective and expressive content, which should retain some value if art isn’t going to be just a pawn in political disputes on aesthetics.

Admittedly Foster partially addresses this by dismissing aesthetic and expressionist content in primitive work as the ‘primitivist misreading *par excellence,*’ but is this enough to justify an almost purely theoretical view, analysing only the curatorial concepts and wider cultural and political implications of the display of primitive art. Foster’s rejection of aesthetic analysis suggests either he presumes there are no aesthetic qualities in primitive art or its only value is its radical otherness and potential as rupture. Is it true that primitive art has no aesthetic content, and is only an object to be used in disputes about its cultural politics? Isn’t it possible that primitive makers intend their work to have visual, expressive or emotional significance, and that Westerners

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203 Ibid., 55.
204 Ibid., 50.
genuinely respond to this, and aren’t just using appreciation as a cover for trophies and exploitation?

This problem is implied when Foster has to admit that the surrealists found primitive objects aesthetically interesting. He tries to minimize this problem by saying, ‘And when these "ethnographic surrealists" did aestheticize, it tended to be in the interests of "cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms."’ But of the example that he gives to show aestheticisation he finds permissible - the surrealist Louis Aragon’s installation of the 1931 surrealist-communist, collaborative, anti-colonial exhibition Exposition Anti-imperialiste in which Aragon juxtaposed primitive and industrial objects - Lynne E. Palermo labels Aragon’s show, ‘indulging in a certain amount of unexamined exoticism.’ Palermo says,

\[\text{Part of Aragon’s goal was undoubtedly to expose the French republic’s complicity in harnessing aesthetics and the arts to construct cultural ‘hierarchies’ that would support colonial policy. And, as Blake, Norindr and others have noted, the surrealists were not above indulging in a certain amount of unexamined exoticism. But by mounting an exhibition replete with ambiguities, and therefore explicitly not contributing to the communist didactics employed in Thirion’s [the exhibition’s Communist Party co-organiser] sections, Aragon equally demonstrated a refusal to allow Surrealism to become the servant of the Communist Party – or any political movement.}\]

Aragon would probably have resisted co-option into Foster’s political strategies too. Besides this flawed view of the surrealists as simply disruptors of Western aestheticisations, another problem with Foster’s primitive as disruptive, transgressive, unclassified, unsought other, is the suggestion that even disruptive surrealist bricolage is exploitative. Besides the problem that any use will always be use for one’s own purposes, Foster’s more transgressive construction of the primitive may be just as patronising. Foster’s primitive may critique older affinitive uses of primitivism, but by

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205 Ibid., 62.
the time of writing his article, modernist transgression was already an established mode, debated in the context of neo-expressionism, commercially viable in the art market and therefore arguably constitutive of Western identity as much as aestheticized primitivism was. Foster seems to admit there could be a problem in trying to distinguish between the two readings of primitivism when he constructs the distinction with extreme care, saying, ‘the one concerned to incorporate the primitive, the other eager to transgress with it.’ His awkward use of the word ‘with’ is telling; it reveals the degree of care he takes to suggest the surrealists are not incorporating, but treating primitivism with respect and equality, avoiding the negative connotations of a more straight forward construction such as ‘using.’

If Foster’s distinctions between types of primitivism aren’t so clear cut after all, it is possible that any use of the primitive will always be to some extent exploitative. Palermo’s observation of a ‘certain amount of unexamined exoticism’ by the surrealists, seems then to be something that is always unavoidable in art that references the primitive. Along with Aragon’s refusal of the party line (including potentially Foster’s post-modernist deconstruction party line had he still been around), this undermines Foster’s reliance on the use of the surrealists to support his dichotomy of reactionary Western assimilation of the primitive versus disruption by the ‘unclassified, unsought other.’

It seems that whatever position you take on primitivism, it is always exploitative. Palermo’s observations support this reading, pointing to the erosion of terms such as critique, disruption and transgression by their overuse in art since the 1980s, becoming neutralised as official doctrine. Foster’s formerly solid dichotomies of aesthetics and politics, and exploitation and critique have been blurred reopening the possibility of reading formal, visual, aesthetic and expressive content in primitive art again.

3.1.3 Victor Li’s critique of critiques of primitivism

Foster’s construction of a radical primitive which depends on dichotomies of aestheticisation and politicisation, inside and outside, self and other, and assimilation and rupture has been brought into question by Victor Li in his 2008 book The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity. Li uses related criticisms to the ones I raise above that any sense of use of primitivism can be
interacted negatively as exploitation. Jeremy Tambling in his review of Li’s book in *The Modern Language Review* 207 summarizes the problem for critiques of primitivism, *neo-primitivism [Li’s term for contemporary critiques of primitivism, and similar to Foster’s ‘primitive’] ‘emphasises absolute difference, or radical alterity. ‘The question besetting study of this neo-primitivism is whether recognition of such alterity is a form of cultural imperialism; whether recognition of the other is not, in Robert Bernasconi’s words in relation to Levinas, ‘the ultimate wisdom of Europe.’* 208

In his book Li criticises numerous theorists including Foster on the grounds that even radically critical forms of primitivism, what he calls ‘neo-primitivism’, still harbour exploitative elements that tend to absorb the other within a Western discourse of difference and alterity. For these reasons Li says,

> *It may even be the case that our sharpest critiques of primitivist discourses still have to presuppose an Other whose primal, untouched authenticity provides the utopian exterior, the critical alternative to a globalizing Western modernity.* 209

Within his critique of the necessity of the primitive other to radical Western thought, Li is critical of Foster’s proposal of alterity as an absolute rupture in opposition to conventional primitivism. Li’s account of Foster begins by his presentation of Foster’s basic argument:

> *Foster therefore advocates a ‘counterprimitivism’ or what I call ‘neo-primitivism’ which challenges an ethnocentric, ‘domesticated’ primitivism by insisting on the absolute rupture and transgression of the primitive rather than its affinity to or dialectical complicity with modern Western regimes of knowledge.* 210

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208 Ibid.
210 Ibid., 17.
This is in line with what Foster himself proposes, however Li takes issue with Foster saying the latter, even though he advocates for the concept of rupture, is still caught in the same bind as those he criticises, using the other to justify his critical position. Li says:

Foster’s essay...its categorical rejection of MOMA’s ethnocentric incorporation of the primitive, and its insistence on the primitive as absolute rupture result in the primitive acting as the Other that guarantees the integrity of the Western subject by marking its limits. Once again, the Western subject finds that it needs the absolute difference of the primitive in order to achieve the non-ethnocentric, critically reflexive, ethical stance it aspires to.\textsuperscript{211}

Li says that Foster is still caught in an ethnocentric position because alterity is a concept that provides the opportunity for ‘the subject’s ethico-cognitive expansion’ to incorporate the other:

Foster’s vigilant anti-ethnocentrism is related to what one can call an ethics of alterity, in which the denial of the Cartesian subject enables both sensitivity and openness to radical otherness. At the same time, however, as we have seen in Foster’s essay such an ethics of alterity may run up against an unintended consequence, namely, that the critical reduction of the subject in the presence of the Other is also the subject’s ethico-cognitive expansion, its new awareness of its own limitation and finitude and of its infinite responsibility to the Other.\textsuperscript{212}

Li suggests that not only is alterity a problematic concept that incorporates as it seeks to differentiate, but the very structure of critique is a problem, because it always needs an outside, a dialectical other. Li says,

to be critical means to be able to recognize our own conceptual limits, the ethnocentric boundaries of our world view. This requires us to challenge

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
those limits through the postulation of an outside, an alternative to them. Such an outside is readily supplied by the idea of the primitive.\textsuperscript{213}

According to Li, post-colonial critique is not an empathetic attitude, but one that uses the other to act as an outside to justify its own processes of testing limits. Thus post-colonial critique can be said to exploit the other. Li entitles his concluding chapter, quoting Michel de Certeau, “Theorizing always needs a Savage.”\textsuperscript{214} In his conclusion Li reiterates his earlier idea that Foster’s alterity - although it postulates an absolute outside with the ethical intention that it will provide a haven for the other – actually expands to reincorporate the other. Li then notes that the other gains little from Western thinkers’ theoretical insights, that these only advantage the Westerners. He says,

\begin{quote}
While the primitive Other enables our theorists to expose the limits of Western thought, it also gains them a renewed epistemic advantage that once again opens up a gap between the West and the rest. From Baudrillard to Habermas, what we have observed is a troubling movement in which the West’s self-critical generosity to the primitive Other returns as a greater form of Western awareness not necessarily shared by the Other. Generosity to the Other wins for the Western thinker, but not for the incommensurable Other, theoretical insight.\textsuperscript{215}
\end{quote}

A final critique of the critiques of primitivism could be that those critiques have no real effect. It not only fails to release others from Western constructions of them, it only enfolds them more. It fails also because, it has been argued, helping the other is not the aim of post-colonial critique, which is instead to constitute and justify itself as a critical enterprise.

### 3.1.4 Future Primitive exhibition

In 2014 the exhibition Future Primitive at the Heidi Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne and curated by Linda Michael looked at aspects of primitivism in contemporary Australian and New Zealand art. The title was the same as John Zerzan’s

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 221.
famous book discussed in Appendix A, but the book is not mentioned in the catalogue, in fact the exhibition sought to occupy an opposed critical, anti-idealist position in relation to the primitive so the title may be purely coincidental, or an unacknowledged reference and critique. The title of the exhibition came from the title of an artwork in the show by Australian artist T.V.Moore, who in turn may have taken it from a skateboarding movie made in the 1990s of the same name. Skateboarding can be viewed as an idealised, marginal, cultural phenomenon, but it has also been connected to a critique of public space, for example in relation to the work of Moore’s contemporary, video artist Shaun Gladwell. This critical connection may have influenced the curator’s choice of the title, because it brings together ideas of nostalgia for simpler (or more primitive) times with critique, alternate cultures, sociology and marginality, issues addressed in the show and catalogue.

In their essay ‘The Double Risk of Primitivism’ in the catalogue for the exhibition, academics Dr Ann Stephen and Professor Andrew McNamara (S&M) ask why primitivism is popular again with artists. Their answer is that its ambiguity is attractive; it can satisfy a need to make critical art (and not lose that edge which contemporary art uses to claim its special status in culture) by addressing primitivism within the context of post-colonial discourse, while at the same time it offers the attraction (or fantasy) of immersion in magic, shamanism, all that’s been lost from post-industrial culture, and a return to something more authentic. They claim that this paradox is what is attractive, where artists can desire to have it both ways, critique and return to essences, in a struggle between return and its impossibility. While I agree that artists find the ideas of return and authenticity very attractive, and that critical self-awareness is essential, I argue that S&M’s argument is too insistent that they are unresolvable and this has the effect of legislating against the possibility of a resolution between them, and promotes self-consciously unresolved art. I argue that immersion in affirmative experiences of the primitive should be sought out, even if they fail, and suggest that performance artist Marina Abramovic, who they criticise as a cultural tourist for seeking out authentic

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216 Read, for example, Jack Anderson’s review of video work by Gladwell, in which he is said to be ‘engaged in simple, repetitive skateboarding activities provocatively performed in the context of a monolithic urban architecture that represents rigid institution powers and jurisdictions.’ Jack Anderson, Leader Post, http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/docview/349670556?pq-origsite=summon.

encounters with Aborigines in the outback in 1979, should be reconsidered as a positive alternative to their self-consciously awkward and moralising position.

S&M rework and update the classic dichotomy of critique and reaction of Hal Foster and Victor Li into a more ambiguous relationship between two types of primitivism. The first type is the uncrirical 'ethnocentricity'\(^{218}\) of Western culture in which 'the primitive is one who does not reflect, but instead remains close to nature; soiled and devoid of technological sophistication; persisting in a child-like state of elemental immediacy, all impulses and reaction.'\(^{219}\) The second kind of primitivism, adapted from critical post-modernism and post-colonialism, is critical of ethnocentric primitivism and constructed as self-critical. They describe in different ways the awkward interaction of the two types; as the ‘uncanny oscillation of attraction and repulsion,’\(^{220}\) 'a magnet of attraction as well as critical refusal. It resided on the knife edge of envy and denunciation.'\(^{221}\)

Among the examples S&M give of the attractions of primitivism to contemporary artists are primitivism ‘as an antidote to the alienated conformity of rigid, bourgeois “sophistication”,’\(^{222}\) primitivism as aspirations to break free of confines and limits to embrace ‘a core modernist cultural strategy of free creative invention,’\(^{223}\) primitivism as the desire for transformation and transcendence, and the appeal of magic and shamanism. The negative side of this attraction is the problem of inappropriate appropriation, exploitation, ‘the worst forms of cultural and racial chauvinism,’\(^{224}\) and ‘the conceit of power and superiority.’\(^{225}\) They argue contemporary primitivism tries to resolve this dilemma - of attraction to the other that could also be exploitative - with self-critique that provides an outside critical vantage point on our own culture and actions while retaining respect for the other. This is a kind of critical embrace that

\(^{218}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{219}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{220}\) Ibid., 38.
\(^{221}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{222}\) Ibid.
\(^{223}\) Ibid., 38.
\(^{224}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{225}\) Ibid., 37.
simultaneously uses and self-critiques. However, S&M identify risks associated with this strategy, ‘the double risk of primitivism.’

The risks associated with a critical form of primitivism derive from its closeness to uncritical ethnocentricity in the attraction artists feel for such things as being ‘close to nature…[low] technological sophistication…elemental immediacy.’226 S&M say ‘this leaves any [primitivist] practice in a precarious space between mystification and demystification.’227 Unlike Foster and Li, S&M don’t clearly separate the critical and uncritical types with separate labels, using the word primitivism for both kinds, while sometimes attaching the concept ‘ethnocentricity’ to the uncritical and once referring disapprovingly to artist Marina Abramovic as a ‘neo-primitivist.’228 Instead of clear labels, S&M’s picture of critical primitivism is relative, because that’s how they see artists working now, and perhaps because they want to be seen to be avoiding a position that claims superiority, but instead one that foregrounds ambiguity and risk.

Before describing their concept of ‘the double risk of primitivism’ S&M provide an example of the error of uncritical ethnocentric primitivism. They argue that the artist Marina Abramovic and her partner Ulay’s utopian vision of primitivism as an ‘absolute inverse’229 - based on their experience trekking through the outback for six months in 1979 meeting Australian Aborigines in remote communities, where they claimed to have had ‘a defining creative moment’230 – is misguided and ethnocentric, an uncritical projection of Western ideals and expectations. S&M say, ‘For Abramovic, Ulay and Lang, Aborigines exist in a state of pre-Lapsarian timelessness. Does primitivism constitute such an enduring theme only because it idealises the journey to the beyond or into the heart of darkness to represent the absolute inverse of the Western or Eurocentric “norm”?…these artists imagined themselves stepping outside of culture in visiting “places that Australians don’t go.”’231

226 Ibid., 29.
227 Ibid., 44.
228 Ibid., 33.
229 Ibid., 32.
230 Ibid.
231 Ibid., 33.
S&M argue not only that Marina and Ulay’s attitude was naïve because, quoting Ignacio M. Sanchez Prado, utopianism has always ‘carried nothing less than colonialism in its underbelly,’ 232 but that the artists made the mistake of believing they could - without issue, risk, or self-critique - step outside their own culture and into another and attempt to understand it. On the contrary, S&M argue that any engagement with the primitive is a risky matter.

Of their central idea ‘the double risk of primitivism’ they say,

*The enduring fascination with the notion of the primitive involves a double risk: on the one hand, it involves the risk of endeavouring to undertake ‘an epistemological impossibility’ – of renouncing one’s cultural specificity, in order to question it and to endeavour to extend its parameters by seeking to understand another culture; yet on the other hand, it does not offer the solace of assuming a politically correct distance above reproach. It involves a risk, but also the conceit of power and superiority. It may prompt accusations of elitism, cultural chauvinism bordering on prejudice, even narrow minded cultural dogmatism and bigotry.* 233

The first risk they propose is the risk of the impossibility of stepping outside one’s own culture, beliefs and assumptions - including that of objectivity - to understand the other. They borrow from the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, who proposed the concept of the ‘epistemological impossibility - to enter into the mind of the object of inquiry while maintaining the distance and objectivity of a scientist.’ 234 What is the risk of attempting this epistemic impossibility? Is it the risk of failure? But if Kolakowski is correct that it is impossible, then there is no risk of failure, there is certainty of it! To step into another’s shoes and understand them for the purpose of looking back at oneself and extending one’s own cultural parameters seems completely selfish. Is there nothing in this for the other, other than some empathy? If one is seeking to use this situation for self/cultural-critique, wouldn’t one observe self-interest as the principal motivation?

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232 Ibid., 35.
233 Ibid., 37.
234 Ibid.
This is probably the second risk, that any such enterprise of understanding the other is always enmeshed in ‘the conceit of power and superiority;’ that understanding will at best always involve a kind of absorption of the object into one’s own knowledge systems, and at worst lead to colonialist forms of exploitation. If my understanding of the process described by S&M is correct, it seems that again there isn’t a risk of conceit, there’s a certainty. With the attitude that it is all about self-critical epistemological expansion, the other is merely a convenient object for self-reflection and there’s bound to be trouble.

S&M criticise what they see as the colonialist utopian and ethnocentric version of the primitive such as Abramovic’s by shifting the emphasis of the Western relationship to the primitive from one of seeing an ideal other, to one that admits that there are contradictions, ambiguities and risks involved in trying to understand the other. They could be seen to be replacing the certainty of Abramovic’s ideal view of the primitive with the difficulties of a self-critical view. However, in comparison to S&M’s complex constructions that emphasis self-advantage, and in defence of Abramovic and Ulay’s naivety, at least they went outback, to ‘places Australians don’t go’ and tried to come face to face with Aborigines leading traditional lives.

Although they don’t mention Victor Li, S&M’s ideas share similarities with his. The idea that primitivism is an opportunity for the West to be more self-critical and stretch its parameters and understanding of itself is one. Li and S&M might agree that primitivism can be a self-critical tool for reflecting back on ourselves by producing a radical contrast, the primitive, however Li goes further casting it in a negative light as also self-serving. As quoted above, he says, ‘the critical reduction of the [Western] subject in the presence of the other is also the [Western] subject’s ethico-cognitive expansion;’ and that ‘the postulation of an outside, justifies ‘a renewed epistemic advantage that once again opens up a gap between the West and the rest.’ Li says that ‘such an outside is readily supplied by the idea of the primitive and asks ‘Can there

\[235\] Ibid., 37.
\[237\] Ibid., 221.
\[238\] Ibid.
\[239\] Ibid.
be theory without the savage?^240 It could be argued that the idea of the Western use of the primitive as a foil in a self-critical project as described by S&M, Kolakowski and Li is an exploitative use, as it is aimed first at self-knowledge and therefore, self-advantage through the effort to extend the parameters of one’s cultural specificity, and only secondly at understanding the other. Understanding the other is at the service of self-knowledge.

These harsh questions are not popular, and S&M avoid putting the issue of critical primitivism in such a negative light, preferring to take a softer more positive view, describing it as a deeply complex, ambiguous and fertile ground for contemporary artists, which although it is very risky, is worth the risks in terms of self-critique. This more accommodating view is probably more representative of current attitudes that are not as strict as Li’s possibly because they leave more room for artistic engagement. As well, S&M are probably constrained by the demands of producing a catalogue essay which would be expected to provide a more positive spin on the issues around the works in the show, so instead of pointing directly at Western advantage, they couch engagement with primitivism as attractive but risky, and critique and empathy caught in a difficult and complex interaction. Li proposes that primitivism is an epistemic exploitation, whereas S&M see it as the risk of exploitation, although both parties avoid that term.

For a critical discussion of the New Zealand artist Rohan Wealleans who S&M use as a principal example for their theory of conflicted and ambiguous contemporary primitivism, see the appendix. I argue that Wealleans is a bad artist trying to do good, conforming to institutional doctrine and ultimately confirming, rather than critiquing Western hegemony over the other.

3.1.5 Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of morality

Nietzsche’s use of the myth of the ‘primitive’ stands out for two specific reasons. Most directly, it reinvigorated the critique of Western modernity by revealing the artificial character and devastating consequences of the

^240 Ibid., 222.
domestication of the human animal, who only followed the ‘herd-instinct’ of the masses. Second, Nietzsche reversed the conventional strategy employed to interrogate modern society; instead of praising the noble savage (benevolence, innocence, purity, peacefulness, etc.), he championed the traits of his ignoble counterpart (cruelty, instinctiveness, rapaciousness, violence, etc.). As an embodiment of the Dionysian spirit, the ‘primitive’ blond beast was to be cherished rather than condemned. Its primal will-to-life and its individualistic morality sought to overcome existing norms and limits, thereby acting as a remedy against a civilizing process which Nietzsche believed to be responsible for humanity’s decay. His Genealogy of Morals puts the case thus: ‘it is the meaning of all culture to breed a tame and civilized animal, a domestic animal, from the predatory animal “man” ’... Set in opposition to the self-satisfied, prudent, comfortable and thoroughly rational ‘last man’, Nietzsche’s Übermensch represented a revival of this predatory animal, a return to our bestial origins in order to revive modernity’s putrefying corpse.241

Against S&M’s and Wealleans’ precarious primitivism, which has been argued to only reinforce Western aesthetics and political domination, and to be based on a hypocritical, moralistic position of doing good, I would like to consider 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of morality to argue that post-colonial theory’s moralism inhibits creativity and produces safe, conformist art.

I don’t think Nietzsche’s life-affirming wild-man would have had much time for the academic and ambiguous constructions of post-colonial primitivism. Its convoluted morality might have struck him as the workings of the dutiful bureaucratic mind which has ‘the vulgar ambition to possess generous feelings.’242 Oscar Wilde would have played this line for laughs, but the psychology is the same, underneath our civilised veneer lies the animal instinct and self-interest, and we should be honest about it and deal with it. For Nietzsche, Christian morality - descended from Plato’s idea of the good, an external standard set for all to adhere to, and lying at the root of the problem of

our civilisation’s conformist condition - was repressive and life denying, and other much better ethics existed such as the good of affirmative creativity and the self-realised individual uninhibited by social norms.

Nothing much seems to have changed since Nietzsche said about Germany in the 1880s that, ‘we modern men, very delicate, very vulnerable and paying and receiving consideration in a hundred ways,’ and, ‘we moderns with our anxious care for ourselves and love of neighbour, with our virtues of work, of unpretentiousness, of fair play, of scientificality – acquisitive, an economical, machine-minded.’ He is describing what he calls the ‘last man’ explained by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek as,

an apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment: unable to dream, tired of life, he takes no risks, seeking only comfort and security, an expression of tolerance with one another: “A little poison now and then: that makes for pleasant dreams. And much poison at the end for a pleasant death. They have their little pleasures for the day, and their little pleasures for the night, but they have a regard for health. ‘We have discovered happiness,’ - say the Last Men, and they blink.”

It sounds like now, when we are bound by ideas of being good, plain, normal and industrious, heads down. In Australia and New Zealand for example (because I am familiar with these cultures), being the same as everyone else is a competitive sport played by every good Aussie and Kiwi, and success is assessed by the size and quality of possessions and achievements within a very tight range of options, what jeans you wear, what car you have, what gallery you show at. Deviations from prescribed limits, such as away from shades of indigo or black for jeans, monotone monochromes for cars, and a specific range of acceptable art venues, are discouraged and endless negotiation and suppression of individuality goes into producing this finely graded levelling.Instances of break-out behaviour such as the opulent wedding of Salim and Aysha

243 Ibid., 101.  
244 Ibid., 102.  
Mehajer on August 16, 2015 in Sydney which featured a fleet of sports cars and Harley Davidson motorcycles and several helicopters, are attacked with ridicule. For example, Channel Nine website sneered at it as the ‘Wedding of the year’ 246 and on the Daily Mail Australia website as the ‘wedding of the century,’ 247 both in inverted commas so there was no doubt that the quotes, possibly fabricated, were being held up to ridicule.

Of S&M’s notion of primitivism and its positionings and risks, its awkward justification of Weallean’s badness and its particular care not to offend, Nietzsche might have demanded, in another Wildean moment, some ‘genuine hypocrisy.’ 248 Nietzsche said,

Nothing seems to me to be rarer today than genuine hypocrisy. I greatly suspect that this plant finds the mild atmosphere of our culture unendurable. Hypocrisy has its place in the ages of strong belief: in which even when one is compelled to exhibit a different belief one does not abandon the belief one already has. 249

Maybe he was thinking of the Christian martyrs who sought glory in horrible deaths, whom he might have admired for their strength, but couldn’t agree with their negative attitude to life which posed as spiritual attainment. For Nietzsche, the mild hypocrisies of today that attempt to paper over all our little (as well as big) offenses given and received are much worse than those grand ones because they lack passion and conviction. We might argue that peace and happiness are better than conflict whatever the cost to integrity, but this could just be a justification for an overly careful, safe and conformist culture.

Nietzsche satirizes the simultaneous holding of conflicting positions, the basics of hypocrisy, saying, ‘Beyond a doubt, a very much larger number of convictions are possible today, than formerly: possible, that means permitted, that means harmless,’ 250

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248 Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols/the Anti-Christ, 88.

249 Ibid.

250 Ibid.
calling this situation, with ironic emphasis, honest.\textsuperscript{251} Nietzsche uses irony often, despite that he says of himself, ‘To be true to my nature, which is affirmative and has dealings with contradictions and criticism only indirectly and when compelled.’\textsuperscript{252} If he uses irony to talk about hypocrisy then it must mean it is a serious issue for him. I presume he is being ironic when he asks, ‘How does one compromise oneself today? By being consistent. By going in a straight line. By being less than ambiguous. By being genuine.’\textsuperscript{253} To this list could be added clarity, which Nietzsche mentions in a moment of typical immodesty (or honesty), ‘Those who know they are profound, strive for clarity, those who would like to appear profound strive for obscurity.’\textsuperscript{254}

If these criteria are applied to the problem of contemporary primitivism, how does it look? S&M’s argument is a complex and tangled idea that tries to juggle empathy and critique, cultural appropriation and self-justifications. Their concept could be read just as easily as an alibi for aesthetic exploitation and a justification of bad art. It could be argued that S&M’s arguments of post-colonial primitivism are not ‘consistent, going in a straight line, less than ambiguous’ and ‘genuine.’ Instead, the contortions of bad and the attempts to hold opposing positions simultaneously - critical and empathetic, bad and good – are obscure and hypocritical.

Acting bad, Wealleans restaged bad appropriative Western behaviour to show how bad the West has been in the past. It is a moralising position that is a hindrance to creativity because the artist is constrained by complicated self-justifications. In his essay ‘The Will to Power and the Ethics of Creativity’\textsuperscript{255} American academic and Nietzsche expert Bernard Reginster argues that Nietzsche believed conventional morality was a hindrance to creative and other kinds of achievement because morality was based on the unrealistic desire for the absence of suffering, which killed creativity that necessarily entails suffering. He argues Nietzsche believed suffering was vital to creativity because

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{251} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 76.
\item \textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 88.
\end{itemize}
creative achievement was only possible against resistance, so suffering was an unavoidable part of facing and overcoming obstacles.

It is precisely insofar as it implies a radical revaluation of suffering that Nietzsche’s ethics of creativity underwrites his famed attack on morality. As Nietzsche understands it, morality, paradigmatically the ‘morality of compassion’ is predicated upon a wholesale condemnation of suffering. As such, it fosters an ethical climate that is essentially inimical to creativity:

‘…nothing stands more malignantly in the way of their [creative people] rise and evolution, today and for a long time to come, than what in Europe today is called simply ‘morality’—as if there were no other morality and could be no other—the aforementioned herd-animal morality which is striving with all its power for a universal green-pasture happiness on earth, namely for security, absence of danger, comfort, the easy life... The two doctrines it preaches most often are: ‘equal rights’ and ‘sympathy with all that suffers’—and it takes suffering itself to be something that must absolutely be abolished.\(^\text{256}\)

These two doctrines could describe post-colonial primitivist theory, a conventional morality of trying to prevent suffering and righting wrongs that, though compassionate, is ‘essentially inimical to creativity’ and doesn’t produce convincing art. Art must be developed from an inner process, and not imposed through external morality. Johanna Drucker made a similar point in her critique of politically motivated art, saying,

Art made to serve an agenda - moral, religious, critical, political, therapeutic [to which could be added ‘curatorial’] - suffers from the limitations of those framing religiosities. Creative imagination must outstrip the program of its initial impulse, for that is where imagination lies – in a dynamic process of reimagining whose outcome is unknown in advance of the act.\(^\text{257}\)

\(^{256}\) Ibid., 45.
This is not an argument that seeks to deny injustices past and present, it is an argument that wants to consider the limitations of politically motivated art and reinstate creative output that does not adhere to those codes.

If S&M are right that ‘the post-colonial critique of primitivism is now virtually official doctrine,’ 258 (and their critique is an example of it) and its true that such a critique has a moral agenda, and if Nietzsche is right that morality represses creativity, then the moralising of post-colonial doctrine must be questioned as pervasive, repressive and unhelpful to creativity. Hal Foster’s comment about moralising critique could be equally applicable to post-colonial art,

*One understands the fatigue that many feel with critique today, especially when, taken as an automatic value, it hardens into a self-regarding posture. Certainly its moral righteousness can be oppressive, and its iconoclastic negativity destructive.* 259

If society today is like Nietzsche’s time and repressive morality influences all aspects of culture including our best (moral and hypocritical) efforts to be self-critical, to better ourselves (and deny so much else), and help others (out of duty and obligation to moralistic systems of thought and art), is there any alternative to this? According to Nietzsche, yes! As Bernard Reginster points out,

*Nietzsche’s new ethics centres on an ideal of self-creation, or the aspiration ‘to be the poets of our lives’; and Brian Leiter has recently pointed out the importance of creativity, particularly artistic creativity, in the ethical outlook Nietzsche opposes to traditional morality.* 260

The Dionysian impulse that is the source of creativity that culminates in Apollonian structures, is affirmative and life-giving and is the basis of Nietzsche's alternative morality or new ethics. This is what I am searching for in my ritual performance, worshipping at the feet of the sex god, trying to get some creative juices flowing. In

258 McNamara and Stephen, "The Double Risk of Primivitism," 42.
260 Reginster, "The Will to Power and the Ethics of Creativity," 34.
contrast the exhibition *Future Primitive* looks dutiful towards a political program while trying to be ‘a bit naughty.’

### 3.1.6 Critiques of Nietzsche

A defence of post-colonial primitivist critique could be that Nietzsche’s doctrines are decidedly suspect, that his will to power and anti-moralistic dismissal of the desire to abolish suffering are Darwinian justifications of political domination and war. If this were true Nietzsche’s critique of morality would fail to have value in a critique of post-colonial morality. Quoted by Reginster in his essay, Nietzsche said,

*Life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest exploitation—but why should one always use those words in which a slanderous intent has been imprinted for ages?... ‘Exploitation’ does not belong to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society: it belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life.*

This looks bad for Nietzsche, however Reginster argues the will to power should not be interpreted literally in terms of political domination and control. These, he says, are consequences of power, not its essence. Instead, he argues will to power is key to Nietzsche’s concept of creativity that requires will to overcome obstacles. Reginster says, ‘I show how Nietzsche’s ethics of creativity is based on his concept of the will to power, and how some of the most distinctive features he attributes to the creative life have their source in the conception of it in terms of the will to power.’

Supporting the idea that the will to power should not be read literally as political domination, is the standard non-literal reading of the idea of karma yoga in the Hindu scripture the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is an idea that parallels Nietzsche’s will to power, being on the face of it a justification of war, but usually read as an exhortation to personal spiritual action, the fight within. Despite Nietzsche being very impressed by

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261 Ibid.
262 Ibid.
263 *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (Chennai, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, no date).
Buddhism, English academic David Smith says he ‘ignores the Bhagavad Gita entirely.’  Nevertheless the parallel is very striking. The story of the Gita is set on a battlefield where Krishna, avatar of the god Vishnu, convinces the reluctant prince Arjuna, who does not want to have to kill members of his own family, to enter the battle, saying, ‘Stand up now, son of Kunti, and resolve to fight.’ Krishna’s argument is the essence of karma yoga, or the yoga path of action. He says to Arjuna, ‘In this yoga, the will is directed singly towards one ideal. When a man lacks this discrimination … he is unable to develop that concentration of the will that leads a man to absorption in God.’ This will of the individual to overcome resistances and achieve their goals is very similar to Nietzsche’s will to power, and I suggest this close resemblance could support the interpretation that the will to power is not about domination and control of others, but a deeply personal and spiritual quest.

There could be a problem using the Bhagavad Gita to defend Nietzsche however, because there are aspects of it that are hard to explain away by saying you can’t take it too literally. If it is a spiritual guide to self-realisation, why use a story about killing to illustrate it, when the mistake of a literal reading could be so easy to make? Because such a dramatic metaphor, though at risk of misunderstanding, makes the point easier to get, or because a justification of killing was intended by its writers, disguised as a metaphor? My feeling is that the writers knew that the risk of reading it literally was substantial, for example, when Krishna tells Arjuna it is his caste duty to go to war because, ‘to a warrior there is nothing nobler than a righteous war,’ and it is the duty of the soldier to fulfil his role in life otherwise he ‘will be a sinner and disgraced,’ it is hard not to believe readers and listeners would never take the threats of sin and disgrace literally as moral rules in life.

Karma yoga can be viewed as ultimately realistic and spiritually valuable because one must fight one’s own internal negativities, and because death is unavoidable and must be reconciled with to appreciate life, however the other side of the problem is that it can

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265 Bhagavad Gita, 88.
266 Ibid., 90.
267 Ibid., 87.
268 Ibid., 88.
be seen to devalue life and justify the infliction of suffering. If you can’t deny the literal reading of the Bhagavad Gita, the same could be said of Nietzsche. It is hard to deny that some of Nietzsche’s ideas favour the powerful, selfish and violent, for example, ‘Exploitation’ does not belong to a corrupt or imperfect or primitive society: it belongs to the essence of what lives.’ Nevertheless, in Nietzsche’s favour, the idea that responsibility falls on individuals to undertake the difficult task of resisting repressive conventionality, to create their art, themselves and their own ethics according to convictions and genuinely held beliefs is very strong. I think the will to power can be detached from its negative political interpretation and regarded as a positive personal and creative force that can challenge the negativity of institutional post-colonial moralism which requires conformity, represses creativity and results in dubious art.

Slavoj Zizek makes a similar criticism of Buddhism to that of karma yoga above, that spiritual experience doesn’t necessarily lead to ethical behaviour and this gap can be exploited to justify violence.

>This is a great problem in Buddhism...we have to admit that once you are in enlightenment nothing prevents you, for example, from torturing people, you can just say my acts leave no traces because I’m already at nirvana level, no karma.\(^{269}\)

He gives the examples of the genocidal Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot - who he says was known to be a very gentle person and said to be enlightened - and the Japanese Zen theorist Teitaro Suzuki who argued the idea of the Japanese Zen warrior during World War Two. Zizek quotes Suzuki,

>when I try to kill some of you it is really not me, but the sword itself that does the killing, he (the killer) has no desire to do harm to anybody but the enemy appears and makes himself a victim, it is as though the sword performs automatically its function of justice which is the function of mercy.\(^{270}\)


\(^{270}\) Ibid.
Zizek extends this argument to a criticism of Nietzsche, that distortion by users is not only an unsatisfactory defence of the author because evil consequences could have been foreseen, it also reveals the author’s implication in the results. Just as Pol Pot and Suzuki’s uses of Buddhism to justify violence reveal the weakness in Buddhist doctrine that being above good and evil can be challenged as a defence against implication in evil consequences, Zizek argues the Nazis’ use of Nietzsche [for example in the idea of the master race] reveals the flaw in his ideas, that they are unconsciously fascist. *Philosophy Out of the Box* blogger quotes Zizek on this as follows,

> Is it not too simple to relieve Nietzsche of responsibility by claiming that the Nazis distorted his thought? Of course they did, but so did Stalinism distort Marx, so was every theory changed (betrayed) in its practico-political application, and a Hegelian point to be made here is that, in such cases, the “truth” is not simply on the side of theory. What if the attempt to actualize a theory renders visible the objective content of this theory, concealed from the gaze of the theorist himself?²⁷¹

*Philosophy Out of the Box* blogger defends Nietzsche saying his ‘letters even more than his books show someone who was deeply opposed to all forms of totalitarianism,’²⁷² so Nietzsche may have been unconscious of possible misinterpretations of his ideas. The openness to fascist interpretations of Nietzsche’s ideas and the danger inherent in spiritual systems that repressive and violent conditions are not challenged remain. Despite these problems I propose to hold on to the possibilities of self-determination, creativity and authenticity as alternative moralities to the unconvincing positionings of post-colonial primitivism.

…

Another possible connection between my work and Nietzsche’s ideas is the rejection of conceptualism. He said, ‘this pitiable God of Christian monotono-theism! This hybrid of the void, conceptualism and contradiction, this picture of decay, in which all decadence instincts, all cowardliness and weariness of soul have their sanction!’¹¹ His use of the

²⁷² Ibid.
word ‘conceptualism’ to describe a cold, empty god is not enough to think he would have disliked conceptual art, but I like the connection. My work is strongly object-based and visual. It is made to be fabulous to look at and enjoyed as a sensational experience with a strong sexual and cultish content. A friend called my work ‘delicious’ and I took this comment to mean that the work is delicious to look at and savour in its formal properties, shapes, colours, glazes, decorations and textures, as well as its content of orientalist bodies and sexuality. Nietzsche might have disapproved of conceptual art and its arid visuality, its (literal) iconoclasm, its hostility to images, representations and sensuality, its poverty of colours and joy, its repression of the body and its replacement of them with ideas and emaciated material signs. He might have found conceptual art to be the result of an imbalance between the Dionysian and Apollonian creative principles, the life giving force of the Dionysian having been over-powered by the sublimating Apollonian intellect, resulting in soulless and repressive negativity.

3.2 Authenticity

In contrast to the critiques of post-colonial theory, unquestioned authenticity and primitivism are ideas that remain embedded in the ethos of studio pottery. To appropriate S&M’s words, the potter’s project is an unrepentant return to ‘a state of pre-Lapsarian timelessness,’ which has often meant living away from the urban environment and working with traditional methods such as digging local clay, wheel throwing Japanese inspired vessels such as blossom jars and tea bowls, and firing in wood-fired kilns such as the traditional Japanese anagama.273 Traditional studio potters still abide by the principles of humility and authenticity, valuing the imperfections and irregularities of the objects that result from the processes of repeat work (repeating the same object again and again) and firing, and the freedom it provides from anxiety about producing masterpieces. Australian potter Ian Jones, who lives and works near Canberra, is a good example of a contemporary potter who practises in a traditional way. He has recently completed a PhD at the School of Art, Australian National

273 Anagama kilns have a single long chamber built on a slope, usually with an arched construction. At the lower end is the fire box without a separation wall inside the chamber and a flue at the top end. During firing which can last days, wood is continuously feed into the fire, requiring a team of people to work in shifts. Firing is therefore a collaborative process. Temperatures can reach between 1300C and 1400C. Anagama kilns became popular in the West during the 1990s along with the Japanese stoneware and ash glaze aesthetic that results.
University. His thesis is a straight forward presentation of an aspect of the philosophy of studio pottery, an account of the traditional Japanese aesthetic concept of wabi, that ‘consists of three aspects: a simple, unpretentious beauty; an imperfect, irregular beauty; and an austere, stark beauty.’

These ideas about the centrality of irregularity and authenticity in studio pottery can be traced to the 1920s when Japanese craft theorist Soetsu Yanagi developed his Mingei theory of the unselfconscious simplicity, distortion and beauty of traditional folk crafts. These ideas were developed in collaboration with his colleague English potter Bernard Leach, and passed into the theory and practice of studio pottery through Leach, subsequently spreading to Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and elsewhere in the world in the following decades influencing generations of potters up until the present. Pottery, though it is now regarded as merely craft in the West, retains a certain mystique due to its history of Zen, Japanese, Chinese and Korean influences.

In this section, I will discuss Yanagi’s ideas that still influence potters today and then present the post-colonial deconstruction of them, exemplified in the writing of Yuko Kikuchi, which reveals the political context of Yanagi’s research to demonstrate that ideas about aesthetics and simplicity can be read as compromised by their underlying and previously unexamined politics of colonial exploitation. However, I then propose to question the post-colonial critique of authenticity in order to bring Yanagi’s ideas back to critique the excesses and failings of contemporary clay-based art which, I argue, seeks authenticity and naturalness through irregularity in a self-conscious and unsatisfactory way. In the appendix I include a critique of the work of contemporary ceramics artist Nicole Cherubini, questioning her use of irregularity as self-conscious in Yanagi’s sense. I use Cherubini as an example to demonstrate that Yanagi’s previously deconstructed and rejected idea of authenticity is a useful position again from which to critique much contemporary clay practice as self-consciously irregular and failed as a project of return to authenticity.

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Soetsu Yanagi’s concept of authentic irregularity

Leach and Yanagi promoted the idea of a return to the basics of craft, influenced by the idealism and social visions of John Ruskin, William Morris and the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts movement among others. Their historical models were 18th century English slipware, 16th century Japanese teaware, Song Dynasty Chinese and Joseon Dynasty Korean pottery (see for example, fig. 78, a Song jar). In his book, The Unknown Craftsman, published posthumously in 1972, Yanagi summarized his theories, central to which was the idea that “Free” beauty of necessity boils down to irregular beauty. But not any irregularity would do, true irregularity was only possible and beautiful when it was not intended. Because the Joseon potters were simple people living with an unpretentious attitude making modest utilitarian work, it unintentionally turned out beautiful because it was authentically connected to the natural world. Yanagi contrasted early tea implements of the sixteenth century imported to Japan from China and Korea, such as Joseon pottery, to the unconvincing irregularity of modern art and contemporary tea-ware saying,

Such deformations as they [e.g. Joseon] contain were born, not made, unlike the kind of distortion that is current today. Their oddness was unplanned. Contemporary “free form” is wilful and unfree.

Yanagi felt modern art and ceramics of his time strived too hard for deformation and therefore failed to achieve the genuine beauty of the original ordinary implements. Yanagi describes the simple Joseon pottery produced by unknown craftsmen as superior because its ‘nonchalance’ and ‘natural good taste’ were ‘free from dualistic, man-made rules [of beautiful and ugly.]’ This was what Bernard Leach called, ‘a good pot,’ in which, ‘an expansion of the true spirit at the expense of the lesser ego is bound to take place,’ and, ‘the pot will have life in it.’ This is Leach’s definition of

276 Ibid., 124.
277 Ibid., 125.
278 Ibid., 123.
279 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
282 Ibid., 17.
283 Ibid.
vitality, or vital force. It is an idea that Japanese academic Yuko Kikuchi says was derived from French philosopher Henri Bergson who was, says Kikuchi, widely read in the intellectual circles of Yanagi and Leach in early twentieth century Japan.  


Yanagi felt deeply about the concept of authenticity, saying in relation to the o-meibutsu (the masterpieces of tea ceremony utensils), ‘Indeed, the authentic beauty of the o-meibutsu is sublime.’ The tea utensils were ordinary everyday objects discovered by the tea masters, “whose sharp “intuition” and “direct perception” (chokkan) enabled them to appreciate the supreme beauty of folkcrafts or getemono* and elevate them to sublime status by their selection and use in the tea ceremony. Yanagi said,

\[ All\ the\ O-Mei-butsu...no\ matter\ by\ whom,\ or\ where\ or\ when\ they\ were\ originally\ produced,\ may\ well\ be\ said\ to\ have\ been\ the\ creations\ of\ the\ eminent\ Tea\ Masters,\ for\ their\ eyes\ created\ things\ freely\ and\ without\ reserve.\]

This is not to say the tea utensils had no intrinsic beauty. For example, the o-meibutsu tea jar (fig.78) started its life as an imported utilitarian object, but its aesthetic values of simple rustic lines, forms and surfaces meant it was probably valued for its visual appeal as well as its functional use before it was spotted by a tea master and elevated to the status of a masterpiece. For the tea masters it was a matter of recognising the inherent beauty of ordinary objects and bringing it to light,

\[ The\ world\ is\ full\ of\ hidden\ beauty\ and\ only\ a\ limited\ portion\ of\ it\ was\ discovered\ by\ the\ great\ masters.\ There\ must\ be\ countless\ masterpieces\ waiting\ for\ us\ to\ bring\ them\ to\ light.\]

Reading between the lines, we can see that Yanagi saw himself as a master whose intuitive gaze could not only appreciate the beauty of ordinary Joseon and Sung pottery and see them for what they were, authentic masterpieces in their own right, but could elevate them to iconic status and museum pieces. Kikuchi regards intuition and the suspension of rational thought as Yanagi’s central concept, an idea she suggests was derived from his reading of Henri Bergson.

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286 Kikuchi, Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory, Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism, 61.
287 Yanagi, "The Way of Tea".
288 Ibid.
289 Kikuchi, Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory, Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism, 7.
authenticity could summarize his criteria of beauty which Kikuchi lists as: the beauty of handcrafts, intimacy, use/function, health (moral and physical), naturalness, simplicity, tradition, sincerity, selflessness and anonymity, inexpensiveness, plurality (repeat work), and irregularity.290

Yanagi said, ‘My encounter with Yi [Joseon] Dynasty everyday utensils was a critical one in that it determined the course of my whole life.’291 A formative moment in the history of studio pottery and Mingei was the discovery of an antique Korean Moon jar (fig.107) in a Korean tool shop by Japanese connoisseur Noritaka Asakawa in 1913 or 1914 during the Japanese colonial period. Asakawa’s rediscovery of plain Joseon pottery was critical to Yanagi’s development of Mingei in which the virtue of work (similar to the idea of karma yoga) and absorption in the intuitive process was visible in the residue of an unintentionally beautiful object, and appreciated as such by the connoisseur. Yanagi believed the intention to produce a beautiful object and thoughts of fame and fortune were obstacles to the production of beauty. Like William Morris, Yanagi retrieved meaningful work from the rustic simplicity, humility, and anonymity of a distant and ‘primitive’ past, in Yanagi’s case, Korea of the Joseon period (14th-19th centuries). Yanagi used the revival of this work, both practice and object, as the defense for his claim to save traditional folk crafts from the encroachment of industrialization.

In antique Korean pottery Yanagi found the primitivism he needed to argue against the ‘imperfections [that] are now sought after and refined with deliberation,’292 of official Japanese Raku tea-ware and modern art that he found forced and unconvincing. He said, ‘I cannot describe the present craze for deliberate deformation in art as a path towards true beauty.’293 True beauty for him, ‘should be seen in terms of muso, the Buddhist idea of unchanging formlessness behind all phenomena,’294 and ‘thusness’295 which cannot be fabricated but appeared to be only achievable unconsciously by simple craftsmen. Yanagi addressed the dilemma of how a self-conscious craftsman could

292 Yanagi, The Unknown Craftsman, 121.
293 Ibid.
294 Ibid.
295 Ibid., 123.
achieve the state of effortlessness and not care too much about success or failure, perfection or imperfection. He said, ‘to do so is immensely difficult so long as one follows the path of jiriki (salvation through one’s own efforts) rather than the tariki (abandonment of attempts at self-reliance; reliance on “grace”) that produced the Korean bowls.’\textsuperscript{296} Ironically, the very thing a sophisticated artist keen on achieving true beauty needs, and what the humble unknown craftsman just naturally has (according to Yanagi), is the thing s/he may struggle to possess, naivety, achievable perhaps only in rare moments of absorption in work.

Yanagi’s ideas about authenticity and deformation can, of course, be found to have serious flaws using post-colonial critique and these will be discussed in the next section. Nevertheless, ideas like Yanagi’s have an attraction for artists today disenchanted with the tangled failures of critical strategies discussed in Chapter 2. In section 3.3.3 I will place him in direct juxtaposition with some contemporary deformed ceramics to test today’s ‘craze for deliberate deformation in art’ and assess whether it is authentic according to his criteria. If egoless art is impossible for today’s over-sophisticated artists, I will question what artists are doing when they try to engage with these ideas.

\textsuperscript{296} Ibid., 125.
3.2.2 Critiques of authenticity


Authenticity and humility, Yanagi’s spontaneous irregularities and Leach’s good pot are easy enough to critique as idealistic constructions that turn out to be a repressive aesthetic system that disallows experimentation and alternative approaches to clay and ceramics. For example, the advent of post-modern ceramics from the 1960s onwards was in part a revolt against the strictures and forced modesty of studio pottery which flourished in imitation of its ancient models, but in the end proved too limiting for artists inspired by popular culture and Pop art. Post-modern ceramics were a flight into sculptural invention, colour, fun, creativity and an appropriationist attitude to history, exemplified in the work of American ceramicists Michael Frimkess (fig.79) and Adrian Saxe (fig.80).

Other problems with Leach’s philosophy have been pointed out, such as his personal lack of humility when he contextualised his work within the fine art system to develop a reputation as an individual genius, at odds with his philosophy of the humble potter. Edmund de Waal has also revealed that Leach did not throw his own pots, it was done by skilled craftsmen in his studio, while he concentrated on decoration.297 This doesn’t quite fit with the eulogising of Leach’s contemporary, the Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, which seems to assume Leach was solely responsible for making his work.

The pots I admired most [in an international group exhibition of Japanese and Western potters] were by Bernard Leach. Many other Japanese potters agreed with me...The focus of his work is the most concentrated and personally expressive. This quality of his work has been apparent for over fifty years.298

A more serious problem is that Yanagi’s theory of Mingei has been deconstructed within post-colonial discourse and argued to have been developed in the context of Japanese nationalism, cultural imperialism, connoisseurship, exoticism and the construction of a subject other. There has been significant recent research in this field notably Yuko Kikuchi’s book Japan’s Modernization and Mingei Theory, Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism. Kikuchi shows that Yanagi’s theories were a

298 The Unknown Craftsman.
hybrid of Eastern and Western ideas, tracing the strong influence of mysticism and Western ideas of primitivism, nostalgia, ‘gothic medievalism’, the ‘grotesque’ and ‘irregular,’ the anti-rational and intuitive, absorbed from sources such as John Ruskin, William Morris, Roger Fry, William Blake and Henri Bergson. She says,

However, far from being ‘authentically’ Oriental in outlook, as is generally assumed, Mingei theory is a hybrid theory, highly eclectic in its concepts, with core ideas from many European sources, such as British (particularly Ruskin and Morris), Scandinavian and German craft philosophies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Buddhist rhetoric and ideas from Japanese Tea Masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century.

She argues that Yanagi applied these hybridized ideas to his research into traditional cultures within the Japanese Empire, “the primitive savage” art of Korea, Taiwan, Manchuria and that of the Ainu, producing a double orientalising gaze, ‘Oriental Orientalism.’ She says, ‘To create its own identity, the Occident designated the Orient as “Other.” Japan in turn, to create its own identity somewhere between the Occident and the Orient, made the rest of the Orient its “Other.”’

This dichotomic framework of Orient and Occident was vital to the formation of Mingei theory and at the same time, in the construction of a cultural identity for Japanese art.

American academic Larry Shiner has also critiqued the idea of authenticity. In relation to traditional West African art he argues against,

the myth of an unspoiled pre-contact “primitive” or “traditional culture”....The notion that “traditional societies” are or were self-contained and unchanging (“without history” in Hegel’s term).

300 Ibid.
301 Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory, Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism, 14.
303 Ibid., 352.
Shiner argues against these ideas of purity which would guarantee authenticity. He argues persuasively against authenticity, that cultures are always changing, undermining the concept of singular and original cultural identity. He says,

*Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, was an area of enormous cultural diversity where there was a constant exchange of goods and stylistic borrowing among indigenous peoples... Today’s carvers who... incorporate stylistic features from various African group or even from European art traditions, are not violating the practices of some mythical self-contained “traditional society” but are carrying on a process of continual cultural exchange.*

The idea of authenticity ignores long histories of continual cultural exchange such as that which existed between Australian Aboriginal tribes before European contact. According to Australian historian Richard Broome,

*The Australian continent was crisscrossed by intricate and specialised trade routes along which goods passed... Pituri (native tobacco), axe-heads, and flints were regularly carried distances of up to 800 kilometres... [and] it was usual for ceremonies and religious ideas to be gradually exchanged over distances of 1500 kilometres or more.*

Contemporary West African tribal practices that mix traditional work with output for Western markets without discrimination between authentic and fake, are discussed by Shiner. This model of fluid cultural exchange and the blurring of boundaries around authenticity challenges Yanagi’s idea of the unknown craftsman, the primitive Joseon potter, which requires an isolated, pure and closed set of historical conditions to justify it. If Broome and Shiner are correct, the pure unknown Joseon potter may never have existed at all, but instead have been a savvy operator working within complex social and

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305 Ibid.
306 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994). 'The exchange of gifts within the tribe and other needs stimulated exchange on an inter-tribal basis. The Australian continent was crisscrossed by intricate and specialised trade routes along which goods passed. Shells from the Gulf of Carpentaria reached southern Australia. Pituri (native tobacco), axe-heads, and flints were regularly carried distances of up to 800 kilometres. Each local region had its trading system. For instance the coastal people of Arnhem Land traded marine products far inland for stone tools and ochre. Also, it was usual for ceremonies and religious ideas to be gradually exchanged over distances of 1500 kilometres or more.' (For this information Broome cites D.J. Mulvaney, 'The Chain of Connection' in N. Petersen (ed.), *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1976, pp. 72-94.)
political conditions of influence from outside producing what clients wanted for local demand and export, utilitarian pottery in a certain fashionable minimal style of the time. This accords with what blogger Anton Cu Unjieng has said,

Looking at Northern Sung celadons [what Leach considered the best pottery ever made, and made in his opinion by unknown craftsmen] in particular, it is difficult to imagine the makers as simple unconscious peasants – and it is impossible to believe that they were somehow lacking self-awareness and subjectivity.307

The argument against authenticity is that innocence never existed and was invented by theorists like Yanagi. Edmund de Waal says ‘reinventing the vernacular,’308 was an international nationalistic phenomenon underpinning craft revivals not only in England and Japan but also in Germany, Finland, the USA and elsewhere. He says, ‘It is possible to see the search of ‘authentic’ vernacular traditions that occupied many ceramicists at the turn of the twentieth century as a reflection of the highly charged question of how to define cultural identity.’309

These critiques of authenticity challenge Yanagi and Leach’s theories of the purity of simple traditional craft by suggesting that their ideas were inventions underpinned by significant political and cultural agendas. Yanagi’s promotion of Joseon can be seen in this context as a retrospective construction using traditional craft to justify nationalistic, Japanese culture and its subject primitive others. Nevertheless, in the following section, I will redeem his ideas as a way to reconsider the deliberate deformations of contemporary clay-based art.

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309 Ibid.
3.2.3 Critique of the critique of critique and its critique

A refutation of my arguments supporting authenticity would be that they are naïve, because aesthetic appropriation is always political. As Anton Cu Unjieng says of Yanagi’s theories,

Politically, the effects of constructing these cultures [Korean, Manchurian, Taiwanese and the Ainu] as atavistic is obvious: they might be plundered for their aesthetic inspiration, that does not require one to recognize their right to self-determination.310

However, the claim that aesthetic inspiration from other cultures is always plunder can be challenged as problematic because it is based on an essentialist notion of cultures as pure entities with intrinsic values. Such an essentialist notion has been critiqued within post-colonial discourse because it contributes to the construction of subject others, us and them. As Shiner has argued from the post-colonial position, cultures are not like that, they are always changing and influenced from outside and never pure. Post-colonial critique has thus produced a basic contradiction at its centre; it constructs cultures as impure entities while it simultaneously employs the idea of cultural authenticity, or the pure origins of a culture, to defend indigenous rights and ownership.

Given this tricky problem where post-colonial critique undermines its own claims to authentic ownership, how does an artist respond to the attraction of materials from other cultures? By claiming carte blanche, that the history of the world has always been made up of cross cultural appropriations? That it is all out there anyway in the globalised economy, it is all relative and up for grabs? Is this an ethical position to take? In my case, if I admire a Moon jar and use it as an example in an argument or were to aspire to make something similar, would these be ‘plundering’ ‘aesthetic inspiration’ from Korea? Would my use be okay because these artworks have been circulating within global ceramics discourse for so long, the story of how they came to prominence is no longer relevant? Or do these pots still have something to say about Japanese and Korean history, where much antique Korean ceramics is still held in Japanese collections since

310 Unjieng, “A Skirmish with Bernard Leach”. 170
the colonial period, and any use of them, especially to make claims about authenticity, is implicated in those issues?

Korean artist Park Young Sook, who makes modern versions of classic Korean Moon jars (see fig. 109) and has shown them at the Musee Tomo in Tokyo in 2008, and the 

*Sydney Biennale* in 2012, is an interesting artist to think about in this context. To show her work in a Japanese museum suggests that the artist is reflecting on Korea’s Japanese colonial history through this type of object, the Moon jar, which was central to Japan’s writing of Korean art history. However, the artist does not seem to directly address the post-colonial issues surrounding the Japanese aesthetic systems developed by Yanagi and others who ‘rediscovered’ Moon jars as objects worthy of connoisseurship, systems that continue to support her work as aesthetic objects, and which could be the object of a critique by her of them. Instead her website biography uses the art historical language of those systems to describe her ‘commitment to recreate the “lost” methods and styles of Korea’s fabled Chosun [Joseon] Dynasty,’ and the technical demands involved. It is interesting to wonder if she is tacitly defending the idea suggested above in my critique of Cherubini that aesthetics and craftsmanship still have value independent of post-colonial critiques. Or is she being subtly, but defiantly political by reclaiming Korean Moon jars from Japanese art history, positioning herself on the issue of cultural ownership and reflecting on the touchy and unresolved issues that still exist between Japan and its neighbours over its colonial past?

Australian academic and artist Jan Guy has pointed out another political reading of Park’s Moon jars given by 2012 Sydney Biennale curator Catherine de Zegher. Zegher observed twenty-first century women artists ‘developing a changed criticality increasingly defined by inclusion, connectivity, attaching and constituting attitudes, and healing too’ in contrast to modernism’s radical negativity. Guy speculates that the inclusion of Park’s work in the Biennale ‘is a feminist perspective (on the part of the curator) and the strategy of collaboration,’ a healing project in which collaborator Yeesookyung pieced together shards from Park’s rejected and destroyed jars.

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313 Ibid.
What about my use of Hindu iconography? Am I an exoticist and orientalist, exploitatively restaging the construction of barbaric others? Or is my use justified because the iconographies of East and West have been in a constant flow of exchange since antiquity? For example, the hybrid Greek inspired sculpture of ancient Gandhara, located in northern Pakistan, combined Greek facial features, musculature, draperies and contra-posto movement in the bodies within Buddhist figurative types such as Buddhas and bodhisatvas. Since the eighteenth century East West exchange has influenced Willow pattern ceramics, Western orientalist academic painting, illustration, fashion, movies, interior design, music videos, games, not to mention philosophy and music. Is this justification sufficient, or is it a flawed argument because it reveals how deeply entrenched cultural appropriation and stereotypes are? What about the appreciation and enjoyment of, say, Indian classical music, the practice of yoga, meditation and reading Hindu sacred texts? Are these practices culturally insensitive? Where do you draw the line on cultural ownership and appropriation? I will take up this question in sections 3.3 The Author’s Position and Queer Primitivisms and Orientalisms (see appendix), where I will defend my appropriations on the grounds of a genuine personal interest in particular aspects of the cultures I reference, and refer to Canadian gay artist A.A. Bronson, whose orientalist appropriations form part of his broader healing project.
3.2.4 Sterling Ruby and innateness


Ruby’s work explores what the artist describes as ‘a dichotomy of repression and expression. These concepts engage in a dialectical paradigm within which individual desires and gestures struggle with authority and control, evoking an ongoing process of becoming. As a method for exploring this condition, Ruby’s work often mimics and subverts the tropes of minimalism... not only a paradigmatic art movement but also a stand-in for an authoritarian system based on oppressive rules of inclusion and exclusion.\textsuperscript{314}

Besides being an aesthetic issue caught up in post-colonial discourse, authenticity has another related source in psychology that has found resonance with contemporary artists in its expressive and idealistic appeal. American artist Sterling Ruby’s (born 1972) punky, messy attitude which challenges repressive authority, often in the form of defacement, is based in what he suggests is an authentic position of innate feeling. Ruby speaks about doing a community course in ceramics in the early 1990s, taught in the art therapy department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. To his disbelief he says he discovered that, ‘clay does give people an innate and unfettered sensibility. I loved it.’\textsuperscript{315} He says he later rebelled at art school against the institutional requirement to intensively pre-plan and justify his work, and instead wanted to work intuitively. He says,

\begin{quote}
I have always thought of art as similar to poetry, that it can’t be proven and yet, if done right, has a sense of unmistakable aura. This idea is also in direct conflict with education and training; it brings with it my generation’s shift towards primitivism or naivety.\textsuperscript{316}
\end{quote}

Ruby uses ceramics as part of a multi-disciplinary practice that questions what he considers to be the authoritarianism and hegemony of minimalism and academic theory in contemporary art. He claims to argue for new positions, the ‘repressed other[s] of minimalism’\textsuperscript{317}, which are to be achieved through ‘sincere hostility’ towards those

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid. 
\end{flushright}
dogmas. Amongst the diverse range of work he produces to achieve these new positions he creates roughly modelled ceramics decorated in lava-like glazes (fig.81) which ‘[privilege] improvisational, relatively unfiltered, and definitely lowbrow work’[^318] and are the antithesis of the industrially pure form, finish and material of minimalist sculpture. He builds then defaces monumental minimalist structures with graffiti (fig.82), contradicting their ‘exterior object-hood’ with ‘marginal states’ of social disobedience and aesthetic deforming. In other distinctive work he pours urethane into spectacular ruby coloured stalagmite sculptures which owe a debt to the process work of Eva Hesse. Through the ideas and practices of process, intuition, and disobedience to orthodox institutional ideas, Ruby claims to investigate alternative theories of subjectivity that are more about the possibilities and potentials of interiority than minimalism’s rigid exteriority. With the associations of low craft and humanistic ideas about expression, it is not hard to understand the challenges Ruby experienced pursuing the idea of unmediated expression in the context of his post-modernist art school training.

The similarities between work using basic finger markings as a technique, made across a very wide spectrum of positions in ceramics seem to support Ruby’s claims that a primal and universal response to clay exists. Compare the deliberately unsophisticated technique of Ruby’s work that foregrounds the finger markings (fig.83), to the *Magic of Clay* children’s art class sign with similar handling of the clay (fig.84), to Japanese-Australian ceramicist Mitsuo Shoji’s simple but skilful platter made with deep finger markings (fig.85).

Ruby seems to be rejecting the post-modern reading of primitivism and authenticity in which it is viewed as part of an exploitative response to the colonial encounter with indigenous cultures and claiming instead an essentialist position against theory and critique, using a pre-post-modern idea of primitivism which assumes that the primitive
offers entry into a more authentic and genuine interiority. Because he studied pottery, its possible Ruby has absorbed ideas about sincerity and utopianism from the ethos of studio pottery and is proposing a new authenticity and an expressionist essential subject. But is he replacing one dogma, academic theory, with another, essentialism? Maybe not because Ruby admits that his position isn’t stable, that innateness isn’t certain,

*Ceramics in particular correspond to the therapy-driven collective identity. The medium of clay for me is universal. It holds all sorts of shared principles with reference to desire, immediacy, sexuality and repression. The malleability of the clay becomes truncated via the kiln, which is also a kind of a monumental allegory for where we are as a generation. Perhaps it characterizes our incapability to truly feel as if there is an innate expression... that even this is an incarceration of current times. It is converted through the firing into a monument of the gesture that it once had.*

This quote indicates that Ruby is very interested in the universal appeal of clay and the idea of innateness because he regrets that it may not be possible after all; he wants to ‘truly feel’ but actually feels incarcerated in the political and psychological issues in which art and subjectivity are enmeshed. It is as if Ruby feels nostalgia the way Schaffner speaks about it, for the simplicity of an essentialist position, but is incarcerated in the realities of art, education and life, and the dichotomies of expression-repression, exteriority-interiority, innateness-constructed self, incarceration-immediacy, primitivism-minimalism, and naivety-institutionalism, with something else.

Writer Robert Hobbs says that Ruby is not a reactionary, but interested in more complex kinds of subjectivities than essentialism,

*Ruby's act of stepping back from Art Centre’s program in order to assess differences between its pedagogical goals and his own artistic needs took the form of an extended discussion [with his examiners] regarding ‘innate’ creation versus ‘conditioned’ responses. Although Ruby wondered at the time if it were at all possible to ‘do something unfiltered,’ his desire to*

319Ribas, “Sterling Ruby.”
engage in process-oriented work did not move in the reactionary direction of a humanistic search for an intrinsic and essential self that could be revealed and celebrated in his art, as the Abstract expressionists had done. After reading Guattari and working with Lotringer...he wanted to plumb an ad hoc self as an assemblage, subject to the machinic flows that Guattari and Deleuze both described.320

Hobbs argues that Ruby’s work is post-humanist and post-Lacanian because this desire to plumb the ad hoc self as assemblage involves dispensing with both the essentialized self of humanism and the Lacanian alienated self and replacing them with ‘positive views of proliferating subjectivities.’321

Hobbs identifies this strategy as ‘transversality,’ placing its origin with French psychologist Felix Guattari and his work with mentally ill patients. He writes that Guattari wanted to,

find new techniques that would allow patients to break the institution's shackles and bond with the outside world... to break through the strictures of an overly controlling superego or Symbolic by providing many different options for forging new subjectivities...’Guattari’s open-ended approach... becomes a modus operandi for Sterling Ruby, who employs it as a working premise for his art.322

Hobbs, based on his reading of Althusser, believes the materiality of the medium in art has the power to block the interpellation of the subject to the ideology investigated by the artist in the artwork, because the, ‘formal means obstruct the more direct persuasiveness necessary for this type of enlistment.’323 According to Hobbs, materiality not only gets in the way of political persuasion, but also provides the viewer with an objective vantage point,

321 Ibid., 24.
322 Ibid., 32.
323 Ibid., 24.
the medium is both inside the art as the means for manifesting its content and also outside the work since it ‘intervenes’ and interacts with this meaning… there is an ongoing confrontation of art's form and content that frees viewers from any interpellative encumbrances at the same time that it permits them to see how its Symbolic or ideological registers function. What this means for our analysis of Ruby's art is that his work can both invoke and indicate various subjectivities while maintaining enough distance so that his viewers can look at them as part of the art's subject rather than being concerned that these subjectivities will hook them into [ideology]. 324

If it is true that medium has this interventionist and objective power to reveal the workings of ideology, then it provides a strong argument for Ruby’s use of clay and ceramics; Ruby’s primal treatment of clay would be a political tactic, responding ‘to the restraints of certain aesthetic and social practices stemming from minimalism's continued hegemony in the twenty-first century.’ 325

Although Ruby needs to challenge orthodoxy and find new positions, he seems unhappy with Hobbs pushing of transversality, suggesting to Ribas in their interview that transversality and post-humanism form a retrospective theorizing of his practice. 326 Perhaps Ruby may regard Hobbs’s theorising as another orthodoxy to avoid, possibly one being developed as part of a career strategy to position and package him with the necessary theory for him to be taken seriously in publications such as art magazines, public interviews and Hobbs’s book. Maybe Ruby is still in love with his therapeutic first experiences with clay, modelling primitive ‘biomorphic and anthropomorphic work…sexual, with holes, extensions and everything over glazed’ 327, holding on to ‘my disobedience of the regulations’ 328 the desire to do something romantic and expressive.

324 Ibid., 25.
325 Ibid., 23.
326 ‘To be quite honest I had never thought about Post-humanism in relation to my work until Robert Hobbs started the discussion while preparing his essay for the JRP/Ringier book… I recently started thinking that I apply a kind of “transversality” not only in theory, but also as a work ethic.’ Ribas, “Sterling Ruby.”
328 Ribas, “Sterling Ruby.”
3.3 The author’s position

So what is my position? To avoid the tangles of post-colonial art I am attracted by Ruby’s nostalgia for the ideas of innateness and expression, Zizek’s clarity and by Nietzsche’s call to go in a straight line, but if I criticise post-colonialism am I a fascist Nietzschean, or am I a creative individualist? Or am I a Zizekian Marxist who is critical of liberal in-betweeners, or am I such a liberal ‘last person’ myself, trying to balance and juggle conflicting positions and issues while carving out a tiny protected corner of the world for my own little pleasures and investigations? Do I live in a culture of ‘last people’? Ironically, both Nietzsche and Zizek are critical of in-between positions. Nietzsche was very hard on the bland, non-committal and hypocritical ‘very delicate, very vulnerable [modern man],’329 and Zizek says,

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\text{I believe in clear-cut positions. I think that the most arrogant position is this apparent, multidisciplinary modesty of “what I am saying now is not unconditional, it is just a hypothesis,” and so on. It really is a most arrogant position. I think that the only way to be honest and expose yourself to criticism is to state clearly and dogmatically where you are. You must take the risk and have a position.}^{330}
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Zizek would hate what Urs Fischer says, ‘I enjoy paradox. I enjoy that there is no clarity. I like things all open and parallel. But they’re just things.’331 Is what Zizek criticises exactly what I have been doing throughout this thesis, trying to avoid criticism by couching everything in ‘maybe,’ ‘perhaps’ and ‘it could be argued that’? The question then is not ‘what is my position?’ but more tragically, ‘do I have a position at all apart from a maybe this/may this fluffiness?’ Admittedly, I have been very critical of some artists such as Tino Sehgal and Rohan Wealleans, but these arguments always seem to be checked by lingering doubts that maybe I’m wrong, suspicion that every position arrived at can in turn be critiqued and taken down, or that I’m a hypocrite who criticises in others exactly what I do myself. Am I convinced by my own arguments?

331 McKie, “Sculpting to His Own Beat.”
This tangle might reflect the more general one of primitivism described above. Am I in a kind of dead end of ambiguity and relativity as a consequence of the contortions of post-colonial theory which might be critical, but also might be exploitative? Is the problem that the basic dialectical structures are self-defeating, where counter arguments and counter-counter positions can always be constructed and convoluted ironies are sought out? Or are these objections to primitivism and the apathy that can result a retreat from the complex realities of the geo-political present, cop-outs that create an alibi for reactionary positions, and should a hard-line approach such as Spivak’s be demanded to maintain the critical rage? Do artists have to become activists in the frontline of protest or is it possible to figure out something for yourself in the Nietzschean sense of personal action and ethics? Does a return to ideas considered idealistic such as those of William Morris, Ingrid Schaffner and John Zerzan’s appeals to nostalgia, the romance of the primitive and expressionism offer a creative way out or is this a reactionary path? Is a more honest approach to the use of the primitive possible which is more authentic and less exploitative? Contemporary artists such as Sterling Ruby (re)claim an intuitive and authentic right to make primitivist work. But their claims could be thought of in context of Marianna Torgovnik’s ideas quoted by Tambling quoting Li when Li discusses, ‘New Age’ commercialism and the ‘contradictory attempt to achieve collective consciousness or oceanic impersonality while still attached to "a thoroughly modern world view that takes the self as a thing to be owned, cultivated, and coddled - the veritable hub of the universe."’ In light of this comment by Torgovnik, is primitivism in contemporary art the expression of artistic egos or is it something more genuine? Later in this chapter, following a discussion of authenticity, Ruby and Huntley’s claims to authenticity and sincerity will be discussed.

3.3.1 Mud Slut, personal primitivism

How do I regard my own shaman-like performances Mud Slut (fig.86) and Evil Flowers (fig.87)? Is Mud Slut a Nietzschean character, a primitive wild man, or are they fashion conscious, patronising and deluded? An engagement with the primitive that seeks to absorb, and be absorbed in the magic of the shamanistic while simultaneously claiming to be self-critical through self-parody? Or self-serving like Victor Li’s idea of the neo-

primitive, an opportunity for epistemic expansion? Can I claim they are authentic? My performances of the shaman relate to my long term interest and practice of taichi, yoga philosophy and meditation, which are connected to an interest in Asian art, particularly Indian sculpture and architecture, but referencing of these could be regarded as an uncritical form of orientalism and exoticism. What are the borders between acceptable and unacceptable use of cultural appropriation? Are S&M close when they say, ‘Rather than separating the primitive and modern, is it not more provocative to think of the two as intricately intertwined?’ This idea appeals to me more than their formulation of the double risks of primitivism because it doesn’t frame the issue as an unresolvable paradox, but opens it to possibilities.

The problems with post-colonial primitivist theory are that it is inevitably exploitative even as it tries to explicate the issues, as Li argues, permanently paradoxical as S&M theorise it, ‘inimical to creativity,’ in Nietzsche’s words, and morally oppressive according to Foster. It is, in Drucker’s words, ‘art made to serve an agenda - moral, religious, critical, political, therapeutic [to which could be added ‘curatorial’] – [and therefore] suffers from the limitations of those framing religiosities.’ An alternative to the problems of political art is provided by developing a personally authentic approach from an inner process, drawing on ideas and practices such as Nietzsche’s, Drucker’s and Ruby’s. It must rely on personal responsibility and a search for its own psychological, social or spiritual significance, its politics consisting of a rejection of standard politics.

_Mud Slut_ approached primitivism in this way rather than from a post-colonial position. It was _bad clay art_ because it ignored politics. It proposed a personal primitivism that concentrates on internal development and addresses more universal concerns. Influenced by 20th century body art, counter-culture and alternative Eastern practices it centred on the idea and experience of the body. It could be argued that this is a reactionary position that derives advantage from other cultures, but it has the advantage of removing the impediment of restrictive politics that might deny the possibility of immersion. It is unlike S&M’s model of primitivism where full shamanistic immersion is said to be impossible by contemporary Western artists engaging with primitive

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333 McNamara and Stephen, “The Double Risk of Primivitism,” 34.
culture because one can’t step outside one’s own culture. Rather than taking the anthropologist as a model, and having to angst over the paradox of empathy and objectivity, I took the seeker as a model, not clinging to the necessity of simultaneous objectivity, but trying to shift from objectivity to immersion in the object of interest.

In the first part of the performance I lit incense, sat down and began pouring slip (a thick solution of clay, or liquid clay) over myself while reading quotes from artists Thomas Houseago and Ugo Rondinone that make reference to modernist, humanist and essentialist concerns in their practices. In particular Houseago claims to be a weirdo and proud of it because of his long standing anti-conceptualist stand as an artist. He claims that art needs outsiders who are wandering in the forest. His self-positioning as an outsider in contemporary art appealed to me, and I wanted to present his and Rondinone’s related statements on humanism and fundamental feelings earnestly as positions that I took seriously, despite my own weird and perhaps comedic costume, actions and speaking voice (a camp, exaggerated, Americanised drawl.) It could be argued that shamanism is widespread throughout the world even in European traditions, and what I was doing was creating my own personal version.

As the recitation and pouring progressed, my experience shifted from speaking the prepared lines to taking them on, becoming the weirdo and shaman, slipping away from speech into a state of writhing and pre-verbal moans. I shifted from trying to be critical to becoming immersed. I wore a long wig and flesh coloured tights, surrounding myself with ceramic vessels and sculptures I had made, one of which contained the slip which I drew out in beaker-fuls to pour over myself. Unlike Wealleans’s performance, it was less of a send-up of shamanism, and much more serious about the possibility of it. It was an attempt to provoke a transformative experience. See the appendix ‘Piles of clay, buckets of mud,’ for a brief list of other artists who have used clay in similar performative ways.

But did it happen, did I experience a transformation from outside to inside? I can report that I did enter an altered state of consciousness for a few moments, not deep but clearly immersive, which had an afterglow of an energised, relaxed feeling as though I had momentarily freed myself from normal social constraints. It can be seen in the video that as I make the transition I make periodic checks on my physical position in relation to nearby objects, to the computer (which displayed the text I was reading) and nearby
ceramic sculptures to make sure I’m not bumping into them, and to the camera screen to make sure I’m still in shot as I slide off my seat and roll around in the slip. Once I made these little checks, I could relax fully into the performance.
Figure 86. Five stills from video performance, Mud Slut, 2013.
3.3.2 Evil Flowers

Figure 87. The author, three stills from video documentation of Evil Flowers performance, 2012.
Figure 88. (top left) The author posing in the installation, Evil Flowers, Performance Space, 2012. Photo: R.O.
Figure 90. (bottom left) John Meade, detail from installation at SEXES exhibition, Performance Space, 2012. Photo: the author.
Figure 91. (bottom right) Philip Brophy, drumming performance at SEXES exhibition, Performance Space, 2012. Video still: the author.
My performance *Evil Flowers* (fig.87), in tandem with my installation of the same name (fig.92) in the exhibition *SEXES* at Performance Space in Sydney in 2012, was a ritual of libation, prostration, and supplication that, although it may have appeared to be a send-up of shamanism, was serious in its intention to be personally meaningful and transformative. The title of the installation and performance came from French romantic poet Charles Baudelaire’s collection of poetry *Les Fleur du Mal (The Flowers of Evil)* first published in Paris in 1857, and censored by the French government because of its intense atmosphere of eroticism and images of passionate sexual love. The combination of decadence, horror and clear sexual references such as,

*When she had sucked out all the marrow from my bones/ And I languidly turned toward her/ To give back an amorous kiss, I saw no more/ Than a wine-skin with gluey sides, all full of pus!*  

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- from the banned poem *The Vampire’s Metamorphoses* - was viewed as immoral, ‘‘outrage aux bonnes mœurs’’ (trans. ‘‘an insult to public decency’’).\(^{335}\) The poet submits to his lover who is a monster (in the poem *Lethe*),\(^{336}\) a tigress (*Lethe* and *The Jewels*),\(^{337}\) a vampire (*The Vampire’s Metamorphoses*),\(^{338}\) beautiful but lethal, loved and hated, someone he can imagine mutilating (*To One Who is Too Gay*).\(^{339}\) I wanted to reference this feverish and lush mix of sex and violence with the title of the installation and performance, which turn around the main figure of the animal-headed and hammer-handed deity with a cork-screw penis standing on the summit of the ruined temple. This figure stands for sexual desire that must be appeased with rituals and offerings.

For the performance I assumed a shaman-like character and made an offering of fruit and incense to the ceramic idol. The shaman look was achieved with a simple costume of long dark wig obscuring my aviator sun glasses and most of my face, a black hooded top pulled over my head and black jeans to produce a look that was a bit monkish, a bit dishevelled street person, with hair cascading out of the hood. It wasn’t a full-on costume or drag that might upstage the sculptures, but something low key but a bit weird that would fit in relatively unobtrusively with the installation. I later posed without the hoody, the wig reversed and covering my face while still wearing the reflective glasses (fig.88). Coincidentally, this look was echoed by two other artists in the SEXES show, Philip Brophy (fig.91) and John Meade (fig.90). Brophy and his go-go dancers wore very long black wigs hanging down to their waists for his ecstatic and sweaty performance of primal rock drumming, and Meade hung long fetishistic scalp-like, black, plastic sculptures in his installation with other slick phallic objects. Face covering and identity obliterating long straight black hair seemed to be the sign *du jour* for primitive shamanistic performativity, perhaps a common pop culture reference to TV character *Cousin Itt* (fig.89).

My performance began with disassembling a sculpture into its three parts to access wine, flowers and fruit lying in the interior of its lowest vessel part. First the snake


\(^{336}\) "Les Métamorphoses Du Vampire".

\(^{337}\) Ibid.

\(^{338}\) Ibid.

\(^{339}\) Ibid.
figure was taken down from the top, then the middle platform on which it stood was taken off the vessel where it rested on the rim. This removal was actually an extraction, since the major part of this middle element consists of a giant penis hanging down inside the interior of the vessel and hidden from sight. The extracted platform/penis was laid onto nearby sand. I reached down inside the bulbous vessel to remove flowers sticky with wine, offered them to the audience, took out apples and scooped out wine, tasted it, and poured it as a libation over the nearby penis. Taking the fruit I ascended the stepped pyramid of staging platforms to approach the god and make offerings of the fruit, and light incense. Retreating down the pyramid, the penis sculpture was reassembled and the performance concluded. The performance added an extra dimension to the installation, activating and enlivening it, putting it to use and reinvesting the sculptures with ritual functions.

But was this performance of any real significance either personally or culturally? The shaman is like the lover in Baudelaire’s poems, submitting to and worshipping the idol, seeking some kind of connection to or even union with the object of desire, but it could be questioned whether a performance is in any way real. If a shaman must be fully absorbed in the persona and ritual to properly be a shaman and connect to an alternative reality, can the identity of a shaman just be taken on and performed? Wouldn’t it be fake, wouldn’t only ‘real’ authentic shamanism do? S&M believe a contemporary shamanistic performance can have cultural relevance. They believe the artist is involved in a double act, a complex performance that tries to access some of the shamanistic power of primitive ritual while at the same time presenting it in parodic form critical of one’s own cultural positions. This description reflects aspects of my recent performances such as Mud Slut and Evil Flowers. I discussed Mud Slut as a negotiation between immersion in the material of clay and a critical position in relation to the medium, but are my performances simply parodies, explorations of issues, of cultural positioning in relation to the primitive? No, because my performance – and my work in general - has a personal foundation in relation to and questioning of moral constructions of sexuality, so I feel its serious performance with personal issues at stake. Despite its amusing fake-ness and exoticism, I felt I really wanted to express the desire for belief in something, even if I didn’t know exactly what it was I wanted to believe in, and though I made fun of the idea of worshipping a scary sex god, I wanted to give the performance
an intensity and reality that reflected on sexual desire and its representation and presentation in art and performance.

See the appendix ‘Queer Primitivisms and Orientalisms’ for a discussion of queer artists such as Canadian A. A. Bronson, who appropriate from primitive and oriental sources to successfully make authentic work that avoids moralism through deeply felt engagement. The depth of this engagement pushes the work through the barrier of what may appear to be trivial appropriation, using the strategy of ironic inauthenticity, to create something that is genuinely authentic.

3.4 Chapter summary

The work of artists like Sterling Ruby (and A.A. Bronson and Nicole Cherubini) are examples of attempts to return to primitive authenticity in contemporary art. Like the artists discussed in the previous chapter, Houseago and Rondinone (and Arlene Shechet), they are interested in utopian ideas, free expression, reconnection to deeper, more fundamental and authentic states of being and working. While their interest in expressive modes places them in opposition to conventional post-colonial discourse that has deconstructed ideas about authenticity and reconnection to simpler ways of living as caught up in exploitative, colonialist constructions of the primitive, Bronson, Ruby and Cherubini all reengage with them while retaining a sense of critical reflection. They reject the post-colonial model theorised by Li and S&M, where critique and empathy are caught in a frustrating or impossible duality, and are much more interested in direct experience that can have critical consequences. Ruby’s desire for the innateness of clay’s psychological potentials is both heart-felt and intensely critical of repressive minimalist art and the carceral society it reflects. Bronson’s psycho-social therapies and collaborative performances embody alternative forms of healing and sexual expression in an alienated society. Cherubini claims a free space of invention, an alternative authenticity of process based on a ‘creative misreading’ and critique of what she sees as ceramics’ patriarchal history and established orthodoxies of aesthetic purity and high technique.

However, there are criticisms that can be made of their work. Ruby’s ceramics and other work could be criticised as neo-expressionist excess and self-indulgence, expressions of male angst perhaps, but it is very powerful visually in its crude authenticity and can be
read as a critique of masculinity. Bronson’s shamanistic appropriations could be regarded as culturally exploitative, but his apparent sincerity and personal commitment to his healing project demonstrate that the post-colonial critique of appropriation as exploitation has limits. Bronson draws from various Eastern and shamanistic traditions, but his long term practice and the view of many that beneficial cultural knowledge should be available to everyone supports his use.

I have argued that Cherubini’s critiques of historic ceramic masterpieces aren’t convincing because although, for example, Mingei theory had dubious imperialist underpinnings, the aesthetic and technical qualities of the objects justify their continued appreciation. The value of aesthetic and technical qualities is demonstrated by the high regard held for Korean artist Park Young Sook’s contemporary Moon jars. I admire this work for its austere formal beauty and commitment to reviving antique forms and processes. Although the technical skill and aesthetic properties contribute to the critical effectiveness of their post-colonial critiques, because they are taken more seriously as objects and this enhances the messages they carry, the physical and visual properties of the work can be appreciated of value in themselves.

Cherubini takes the opposite tack, using bad (or bad, depending on your point of view) inauthenticity to ridicule traditions of skill as oppressive. If it weren’t for the fact that almost all ceramics in current contemporary art is similarly bad, this strategy would have more credence, but because it is mainstream now its peripheral effectiveness is diminished. Bad construction can no longer guarantee bad parody and good critique. To be wild, free and exaggerated is great fun, but isn’t always enough to convincingly get the political message across. It is too easy to mock the assumptions that naivety, innocence and bad technique make good art, claims of authenticity need to be backed up with knowledge, aesthetic principles and technical expertise. This problem is probably acknowledged by the artist whose work has increasingly shed its more extreme trappings such as gold chains in recent years.

Spivak and Li believe any Western engagement with the primitive is exploitative, while S&M believe that engagement is possible in the form of an anxious precarity, but all are moralistic and wish to place limits on creative interaction, influence and exchange. My position is the desire to work outside these moral constraints that is something like Abramovic’s (surely consciously) naïve essentialism, knowing appropriation for
authentic personal development *a la* Bronson. It is a project to redeem idealistic notions such as Yanagi’s authenticity and skill from the scrap heap of post-colonial discourse and reengage with them in positive new formations. This means not getting trapped by moral anxiety, but accepting complicity and proceeding in a creative and self-aware way.
CONCLUSION

There is a commonly held perception that cultural practices and activities have ceased, or have changed too much to have any value or visible relevance to broad audiences. Yet as the work of artists in this year’s Primavera demonstrates, Aboriginal art practices emerging from the wreckage of first contact and generations of colonial impacts are assuming an increasingly important role in the continuation of our nation’s cultural strength.340


The revival of interest in clay and ceramics in contemporary art is part of a wider trend in art reconsidering and returning to lost, neglected or repressed forms of cultural production. For example, Nicole Foreshew, Australian curator of the current exhibition of young Australian artists, Primavera, at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art, discusses the show in terms of the,

resurgent ‘Global South’ within which peoples belonging to a diversity of cultures question received ideas of identity, culture and power.341


341 Ibid.
The show focusses on artists from Indigenous and other cultural backgrounds working in a range of contemporary and traditional mediums from video to craft practices such as fibre knotting and artist Taloi Havini’s simulations of shell beads in ceramic (fig.93). Havini has a much larger version of this work in Primavera. Beads threaded together suggests a metaphor for community, individual elements connected by the thread of social and economic bonds and traditions over time and space, and its translation from organic material to vitrified ceramic, a metaphor of renewal and the remaking of tradition.

Indigenous artists employing traditional crafts as part of contemporary practice can be seen as reengaging with authenticity and revising conventional, post-colonial deconstruction into something more affirmative. Primavera’s recognition of, and reconnection to traditional forms of cultural production is a retrieval project that has value not only as a critique of received ideas, but as a positive alternative that benefits people’s lives by reintroducing and reconnecting to valuable cultural knowledge. It is not just an abstract critique of power, but an affirmative action in the context of other returns in contemporary culture to authentic origins that attempt to counter alienation, discontent and failure in the present. Notions of return as reaction to unsatisfactory current conditions can be traced to sources such as William Morris, and before him John Ruskin’s visions of ideal communities and meaningful work. More recent influences such as relational art’s foregrounding of the social and counter-culture ideas such as John Zerzan’s primitivism may also have influenced this development. As Ingrid Schaffner pointed out, even if the ideal primitive society never existed ‘the critical power of these conditions remains intact.’

The Indigenous model of revitalising post-colonial critique through authentic return to lost or endangered traditions could also be applied to ceramics. The principles are the same, renewing critical positions through the prevention of loss of knowledge, recognition of cultural value, and reconnection to practices that have been overlooked or

342 In Chapter Three I quote from Bevir’s discussion of Ruskin’s influence on Morris. In another example, Bevir says ‘Morris used Ruskin’s sociology to bring a social dimension to his evaluation of works of art. He identified good art with the nature of the labour that produced it, saying “the thing that I understand by real art is the expression by man of his pleasure in labour. A work of art reflected the society in which it was produced...” Bevir, “William Morris: The Modern Self, Art, and Politics”. 10.

343 Schaffner and Porter, Dirt on Delight, Impulses That Form Clay, 31.
disparaged as irrelevant. Whereas the Indigenous return appears to emerge out of on-going connection to community and country, in Chapter One it was argued that the revival of ceramics and clay in contemporary art so far has, however, mostly been a rediscovery of clay as a material that can be exploited by contemporary artists with little connection to the existing subcultures of ceramics and pottery. Clay is used on a basic technical level, while in-depth craft knowledge of clays, construction methods, glazes, firing, philosophies and histories are often overlooked. I argue this new dogma of transformation through innocent mud play is based on a superficial assumption that the encounter with clay is a purely experiential one, for example Edmund de Waal’s phenomenological theorising of clay. Clay is automatically assumed to guarantee primitive magic, innocence and therapeutic results just by putting your hands in it. While I have used clay in muddy form in my work and I like, for example, the materialist spectacle and relational fun of Urs Fischer’s raw clay installations, because of its success the risk is that this and similar work by other artists becomes the only model for clay’s use.

The absence of skill is assumed to guarantee quality, either as expression, transgressive critical deskilling, or to authentically acknowledge and reveal clay’s true nature as an easily manipulable plastic material. However, it could be argued these latter assumptions are hangovers from conceptual art and its devaluation of the object and manual activity, a rejection of art’s other, craft, which is delegated to technicians and machines. I counter de Waal’s theory with Krauss’s idea of medium specificity, Adamson’s theory of craft’s inferiority and the argument that phenomenology and post-structuralism are intricately interconnected philosophies to propose skill as a critical complementary to immersiveness. I argue traditional methods that exploit clay’s strength, elasticity and responsivity to fine building techniques are just as materially specific or true to the material’s ‘nature’ as loose definition of form, sagging and collapse, features of materialist clay-based art. I argue that high levels of skill cannot be assumed to hinder expressive possibilities and that ceramics is a demanding discipline in which quality needs time and training. Although instant feelings of magic may be experienced when coming to the medium fresh, the assumption that this alone can reveal deep truths results in short term effects. I love to have fun and make a big mess with clay, but it is not the only way to proceed. To demonstrate the relevance of my own skilful figurative ceramics, I place them within the context of contemporary artists,
particularly Daniel Dewar & Gregory Giquel and Adel Abdessemed who use clay to make large scale, skilled figurative work.

In Chapter Two I argued a return to outmoded expression in clay-based art is potentially bad – personal, historicising, appropriative, free – and as such can constitute a critique of exhausted critique and post-conceptualism in current art. I used Richard Prince as an example of critique gone bad, and Tino Sehgal’s practice as an example of ambiguous, institutionalised conceptualism, referencing theorists Johanna Drucker and Hal Foster who agree that critique has become negative, conformist and hypocritical. However they disagree on what to do about it. Foster is staying with critique and theorizing kitsch as a critical strategy while Drucker accepts complicity as the unavoidable condition of art. She believes that creativity, ‘a reawakening of affirmative sensibilities, a reflective, self-conscious artifice’344 and the challenge to ‘imagine otherwise’345 are the best response to the critical impasse. I discuss artists Arlene Shechet, Ugo Rondinone and Thomas Houseago who use ceramics as a primary medium, or clay as a supplementary material, to demonstrate the relevance of renewed interest in art of essentialist ideas of subjectivity, expressionism and alternatives to conceptualist ways of working.

The question whether these returns to what appear to be expressive modernist forms of figuration and philosophies of reconnection are reactionary, complicit or critical alternatives still seems unresolved. While expressionism is not an inherently critical style, it gains critical traction as a counter to post-conceptualism, as an alternative that shows up the dependency of immaterial art on politics and context that can just as easily be commodified as well. Maybe in the brief moment while expressionism is new again, and bad, it is political and can ironically challenge the primacy of the political in art, but as soon as it is reabsorbed into the mainstream, as Shechet, Rondinone and Houseago’s work has already been, it loses its contrary edge.

The question for me is where do I place myself in this field? Am I a political strategist who chooses creativity and outmoded ceramics as a platform from which to critique politics as problematic and restrictive? Or am I a creative seeking inspiration where I will, and that turns out to be a political problem because creativity is considered

344 Drucker, Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity, xvi.
345 Ibid., 6.
unacceptably apolitical and appropriationist and I must therefore defend it by critiquing critique with creative *bad* art? Or am I interested in direct experience that’s critical consequences are of no interest to me?

It is a ‘chicken and the egg’ situation. Whichever comes first, politics or aesthetics, in prioritising personal, affective and aesthetic values *bad* expressive art offers an alternative where ‘ideas of good and bad are flexible’ and I am free to create beautiful monsters. Even if I start from a position of political awareness within the context of the art world, I want to outstrip this beginning. I claim Marcia Tucker’s ‘extraordinary freedom to do and to be whatever you want by bypassing the idea of progress’ and reconnecting to ‘openly nostalgic, figurative… classical and popular art-historical sources, kitsch and traditional images, archetypal and personal fantasies.’ Maybe this is enough in a post-critical art world where clear narratives have broken down.

In Chapter Three I defend the relevance of the idea of primitive authenticity in contemporary art against its deconstruction as naïve and exploitative within post-colonial discourse. I criticise the moralistic underpinnings of the post-colonial critiques of primitivism and authenticity by Hal Foster and the more conflicted positioning of Ann Stephen and Andrew McNamara. I argue these positions are contradictory and even exploitative themselves, basing this on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s and Victor Li’s more fundamentalist critiques that even well-intentioned post-colonial constructions of the primitive encounter are exploitative.

All these critiques seek to prohibit or regulate aesthetic appropriation by limiting the potentially valuable exchange of histories of thought, iconographies, material production and spiritual systems. However, I argue post-colonialism’s restrictive model of ownership rests on a basic contradiction that undermines its authority. Post-colonialism both rejects and finds useful the essentialist, authentic idea of culture; it is deconstructed as constitutive of the subject other while employed to defend claims of original ownership. This shouldn’t be an argument to invalidate claims of ownership, but it does highlight the paradoxes involved, post-colonialism’s moralism and

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346 Tucker, *Bad* Painting.
347 Ibid.
contradictions necessary to defend cultural integrity and the problematic ideas of
equality, exchange and cultural porosity which can be fronts for exploitation.

In this field where the politics are contradictory and all encounters with the primitive are
potentially exploitative, I argue instead for appropriation that is personally meaningful
and creative. I base my use of creativity on Nietzsche’s critique of morality and his
alternative of individual responsibility and self creation. Appropriation is appropriate if
it is a genuine engagement with other traditions, if it personally authentic and connects
to an authentic source, as far as these are possible. For example, I propose that Soetsu
Yanagi’s theories of aesthetics and authenticity from ceramics history can be
reconnected to despite their post-colonial deconstruction by Yuko Kikuchi and others. I
also use the example of yoga, which though a contested field, can be practised in a
genuine way. A.A. Bronson is another good example. He conducts healing rituals based
on long term study of Eastern and alternative systems, appropriating from East and
West, but because he channels these influences into a personal and sub-culturally
meaningful practice, they are appropriate appropriations.

This model could be applied to the appropriation of ceramics by contemporary artists. If
artists make easy materialist appropriations from ceramics to make fashionable lumps
for multimedia installations, that’s dubious, but if it is a thoughtful, creative and critical
engagement with ceramics traditions, techniques and histories - medium specific in
Krauss’s sense - that’s more interesting. Although she is a Korean artist reconnecting to
her own history, Park Young Sook could be a model for this attitude. She researches the
particular tradition of the Moon jar in Korean ceramics history, recreating historical
skills which are offered to the present as something that could easily be lost, but are
worth keeping and restoring as a cultural asset. There are dangers with Park’s method
however, because it could become a repressive new aesthetic system of skill with a
nationalistic rationale.

Addressing my initial question - can a return to traditional aspects of ceramics and art,
namely skill, expression and authenticity, be used to critique aspects of contemporary
art and clay-based materialist practice and offer something new, or is this a reactionary
move that only serves the status quo – the answer is not clear cut. Despite my promotion
of authenticity and criticism of ambiguous positions, politics, moralities and cultural
boundaries are vague and contradictory. Almost all the artists I have discussed are bad,
but also could be argued to be exploitative. Rondinone and Bronson appropriate from other cultural sources. Rondinone, Houseago and Ruby reengage with outdated essentialist philosophies. Dewar & Gicquel and Bronson use the nude male body in a sleazy, sexually-charged way, and Cherubini and Shechet have drawn from outmoded studio pottery traditions, ‘creatively misreading’ them. Abdessemed and Aramesh make edgy political work that serves their careers. Fischer embraces fun (and decay and death) and denies politics. Almost all reengage with what have been outmoded mediums and materials, figurative sculpture, ceramics, clay, and foreground creativity in their practices. But all these artists are also very successful, so how critical can their _bad_ strategies really be, when everyone is trying to be _bad, and bad is good_? Are they critical artists or reactionary?

Other problems arise with these arguments. If I support freedom and complicity, aren’t these terms also open to critique? Complicity could be a cover for exploitation, and Zizek argues freedom only exists as a momentary cognitive opportunity.\(^{348}\) Where does critique stop if every position can be questioned and taken down? I argue that critique is exhausted, but then argue for it anyway. I argue against morality, but isn’t any attempt to be critical a moralistic stand? Aren’t I being moralistic when I criticise Tino Sehgal’s sponsorship by a bad multinational company? Tucker argues for a critical position beyond good and bad, but isn’t this therefore presumably good?

Are all these contradictions and unresolvable political arguments symptomatic of a hypocritical, conformist, reactionary ‘last’ people? Whether this is true or not, a reconsideration of the affirmative values of authenticity, expression and skilled working are creative responses that offer possible alternative, personally meaningful pathways.

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\(^{348}\) Zizek, “Slavoj Zizek on the Desert of Post-Ideology”.  

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APPENDIX A

1. Foucault, Bataille and Merleau Ponty

The perceived philosophical differences between phenomenology, which lies behind de Waal’s position and the post-structuralism of Rosalind Krauss contradict a connection between material and critique. For example, post-structuralism suggests self-conscious critical distance while phenomenology suggests a self-effacing immersion and intertwining between artist and material. However the underlying philosophical positions of phenomenology and post-structuralism can be shown to be not as mutually exclusive as is often thought. In order to show a commonality the conventional view held by writers such as Christian Fuchs and Marisol Sandoval that phenomenology and post-structuralism are antithetical will be challenged and writers Sylvia Stoller, Martin Jay and Gary Sauer-Thompson are presented here to support this.

Fuchs and Sandoval quote Michel Foucault to support their view that there is a clear demarcation between phenomenology and post-structuralism.

_The main post-modern critique of notions such as essence, ground, foundation, truth, unity, or universals is the argument that such categories can be used for legitimating grand narratives of domination... Things should be defined ‘without reference to the ground, the foundation of things, but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance._\(^{349}\)

In contrast to this more hardline distinction, in his article ‘The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault’\(^{350}\) Martin Jay challenges the dichotomy of phenomenology and post-structuralism using the idea of experience. He outlines what he sees as the conventional view of the confrontation, like Fuchs and Sandoval’s, before discussing his contrary view. He writes that the confrontational position held by,

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those theorists who have taken to heart ... post-structuralism are far more suspicious of the self-evident value of experience than those who have not. Appeals to the authority of something called experience - or even more emphatically, ‘lived experience’ – they distrust as a naive, indeed ideologically pernicious, residue of earlier epistemologies, which they typically identify with empiricism or phenomenology.351

Jay writes that these post-structuralists’ false view of experience is that it is,

construed as unified, holistic, coherent and present to itself... a marker for the immediacy of lived, pre-reflexive encounters between self and world...The very quest for an authentic experience lost in the modern world they damn as yet another version of the nostalgic yearning for a presence and immediacy that never has existed and never will.352

Contrary to these positions, Jay argues that the demarcation between phenomenology and post-structuralism is not clear cut at all, citing Bataille (as a precursor of post-structuralism) and Foucault (as a post-structuralist) who have strong investments in the term experience influenced by phenomenology in that they incorporate the body but in a complex critical way. Jay quotes Foucault on his concept of limit-experience,

Phenomenology also erred, Foucault continued, in trying ‘to grasp the significance of daily experience in order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, of the self, of its transcendental functions. On the contrary, experience according to Nietzsche, Blanchot and Bataille has rather the task of ‘tearing’ the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is complete ‘other’ than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation.’ Such a notion of an experience that undermines the subject, Foucault called a ‘limit-experience,’’ because it transgresses the limits of coherent subjectivity as it functions in everyday life.353

351 Ibid., 157.
352 Ibid., 156-57.
353 Ibid., 158.
In speaking about Bataille’s book *Inner Experience*, he says it,

> undermines any attempt to read it as a plea for positive, personal, individual, fully interiorized experience...For it is precisely the impossibility of such a successful fusion that Bataille suggests is one of the most powerful limits of inner experience.\(^{354}\)

Jay suggests that these violent definitions of experience aim at rejecting wholistic, conventional spirituality which seeks outcomes in the form of harmony and union with a higher sphere, in Bataille’s words the ‘beatitude, deliverance, which we strive to procure for ourselves.’\(^{355}\) Instead, the sacred that Bataille seeks is, Jay quotes Bataille, ‘no longer a limited experience. There the man is not distinguished in any way from others: in him what is torrential is lost within others. The simple commandment: ‘Be that ocean’ …makes of a man a multitude, a desert.’\(^{356}\)

On his webpage writer Gary Sauer-Thompson makes similar points that Bataille rejects conventional spirituality, quoting from *Inner Experience*,

> This book is a tale of despair...Like a marvellous madwomen [sic], death uneasingly opened or closed the gates of the possible. In this maze, I could lose myself at will, give myself over to rapture, but I could also at will discern the paths, provide a precise passage for intellectual steps...Everything was giving way. I awakened before a new enigma, one I knew to be insolvable. The enigma was so bitter, it kept me in an impotence so overwhelming, that I experienced it as God, if he were to exist, would experience it.\(^{357}\)

Sauer-Thompson links the ecstatic experience with post-modern critique. He writes,

> So Bataille's strategy is to rework an ecstatic visionary tradition in order to critique the anti-bodily, anti-emotional character of the idealist

\(^{354}\) Ibid., 163.  
\(^{355}\) Ibid.  
\(^{356}\) Ibid., 165.  
Jay criticises those who assume that the ‘lessons of post-structuralist thought…fatally undermine the notion of coherent subjectivity subtending any belief in the self-evidence of experience’ \(^{359}\) and who draw from this assumption the conclusion that experience, as naïve, must be jettisoned altogether. Jay questions this position by showing that experience can take other forms not reliant on an essentialist subject. He provides the evidence of Bataille’s ecstatic/critical subject and Foucault’s subject torn from itself, to show that experience doesn’t need a coherent subject, it does very well with all kinds of fragmented and dissolved subjects, and the experience of these subjects is critical in itself. Thus Jay reveals a complex inter-connection between phenomenology and post-structuralism, the latter preserving the concept of experience by recasting it through the phenomenological body of flesh, violence, emotions, mysticism as a critique of integrated subjectivity, power and space.

**Maurice Merleau-Ponty**

Supporting the above arguments on the interconnection of phenomenology and poststructuralism, writer Sylvia Stoller says in the abstract of her article ‘Expressivity and Performativity: Merleau-Ponty and Butler’ \(^{360}\) that feminist phenomenology can combine phenomenology and post-structuralism. She says,

> until now post-structuralism and phenomenology are widely regarded as opposites. Contrary to this opinion, I am arguing that they have a lot in common. In order to make my argument, I concentrate on Judith Butler’s poststructuralist concept of performativity to confront it with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological concept of expressivity. While Butler claims that phenomenological theories of expression are in danger of essentialism and thus must be replaced by non-essentialist theories of performativity, I hold that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of expressivity must

\(^{358}\)Ibid.


strictly be understood in anti-essentialist terms. Following this line of interpretation, ‘expressivity’ and ‘performativity’—as well as phenomenology and post-structuralism—are not opposites but partners in the search for an anti-essentialist gender concept. Consequently, feminist phenomenology turns out to be a non-essentialist approach that combines phenomenological and post-structural insights.\textsuperscript{361}

Also supporting the above arguments, writer Glenn A. Mazis argues that phenomenology is not naïve as some think and does not seek an essential transcendent subject. In his emphasis on the body and experience as interwoven in the world, Glenn A. Mazis’ reading of Merleau-Ponty seems to accord more with Sauer-Thompson’s image of Bataille involved in a critique of the anti-bodily and anti-emotional Enlightenment model of the subject, seeing subjectivity in a non-wholistic way. In these ways Mazis challenges the view of phenomenology as essentialist by arguing for a contingent phenomenological subject. In his essay ‘Chaos Theory and Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology’\textsuperscript{362} Mazis argues that Merleau-Ponty’s ‘philosophy of perception and ambiguity’\textsuperscript{363} produces a subject that is very hard to pin down, existing as interconnections within a matrix of subject and world. Mazis links Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy to the chaos theory of science,

\textit{to articulate an ontology which reconfigures time, materiality, identity, and other traditional categories of analytical thought as used both in the sciences and humanities... in such a way that the human and the natural can be seen as intertwining or in a chiasmatic relationship.}\textsuperscript{364}

For Mazis the subject is inside the world not exterior to it looking on from outside, Merleau-Ponty’s subject and the world inter-penetrating in incredibly fragile ways. He writes,

\textsuperscript{361} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{363} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{364} Ibid.
the contingency of existence that Merleau-Ponty’s ontology has addressed
...will allow us to consider the body as interwoven in the flesh of the world,
to see the logic of personal and material identity as emergent from a
dynamic unfolding of a fragile endurance...365

Mazis uses other ideas from chaos theory like ‘open systems.’

In an open system, an entity functions and unfolds only within the
interrelated functioning and unfolding of its environment. Furthermore,
whatever one wishes to designate as a discrete entity, probably is likewise
an interrelation of its constituents.366

Thus an entity becomes an event, and,

if all entities are events (including human being), ways of self-amplifying
themselves within the interplay of open systems, then we are merely ‘ways of
happening,’ fragile, yet enduring...physics speaks of probabilities rather
than entities...irregular in their unfolding, open to other events, fluctuating
in identity: a knowing of indeterminacy. These entities are never really
anywhere, as discrete, self-founding beings, and the probabilities represent
the gaps in their substantiality and in the Cartesian world.367

Does the insubstantiality of Mazis’ subject and world indicate an essentialist view or a
critical one? As a theory it undermines the Cartesian model of an objective world and a
discrete subject separate from matter, so is critical in that sense, and in the entity’s
structure as ‘an interrelation of constituents’ rather than a unified whole, it is post-
structuralist in character. But it could still fall into that category of phenomenology
rejected by Foucault, because it tries ‘to grasp the significance of daily experience in
order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, of the self, of its
transcendental functions.’ The subject and the world may be insubstantial and chaotic,
but that insubstantiality still rests on the idea of the subject having a fundamental
character, and that character is a kind of transcendental insubstantiality, an unchanging

365 Ibid.
366 Ibid.
367 Ibid.
insubstantiality that transcends the apparent solid world. For Foucault, the world could well be an insubstantial thing, but it is still made up of power relations that must always be questioned.

Alternatively, it could be argued that the argument against transcendence is irrelevant because insubstantiality doesn’t transcend anything, because everything is insubstantial. This could be criticized because, if not transcendent, it is still an essentialist idea that everything is material in flux, so could be classified by Foucault as an idea that, ‘can be used for legitimating grand narratives of domination,’ because it has at its base an unquestioned assumption on which power structures could be built.

2. Refutation of Glenn Barkley’s rejection of skill

Skill gets in the way. This attitude is exemplified by Australian curator and writer Glenn Barkley in his 2014 article ‘So Hot Right Now? Contemporary Ceramics and Contemporary Art’ in Art and Australia (Artand) magazine, an overview of six Australian ceramicists and contemporary artists who use ceramics. What these artists have in common Barkley says is that they all, ‘tread the fine line of knowing good technique but not being overwhelmed by it…equal parts concert pianist and garage band.’ Although he does not jettison technique altogether, he certainly thinks it is an issue, one that always needs to be kept in check and never given free rein. The problem with Barkley’s model, however, is that ambition is thwarted because you must always be fearful of craft and careful not to be too good technically. The result is that everything remains small and unchallenging and large technically demanding work is not possible. It is interesting that this insistence on modest scale parallels the same limitation in traditional studio pottery, with its innate puritanism, where the pots demanded by studio pottery founder Bernard Leach must never reveal any egoistic ambition by the artist. This problem is evident in the selection of work Barkley makes for his article, all of which are domestically scaled.

I understand what Barkley’s getting at in his questioning of skill. For example, Fischer’s use of amateur making and basic techniques has positive experimental value and breaks

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368 Barkley, “So Hot Right Now? Contemporary Ceramics and Contemporary Art.”
369 Ibid.
potentially stifling rules about how things should be made. But low skill is a dogma in itself and doesn’t guarantee spontaneity. As traditional pottery attests, high levels of skill are required to effortlessly throw a pot on the wheel. Sure, expression can be killed off by too much control and refinement and energy blocked by rigidity, but extremely high levels of skill do not necessarily prevent full expression. The history of art is full of incredibly well-made art of the greatest expressive quality and material interest that has been produced within traditions dating back hundreds or thousands of years. Indian sculpture and pre-colombian mesoamerican ceramic sculptures are excellent examples of this (figs.71,72), and this work has inspired me to follow the path of refined building. So a simplistic rule that insists on a balancing act between high and low craft is unworkable because high craft has no innate need to deskill itself for the sake of expression. Such a formula can easily degenerate into compromising and mediocre work. In the context of mediocrity and conformity to modesty, to honestly delight in the ambitious and well-made turns out to be genuinely transgressive.

3. Richard Prince: critique gone bad?

It might be interesting to look at American photographic artist Richard Prince’s work in relation to Raphael Rubinstein’s quote at the beginning of Chapter 2 and wonder why the pictures generation artists are being yawned and sneered at now. This might provide an example of critique gone bad and an insight into the return of clay and expression.

Continuing his forty year practice of appropriating images without permission, in 2014 Prince showed new work that copied pages from social media site Instagram featuring digital photographic portraits published by other people with accompanying comments. Prince made screen shots of the pages and printed them as inkjets on canvas scaled up to six feet square. The strategy of appropriation that established Prince in the 1980s by critiquing the circulation of images in culture and radically questioning originality in art and definitions of subjectivity, is now itself questioned by detractors asking whether critique has gone bad. Not only are Prince’s appropriations questioned on the basis of ethical debates about intellectual property, authorship and privacy on the internet, his behaviour as a participant on Instagram is also criticised as ‘trolling.’ This is something like stalking, or being a pest on the internet, characterised in Prince’s case by leaving suggestive comments on the posts of often beautiful young women, which are then incorporated into his screen shots.
Prince discusses the work in question, *New Portraits*, in an essay on the *Love* magazine website. He admits to being a troll. He says, ‘What’s yours is mine…”Trolling.” If you say so…Everyone is fair. Game. A level playing field.’ These are unrepentant comments but knowingly provocative about the dangers of the digital world where consent to loss of privacy and ownership is accepted as a condition of participation. On a more positive note Prince describes a new kind of experience, losing himself while following people through the labyrinth of Instagram, ‘the rabbit hole takes on an outer body experience where you suddenly look at the clock and it is three in the morning.’ Of his printed artworks, he describes a new type of canvas that produces ‘perfect’ results with colour that is ‘intense, saturated and rich,’ saying ‘they're the only thing I've ever done that has made me happy.’ These revelations are interesting artistic and personal disclosures in the manner of the culture of full disclosure on social media, but do they justify his trolling and appropriations?

On website *Verge*, commentator Lizzie Plaugic says that Prince’s defences of his appropriations against legal challenges have been successful ‘because of the complexity of [the legal definition of] fair use (and also because he's very rich),’ suggesting that he uses his position as a powerful person to exploit others. It is interesting to note that for this work Prince doesn’t appropriate imagery - such as the *Marlboro Man* - from corporations but from ordinary people or other artists who are much less able to defend themselves. Prince might argue that he’s pointing out how vulnerable people are on the internet, nevertheless real people have been adversely effected by his appropriations.

Plaugic reports that Missy Suicide, whose image was used by Prince, said ‘that the installation [of Prince’s Instagram prints] felt like "a violation by someone who doesn't get it"’ as if Prince does not understand the unwritten social rules of Instagram.

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371 Ibid.
372 Ibid.
373 Ibid.
374 Ibid.
376 Ibid.
culture, whatever they are. In her *Artnet News* column, New York critic Paddy Johnson also suggests Prince is out of touch and committing a faux pas,

*Prince is painfully removed from the youth culture in which he’s participating...*as artist Clayton Cubitt pointed out on Twitter, “*Watching Richard Prince do Instagram is like watching your dad try to rap.*” *And thus, every time he leaves a comment, you wince a little with embarrassment.*377

On the other hand, Prince is defended by others such as critic Jerry Saltz who says ‘Prince's slices of immaterial digital reality uploaded into physical space…[are] burning through the last layers that separate the digital and physical realms. They portend a merging more momentous than we know.’378 As for intellectual property Saltz says ‘my view of an artist using other people's Instagram pics is no different than an artist using any other material…too many artists are too wed to woefully outmoded copyright notions.’379 Of Prince’s trolling, Saltz calls it ‘genius,’ that it ‘sauces everything up and plunges the work into uncomfortable waters, disallowing any easy art interpretations.’380 Saltz’s defence seems to be that Prince is presenting the issues, what’s there and what’s coming, a kind of prophetic reportage. He is defending the artist’s freedom to report on things that aren’t so nice.

Despite Prince having dealt with legal issues over appropriation for most of his career this controversy reveals that differences in interpretation could be generational. Saltz is of Prince’s generation and reads his work as cultural critique, performing a service by revealing what’s happening. In contrast his young objectors reject the defence of critique, seeing its use not only as dated – ‘Copy-paste culture is so ubiquitous now that appropriation remains relevant only to those who have piles of money invested in

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379 Ibid.

380 Ibid.
appropriation artists.¹³⁸¹ - but sexist and uncool, the artist desperate to remain relevant by being ultra-bad, but actually behaving like a dirty old man.

So is Prince bad, meaning provocatively good, or just plain bad? Because of this sharp difference in opinion the issue of bad strategies in art remains current and worth investigating. In this chapter it is asked, if critique has gone bad, is expressionism bad (read good bad) again?

4. Conspiracy theory and the façade of transparency

In this section I argue that the proliferation of conspiracy theories in popular culture is evidence of the decay of critique into a paranoid form. Whereas Alan Norrie says, in an idealistic interpretation, ‘the impulse to bring something hidden into view is central to Adorno’s negatives dialectics,’ this impulse becomes ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion at work in critique à la the Frankfurt School’¹³⁸² observed by Foster in ‘Post-Critical.’ Paralleled by entertainment forms such as movie conspiracies and mockumentaries, critique, which began as an analytical tool for digging out the truth has been undermined because it is now always tainted with the suspicion of always having secret or fake agendas. The suspicion that conspiracy theories might actually be revealing terrible truths, but it can’t be known for certain, or that faked conspiracy theories are planted to psychologically destabilise certainties and cause havoc that can only be assuaged by capitalist consumption compound confusion, anxiety and paranoia over what’s real and what’s not. Conspiracy theories could be a conspiracy themselves, rendering all possibility of objectivity and questioning unworkable. A more reasoned response to conspiracy theories might be that they reveal a problem inherent in critique that it is always negative and driven to find issue wherever it directs its attention.

The Hollywood movie Wag the Dog³⁸³ is an example of how the boundaries between critique and conspiracy theory blur. The movie seems to want to be critical of the

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¹³⁸¹ Johnson, “Richard Prince Sucks”.
¹³⁸² Foster, "Post-Critical," 5.
³⁸³ Barry Levinson, "Wag the Dog," (New Line Cinema, 1997). In form the movie is a black comedy and appears to be an attempt at critical filmmaking using self-reflexivity in the medium of movie making as a comedy trope to reveal the apparatus and hidden mechanisms within politics and the media and question ideas about the construction of reality. The movie relates the story of a collaboration between the White House and Hollywood in the production of a fake war set in Albania to distract public attention from a potential presidential scandal. Footage of war is shot in Hollywood and channelled through the media as news. One scene in particular reveals the apparatus of image making. Heartrending footage of a girl fleeing from a burning village is being digitally constructed from a shot of an actress running and
collusion of media and politics and the passivity of the public, to reveal the truth about corruption and stupidity, and on another level to be a meditation on movie making and the blurring of the lines between fact and fiction. However, its arch irony undercuts the believability of the story, hindering the audience’s ability to seriously consider the implications of the scenario. The false tone may not be a misjudgement of taste by the film makers, but a deliberate attempt by them to distract attention from the politics, which could seem too provocative if depicted realistically. The excessive irony functions to make it perfectly clear that what is going on is fictional and in no way similar to, or worse than, reality.

By characterizing the events depicted as too bizarre to be believable the movie subtly satirizes itself as conspiracy theory, the suggestion that a secret conspiracy exists. It possibly goes further and suggests that critique doesn’t reveal the truth, but fabricates conspiracy theories, satirizing the idea of critique itself. These deeper suggestions about the credibility of critique are hidden behind the official story which proclaims the rhetoric of critical contemporary capitalism where everything is thought to be open to analysis by citizens who have the democratic right (and responsibility) to be knowing subjects aware of what’s going on. In the end however, the movie pays lip service to critique, critique is discredited as conspiracy theory, potential real conspiracies in the world are given cover by this ridicule and the status quo is reaffirmed. This example from contemporary culture demonstrates that critique can function perfectly well as official rhetoric without it actually being a threat to the smooth operation of what it pretends to critique because it is inverted, neutralised and becomes a façade of transparency.

cowering in front of a chroma green screen compositied with stock videos of fire and a village backdrop. The result looks real and the public buys the whole thing when it is aired. Even as crises threaten to reveal the fraud and ever greater fictions must be woven to protect it, in the end the war is won and the President emerges as the hero and is re-elected. The Hollywood producer, a hysterical artist overacted by Dustin Hoffman, who believes the fake war is his best work, is silenced before he can reveal to the world that he is the genius behind the illusion.
5. The promotional use of a Brooke Andrew artwork

Figure 94. (background) Brook Andrew, Warrang, 2011. Installation view MCA forecourt, Animated LED arrow, Australian hardwood with shou-sugi-ban finish, sandblasted concrete. (foreground) Audi promotion, car, platform, signage, lighting. Photo: the author, 2014.

In this section I look at the incorporation of a critical contemporary artwork by Indigenous artist Brooke Andrew into a corporate sponsor’s promotion at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA). The question is whether or not this incorporation is an example of complicity on the part of curators, organisers, museum and/or the artist and if it is, what kind of complicity it is. Is it an upfront case of complicity, an open acknowledgment of the realities of corporate sponsorship and hardly worth commenting on, which in Drucker’s terms might be okay, is it a cynical exploitation devaluing the critical value of the artwork, or is it an unacknowledged coincidence?

At the monthly Art Bar, an MCA commercial event which combines elements of nightclub, exhibition opening and performances aimed at a young professional audience, the event’s sponsor Audi’s\textsuperscript{384} latest model car is regularly displayed in front of Andrew’s Warrang, 2011, (fig.94) an animated LED arrow sign utilizing a traditional black and white zigzag pattern. Andrew’s work is permanently installed on the exterior wall next to the main entrance of the museum. I read the prominence of the artwork in its location as an upfront statement by the museum of its commitment to addressing


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Indigenous issues within its collection, exhibitions and education programs, intended to give the museum an aura of critical, political engagement and awareness. The arrow points down at sandblasted text engraved on the concrete forecourt, text that refers to the site and reminds readers of the history of the land they stand on and related post-colonial and Indigenous issues that form a significant part of contemporary art and cultural discourse. Meanwhile, the car displayed adjacent to the artwork celebrates capitalist values that depend on the exploitation of the land and its resources. The juxtaposition seems a touch ironic. The art could be seen as compromised by the car, as part of an advertisement for it, a back drop, chic décor. Or the car could be seen to be critiqued by the art, pointing to the car, an accusation, but with no power to change the object of critique. The artwork is a beautiful object just like the car, manufactured to very high industrial and technological specifications, inhabiting the same elite world of commodity consumption. The ambiguous juxtaposition could be valorised as productive of debate (such as this discussion), and possibly suggests that critique can survive commodification. However, the juxtaposition doesn’t appear to produce any real grating of the issues, nobody objects or complains, and a polite and smooth surface is maintained that doesn’t disrupt the operations of the event, the museum, the advertisement or of capital.

Complicity could be the condition of the juxtaposition of Andrew’s artwork and the Audi car. Because complicity is the new condition of critique, which in now complex and impure, this juxtaposition could be viewed as not simplistically immoral, art selling out to commerce, but as indicative of current complex (or immoral) conditions in culture where art, culture and commerce are inextricably intertwined and separation is impossible. If, as Drucker says, art must begin with acceptance of its complicity and go from there in its investigations of conditions, then the car situation could be regarded not as a corrupt dead end but as an opportunity to think about the issues of sponsorship and art, and institutional politics.

Other questions could arise such as, does anyone notice (apart from me) or is it invisible? Is the artist consulted about the juxtaposition, or does he have no say now that it is sold? If the organizer is aware of what they are doing, does s/he start from a position of admission of complicity, acknowledging that placing the car in front of the artwork could provoke complex and conflicted readings on the close relationship of art
and capital, or does s/he resist such an admission and those consequent readings? Would such a position of denial amount to a hypocritical and corrupt situation? If, on the other hand, s/he is starting from a position of admission of complicity, how does the organiser acknowledge the juxtaposition of artwork and car? Is the artwork regarded as critically pure and autonomous, above its ambiguous positioning in relation to the car? Does, or to what degree might, Brooke Andrew fit Drucker’s description of ‘successful bad-boy artists [who, probably like most artists] claim to have no interest in money and are scornful of success, while reaping the benefits of highly capitalised endeavours… [but] no one is fooled or surprised by this…’?\(^3^{385}\)

Is it a tame juxtaposition trying to be interesting but not nearly bad enough because it is all been done before, for example in 1995 at the National Gallery of Australia in the exhibition *Virtual Reality*? This show’s curators Mary Eagle and Christopher Chapman displayed a late model BMW car, not as art but as a luxury commodity amongst contemporary art, games and other commodities, as a provocation to the Greenbergian separation of high and low culture, art and kitsch, in a show described by critic David McNeill as a ‘historical show documenting a moment of historical cultural implosion…from the late eighties.’\(^3^{386}\) What was bad then, is now a tired old provocation.

So, no one cares, because ‘there is no issue’ and institutions aren’t really interested in self-critique, it is just too complicated and confusing to resolve, nothing is hidden, but nothing is acknowledged either, people just go through the motions and a Sloterdijkean cynicism rules. This indicates the futility of critique.

6. **Tino Sehgal’s ambiguous immateriality**

   *My big question, which I think is the question of my generation, is that the way we produce nowadays, the social form of economic organization, is not*

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going to be able to persist, and we are going to be measured against the question of how we are able to adjust to that.\footnote{387}

Given the confusing complexities deriving from Drucker’s theory of complicity, it could be useful to understand the work of contemporary conceptual artist Tino Sehgal. Contemporary conceptual art (or post-conceptualism) is in a very complex situation because it has been found to be very amenable to institutional requirements. Whereas once, in the 1960s at its inception, conceptualism was critical of the art commodity and its institutional supports, now it has become a desirable and complicit institutional non-object art, having become a commodity itself. One particular attraction of new post-object art is its financial rationality; objects are expensive to fabricate and transport while immaterial art can easily be emailed or phoned through to its international destination.

Sehgal’s work is an example of the paradox of institutionalized conceptualism. Sehgal foregrounds the social and sustainability in his work, creating performances that don’t produce objects to be consumed. His works are social interactions between participants and audiences, what he calls ‘constructed situations,’ ephemeral moments that are not documented. To avoid commodification, he claims to produce no objects at all, only memories. There are no written instructions and no video or photographic documentation of his work, each performance is produced by direct verbal communication, either face to face or by phone or Skype, so there are, apart from rogue photos and videos taken by members of the public, no physical or digital residues. There are only memories of the experience, which focusses attention on the moment of social contact between performers and public said to be at the heart of the work. This ephemerality means the artist need never leave home, and in Sehgal’s case this actually happens as he refuses to travel by air, citing the ethics of his environmental footprint. According to the Musee d’Art Contemporain de Montreal website, Sehgal insists that even the purchase transaction is documentation free as well,

In keeping with Sehgal’s strict opposition to manufacturing objects, the process of acquiring one of his works consists in a purely oral transaction involving the artist or one of his representatives, the director, curators and registrar of the museum, and a lawyer. The conditions of acquisition and installation are recited and committed to memory by all present, the price is discussed and when both parties are in agreement, there is a handshake. No paper documentation accompanies the acquisition. Conditions of presentation include the remuneration of all players and a strict refusal of video or photographic documentation, printed press releases, catalogues, labels or didactic panels.

At first glance his work looks radical with the artist revisiting the classic stance of the conceptual artist in his renunciation of the art commodity and the embracing of an ethical and relational content. But I would argue that there are flaws and inconsistencies in his claims of ephemerality and limits to his claims of transparency in his institutional

388 Ibid.
389 Ibid.
arrangements which undermine his ethical program, and suggest that his position is ambiguous and possibly even cynical. It seems to me there is a significant gap between appearances and reality; between the unquestionable ethics and niceness of his public face and behind the scenes irregularities.

A photograph from the Guardian newspaper (fig.95) shows the artist with a group of participants standing outside the Tate Modern and under signage featuring the name of his 2012 show’s corporate sponsor Unilever. Unilever is a multinational manufacturing company specialising in food, personal care products and cleaning agents with a history of unethical practices. Ethical Consumer magazine’s website page on Unilever (last updated February 2013) says that Unilever is one of the world’s biggest processors of palm oil one of whose major suppliers is Wilmar International. Wilmar has been implicated in the 2011 violent treatment of the ethnic Suku Anak Dalam people in the village of Sungai Beruang, Sumatra, Indonesia. The village was reportedly destroyed and forty people missing after being shot at while resisting development of palm oil plantations. Ethical Consumer also gives Unilever its worst rating, 3/3, for the ethical treatment of animals due to its lack of clarity in the use of animals for testing. After a campaign in 2011 in which People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) successfully pressured Unilever to stop cruel experiments for testing Lipton’s Tea on rabbits and piglets, which included cutting open live animals, the Ethical Consumer webpage says that there was still ‘lack of clarity’ about Unilever’s practices despite assurances that testing had stopped. The question is how Sehgal can justify support from Unilever shortly after this scandal when he maintains that his stated position is for ethics and sustainability.

It is interesting to note that Unilever has ceased sponsorship of the Tate’s Turbine Hall commissions of which Sehgal’s was the last. In 2012 Sue Garrard, senior vice president of communications at Unilever announced,

391 Ibid.
While we will continue our relationship with Tate as a corporate member, we are now planning a change of direction which will fit closely with our company's mission set out in the Unilever sustainable living plan: to double the size of our business while reducing our environmental impact and increasing our positive social impact.393

Not exactly an admission of guilt, but it is interesting to wonder if Sehgal’s ethical stand influenced their decision.

Nevertheless, Sehgal’s theoretical position remains ambiguous because the Unilever photo is documentation, material residue that he claims to refuse. I argue that the care he takes to ensure that his works are as ephemeral as possible fails, not only because he can’t guarantee that there are no residues, but also because he actively participates in the production of them. (There is also the issue of his work becoming tradable on the secondary market, where the artist’s control over the work and its presentation would presumably be lost. Secondary trade would imply the work was a residual commodity.)

Sehgal seeks to avoid objects and allow no permanent physical records of his artwork to exist yet there are many exceptions to this ban. For example, while he prohibits paper documentation such as catalogues, the artist doesn’t object to most kinds of digital residues (except documentation), such as bank transaction records, information on the AGNSW’s website, emails, and phone records. He might argue that these kinds of records are not directly related to the work, and outside its range, but such an objection would overlook the history of conceptual and critical practices, particularly institutional critique, which is about revealing the hidden institutional mechanisms which support artworks. Any such exclusion by the artist would appear hypocritical. Presumably all these kinds of digital records must exist such as banking records otherwise how would the artist get paid? In cash in an envelope carried by a courier on a plane? He must have records otherwise how does he pay his taxes? If digital records must exist, how does the artist justify them while banning physical ones? Does he exclude digital documentation from his ban on documentation because it is immaterial and therefore somehow doesn’t
count, or because he can’t prevent it? Does he assume that banning physical documentation is a critical position, while not banning digital documentation is unproblematic in the same context?

A second objection is that writing in the media, such as in magazines and newspapers is documentation of his work; these exist and are not only necessary but also sought out by him for the purpose of pursuing and developing his career. He’s not averse to having his picture taken and distributed to promote his shows. A third objection is that Sehgal fails to control paper documentation even within his stated institutional scope. Remuneration of interpreters (Sehgal’s term for performers) for his 2005 work *This is so contemporary*, when restaged at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in February 2014, is known by the author to have involved considerable paper documentation as the author was hired to be an interpreter and was required to fill out and sign paper forms relating to his temporary employment by the AGNSW and for more than a year after the performance continued to receive email correspondence requesting payroll documentation (fig.96).

The artist’s inconsistency over what is and what is not banned could make sense when it is seen as a ban on documentation the artist has the power or influence to ban. If this is the case, it seems like it is the realm of negotiation that the artist addresses in a realistic approach where he attempts to reveal the extent and limits of his own agency within the institution. His successful negotiations with institutions not to document his work, for example, but his lack of influence on the AGNSW to have no formal agreements with its staff, supports this interpretation of his project. The inevitable existence of a parallel world of unsuppressable (or unrepressable) documentation that he cannot control demonstrates that the artist is engaged in a form of institutional critique, but it is one of agreed and agreeable interventions by the artist into the institution, not of, for example, revelations of corrupt conduct using confrontational tactics.
It is a soft critique where the institution is not challenged beyond what it is willing to accept. This could be read from a more critical point of view as the artist’s negative complicity with the institution. For example, the idea of the handshake, could be seen not as a statement about an artist’s equality and a subtle mocking of institutional power, but as dissimulation, of hiding inequitable power relations between institution and artist behind a fake gesture of openness, trust and equality. The limits of the artist’s agency and the power of the institution are confirmed and nothing of real interest about the inner workings of the institution is made public by the artist. Although both parties give up things and loss of permanent documentation affects both sides, artists inevitably lose more in the precedent of the obedient critic.

It could be argued that he not only doesn’t reveal much about the internal workings of the institution, the artwork itself actually throws up a benign façade in front of the institution, in a cynical operation where a pseudo-political artwork hides its real politics. In his work This is so contemporary a group of three performers stationed in the vestibule of the museum and disguised as museum guards suddenly come to life and chant several times ‘this is so contemporary’ while dancing around surprised museum visitors, to their mutual delight or awkwardness. The performers then announce the artist’s name, the work’s title and date and the sponsor of the work - the verbal version of a wall text – before returning to their original positions to await the next visitors’
entry. This is a ‘constructed situation’ by the artist, creating social interaction between individuals where context momentarily dissolves in person to person exchange. Besides its jokey self-referentiality as a fashionable work of contemporary art, by foregrounding the social the work suggests that it is all about people really and not institutions. The work is an experience that becomes a memory for the audience member/participant to take away.

However, as institutional critique the work is soft and doesn’t bite. Instead, it is an affirmation of its context like a corporate promotion or a totalitarian painting of happy workers. It sweeps its participants up in a moment of positivity, reaffirming the institution in an uncritical way. Even if a visitor is annoyed at the intrusion of the performers, it is unlikely they would be led to thoughts of institutional critique.

Sehgal incorporates an acknowledgment of institutional realities with the announcement at the end of each interaction, however, that is not enough for the artwork to be considered critical of its context. The work is almost the opposite of institutional critique because what’s going on behind the scenes remains completely hidden.

In contrast is the clarity and directness of German/American artist Hans Haacke’s institutional critique. His 1971 work *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (fig.97) revealed complex and hidden business dealings of a major New York real estate company, and his show of the work at the *Guggenheim Museum* in New York was cancelled because of its potentially scandalous revelations. The work consisted of ‘diagrams revealing how the [real estate] system was made up of an obscure network of family ties and dummy corporations’ and photographs that ‘testify to the type of investments these properties represented – housing in impoverished neighbourhoods lucratively run at a low level of maintenance – and reinforce the impression of the city as a mere economic product.’

According to information on the website of the Museu d’Art Contemporani in Barcelona,

> The work was part of the Haacke’s individual exhibition programmed for 1971 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Thomas Messer, director of the museum, called Shapolsky et al. ‘inadequate’ and refused it along with two other works, judging them incompatible with the functions of an artistic institution. The exhibition was cancelled a month and a half before its scheduled date, when the artist refused to remove these three works. Edward F. Fry, curator of the exhibition, defended the works and was subsequently fired. Many commentators on the controversy have speculated that the Board of Trustees of the Guggenheim Museum were connected to the real estate group, but this has never been proven.

One can’t imagine Sehgal risking a show or his career with institutional critique with this degree of political content and social comment. More than forty years later, maybe Sehgal believes his work is a reflection on the institutionalization of institutional critique, a message that we are all implicated, a sly revelation of the untruth of the accepted dichotomies of art, revealing that the free, politically pure and conceptually

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395 Ibid.
396 Ibid.
distanced ephemeral artwork is no longer, or was ever, possible but can only exist institutionally in a compromised form.

Looking at it positively, Sehgal could be what Foster called an ‘ironic collaborator,’ a participant in the institutional processes he critiques, or alternatively - to use another Foster term and view Sehgal negatively - his work could be an ‘ideological exhibition’ of institutional conceptualism, bracketed to either exploit it or to contemplate it. His work could be about a resigned cynicism about the realities of the art world where commodification is unavoidable and to be aware of that reality and to subtly signal this awareness is enough. Or does the absence of overt intervention a la Haacke mean his work is hypocritically complicit with its institutional context? If Sehgal is complicit, how open is he about it? Is his work upfront, or does it hide its complicity and its contradictions? Is the photo of himself beneath The Unilever Series banner an admission of complicity? Answers to these questions are difficult to determine, because the work seems to occupy an ambiguous position so deftly. Does it generate positive results like debate, or does it deliberately cloud the issues by making them so complex and opaque that no one is really sure what’s going on, but they go along with it anyway because it is profitable economically and/or reputationally?

If Sehgal’s work hides its complicity and is therefore corrupt, it becomes a good example of the failure of conceptualism’s original critiques of institutional power and the art commodity - failed because conceptualism itself has become commodified, collected and institutionalised through ever increasing and obscuring complexity.
As an afterthought on Sehgal, and in a speculative moment I wondered, given the artist studied political economy at university, whether that in the age of the immateriality of financial value, his work could be read as paralleling aspects of the world’s financial system. This system operates virtually, with no connection to the real economy but runs on the endless creation of credit, with methods and instruments of such complexity that no one fully understands how they work or what more consequences they might have. This thought found some admittedly questionable support in a photograph taken of the artist at the Tate Modern in London against a view across the Thames River (fig.98), a photo which does not include the skyline of the financial district which would be visible just past St Paul’s Cathedral and might have made a more glamourous backdrop. In order to see what is not shown in that photo, I have photoshopped in the right half to restore the view of the shiny skyscrapers and the Gherkin, the city at his feet (fig.99). The ‘restored’ part of the view may have been excluded from the photo’s framing by the artist so as to conceal (while still suggesting) both its presence and the full context of his work, the context of the dark and dubious practices of the financial world. If this convoluted game of concealment were so, it would be his way of revealing his ambiguous ethical agenda which could equally be a critique of the financial system or an adaptation of its practices to his practice, immaterial, secretive, controlling and dissimulating. One photo that doesn’t show something is hardly proof of a conspiracy,
however I thought it was interesting to speculate about the wider political, social and economic conditions of his works production, and the possible parallels within it.

7. Arlene Shechet: critical, complicit or reactionary?

Figure 101. Robert Arneson, title unknown, c. 1960s. Glazed ceramic. Source unknown.


American artist Arlene Shechet’s ceramic sculptures look like they might fulfil Drucker’s conditions of, ‘engaged, expressive affectivity…a reflective, self-conscious artifice.’ The artist’s emphasis on materiality, colour, texture, hand-making and dynamic formal manipulations (see for example fig.100, *Idle Idol*) suggest the work, because of its context of contemporary art, knowingly reacts against the post-minimalist and post-conceptualist mainstream of contemporary art, rejecting self-conscious cultural critique in favour of visuality, tactility and vitality. Her work is the opposite of Tino Sehgal’s immateriality and his ambiguous intentions; it is direct, materialist, object-based and embracing a formerly peripheral medium ceramics, engaging with its conventions of hand-building, glazing and firing. Her work’s artifice and imagination make it interesting, but does its difference from contemporary conceptualism make it *bad* and critical of them? Is it medium specific in Krauss’s sense, or is it just a wild creative project? Does it amount to a critique of critique, critical of the ambiguities and commodification of post-conceptual art, or is it a reactionary return to uncritical self-expression?

Along with paper, clay has been Shechet’s main medium since the late 1990s. She is one of the leaders of the new wave of contemporary artists turning to ceramics and clay to make lumpy, faecal forms. She has been very successful commercially and critically having been written about in *Art in America* in 2012 featuring on the cover with her abstract glazed surfaces.

Her ceramic work until about 2012 seems to reflect the earthiness of traditional wood-fired pottery, where very high temperatures and the random effects of ash from wood and other materials introduced into the kiln during firing can create distorted, natural effects, the result of the struggle between chance and control, nature and human. Shechet has been said to do everything wrong,

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With an awkwardness so skilled it becomes elegant, Shechet demonstrates a mastery over everything that can go wrong in ceramics, harnessing wrongness to endless expressive possibility.\textsuperscript{399}

This echoes Adamson’s comment about American abstract expressionist potter Peter Voulkos’s “how not to” manner of using clay\textsuperscript{400} to build his great lumpy constructions. Shechet has been compared to Voulkos\textsuperscript{401} so it is possible that Shechet has been influenced by him and his interest in the aesthetics of the Japanese roughly made Zen pottery of the tea tradition. Voulkos and Shechet share with teaware a similar expressive, loose earthy quality suggesting that Shechet also intends to signify and embody humility and Zen natural beauty in her work. The reading of a Japanese connection is strongly supported by the titling of her work \textit{Y Wabi M} which relates very closely to the tea bowl form. (cf. figs. 102,103 and 104). ‘Wabi’ is a traditional Japanese aesthetic term meaning unpretentious, imperfect and austere beauty. In interviews Shechet discusses Buddhism and meditation. She says,

\begin{quote}
Every time I went to the studio, I could use the process as a practice in developing—the word meditation, that’s not exactly it, but what meditation is about—awareness. Working with awareness, with an ability to move with what is happening.\textsuperscript{402}
\end{quote}

Shechet’s ideas seem to parallel those of Soetsu Yanagi, the Japanese craft theorist of the early twentieth century (discussed in more detail in section 3.3.1), who placed intuition and the anti-rational at the centre of his Mingei craft theory and practice. He developed these ideas in conjunction with English potter Bernard Leach, the founder of the studio pottery movement, which was particularly influential in the USA in the 1950s on Voulkos. The flow of ideas and influence from early to mid-century pottery through to the current wave of contemporary clay-based art is also often commented on by English craft historian Tanya Harrod. She has pictured contemporary artists hanging

\textsuperscript{399} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{400} Adamson, \textit{Thinking through Craft}, 46.
\textsuperscript{402} Hirsch, “Buckle and Flow”.

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onto Yanagi’s dictum ‘objects born not made,’ in reference to the idea that beauty can’t be forced. Shechet seems to restate this idea:

*I start and then I feel like the thing tells me what it wants to be. It is maybe the best part of making art—you start to create this inanimate object and then it starts talking to you and bossing you around, and then it rules. You must come to some compromise position and let it live. You’re acknowledging that it is a living thing and you want to be alive with it. In a funny way, it is like having kids. You think you’re the parent, but, of course, you’re just the caretaker, and the witness. You’re not in control of anything.*

Shechet’s work has been discussed variously in terms of alchemy, vitality, breath, materiality, touch, process, the fleeting made permanent, fluidity, memory, gesture, vulnerability, failure, humanity, pathos, hybridity, archetypal symbolism and the visceral, expanding on the basics of studio pottery such as vitality, touch, process and materiality into a broader more encompassing humanist approach. Shechet can also be linked to her funk ceramics predecessors such as Robert Arneson (fig. 101), whose dirty expressive aesthetic combined elements of abstract expressionism and pop art.

Although her *wrong* strategy can be interpreted in the light of traditional studio pottery ideas as a reaction against the sleekness of the contemporary white aesthetics of porcelain, minimalism and design, since 2012 Shechet has herself turned to porcelain. In that year she did a six month residency at the Meissen porcelain factory in Germany, where in 1710 the first high quality European porcelain was produced. She has since moved away from her earthy style and turned to the ceramic thing she seemed to be the antithesis of, the perfectionism of porcelain, while nevertheless attempting to retain her *wrong* strategy to interrogate its history.

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Shechet gained access to all areas of the porcelain factory—working alongside Meissen artisans, learning their techniques, using their tools, and observing the company’s internal traditions. She made plaster reproductions of original factory moulds, which she then assembled to produce a variety of cast, hand-painted porcelain forms; her resulting “moulds of moulds” merge what is precious and luxurious with the industrial and usually hidden. The work she produced during this time celebrates and subverts the language and craftsmanship of the world’s pre-eminent porcelain manufacturer.\

This work has been described as ‘subversive’ because it breaks the rules and intervenes into Meissen history, forms and techniques, deforming and rearranging the elements according to personal aesthetic and appropriation choices (see for example fig.105). In this sense this work is medium specific because it turns its focus onto things that make porcelain a specific medium, its traditions, conventions and particularly its

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moulds, adding critical value to debates about ceramics in contemporary art. It deconstructs while retaining the aura of the original Meissen forms, their preciousness, intensely detailed craftsmanship and finery. Shechet has clearly been immersed in the Meissen method and mythology, while still doing things wrong with a cut and paste attitude. But these interventions don’t seem to be enough to break away and the work merges back into the history it addresses, returning to a conventional white porcelain look. It is not bad enough anymore. It has lost the raw energy of her earthier earlier expressive work which was, if not a direct critique of critique as such, an alternative and a rejoinder to smooth contemporary art. Without that work’s material grunt, her porcelain seems clever and precious and loses what her expressive work had, a criticality by being expressive, free and energetic. In Drucker’s terms, it does not outstrip its initial program, but is caught in its own critical agenda to subversively engage with Meissen history.

8. John Zerzan and anarcho-primitivist theory

As a background to primitivism in contemporary art, ideas from anarchist theory will be presented as an example of the currency and relevance of ideas that contradict official views that technological civilisation is the best kind of human society and that its progress will provide the answers to cultural, social and environmental problems.406 I propose that a focus on clay in contemporary art can be seen in the context of these broader primitivist trends in culture.

In the contemporary anarcho-primitivist theory of John Zerzan ideas like the noble savage and golden age are contended to be relevant and arguable again. For Zerzan noble savages were real people in real places and he supports this with contemporary research. His Adam and Eve were cavemen or savannah dwellers, but they didn’t live cruel and barbaric lives as pre-history is usually imagined, but peaceful ones attuned to the natural world. He contends that the advent of civilisation was a mistake which ruined pre-historic humanity which lived happier lives than we do, living in non-hierarchical societies of co-operation, sharing, integration with and respect for the natural world. He disagrees with Freud who maintained that generalised neurosis in

society is the necessary price of civilisation, and he believes civilisation isn’t worth the price of alienation and destruction of the environment. The thesis of Zerzan’s book *Future Primitive Revisited* is that civilization is not the answer to the problems of the world, but the cause of them. He paints civilisation as a cancer with ‘its malignant and metastasizing trajectory.’ 407

Zerzan believes our lives are unhappy and unfulfilling because ‘the cultural “explosion” of the Upper Paleolithic’ 408 - that led to the domestication of plants and animals, agriculture, division of labour, sedentary life style, the invention of spoken and written language, art, property, urbanisation and organised warfare - has alienated us from nature to the extent that we are now destroying it as an ‘other’ which we fear threatens us.

*We have taken a monstrously wrong turn with symbolic culture and division of labour, from a place of enchantment, understanding and wholeness to the absence we find at the heart of the doctrine of progress. Empty and emptying, the logic of domestication with its demand to control everything now shows us the ruin of the civilisation that ruins the rest. Assuming the inferiority of nature enables the domination of cultural systems that soon will make the very Earth uninhabitable.* 409

Zerzan bases his belief that humanity took a wrong turn into civilisation on anthropological research beginning in the 1960s with Marshall Sahlins’s idea of the ‘original affluent society,’ 410

*Almost totally committed to the argument that life was hard in the Paleolithic, our textbooks compete to convey a sense of impending doom, leaving the student to wonder not only how hunters managed to make a living, but whether after all this was living? The spectre of starvation stalks the stalker in these pages…Perhaps then we should phrase the necessary*
revisions in the most shocking terms possible: that this was, when you come to think of it, the original affluent society...for wants are “easily satisfied” whether by producing much or desiring little, and there are accordingly two possible roads to affluence...the gap between needs and ends can be eventually narrowed by industrial productivity...there is also the Zen solution to scarcity and affluence, beginning from premises opposite from our own, that human material ends are few and finite and technical means unchanging but on the whole adequate. Adapting the Zen strategy, a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty, though perhaps only a low standard of living. That I think describes the hunters.411

This idea has overturned the conventional view of prehistoric life as one of deprivation, ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,’412 and says that for most of the last two million years over the Paleolithic period, hunter-gatherer humankind lived healthy lives, living cooperatively with low levels of disease and violence, enjoying more leisure time than we do, and living lives integrated with the natural world.413 This is backed up with evidence of hunter-gatherer societies that still exist today such as Richard B. Lee’s studies of the !Kung San people of the Kalahari desert in his book The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society414, who are shown to live in an egalitarian society in harmony with nature. Zerzan proposes that humanity didn’t develop much technologically during the Paleolithic era, not because of lack of intelligence, citing research that shows there is very little if any difference between homo erectus and homo sapiens, but because ‘intelligence, informed by the success and satisfaction of a hunter-gatherer existence is the very reason for the pronounced absence of “progress”’. 415 He believes humanity was smart enough to realise they were onto a good thing and they chose not to change it by ‘progressing.’

411 Ibid., p35.
412 Zerzan, Against Civilization, Readings and Reflections, 46. Contemporary writer Marvin Harris quotes seventeenth century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose work is regarded as justifying the emerging rule of the modern state through the idea that it provided civilising order.
413 See the opening pages of Future Primitive Revisited for references to many anthropological and other studies which provide evidence from prehistory.
415 Zerzan, Future Primitive Revisited, 7.
The biggest problem with this new view on prehistoric life where cavemen were just as smart as, or smarter than us, is why after two million years of stability things changed and humanity abandoned a better way of life and domesticated themselves during the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods. Zerzan dismisses as unconvincing existing theories for the origin of agriculture and sedentary life, in particular the theory that an increase in population necessitated agriculture. He proposes instead the idea of the spread of ‘cultural values of control and uniformity that are part of religion and are certainly part of agriculture, and from the beginning.’

He seems to be suggesting a kind of cultural virus, that humankind discovered control and uniformity as abstract notions that it then used to turn against nature, ‘the domesticating will to control and make static, an aspect of the tendency to symbolize. A bulwark against the flow of nature…’ However, he doesn’t elucidate further as to why this might have happened, what set off our interest in abstraction. Why would people give up telepathy for spoken language, not only give it up but repress and demonise it? Give up a fearless life in nature for the anxiety of culture, give up immersion for mediation? It sounds like some kind of oedipal intervention, but Zerzan gives no answer. Because these questions haven’t been answered may not necessarily mean the theory of the original affluent society is fatally flawed and should be abandoned and the conventional idea that technological evolution brought us out of crude and barbaric prehistory should be accepted without question. Questioning of conventional ideas about civilisation is imperative at this time. Needless to say both theories serve the purposes of those who believe them; capitalists find the idea of barbaric prehistory extremely useful to justify technological society, while critics of contemporary society find the theory of prehistoric oneness and happiness a very appealing argument against technology, progress and their negative effects.

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416 Against Civilization, Readings and Reflections, 70.
417 Ibid., 69.
9. Rohan Wealleans and the moralism of post-colonial art

The limits of post-colonial critique are exemplified in the performance work by New Zealand artist Rohan Wealleans at the Asia Pacific Triennial of 2009 (fig. 106). I argue that the artist’s critique of Western colonialist exploitation of indigenous South Pacific cultures fails as an artwork because his self-conscious attempt to inhabit the awkward position described by S&M is unconvincing. He performs a fake shamanism that tries to be simultaneously self-critical and bad, a convoluted politics that is moralistic and fails in a bad bad way (not a good bad way), even if it is meant to be a failure (in a good bad
way). It is tame next to the politics of artists discussed in Chapter 1.7.3., Adel Abdesselmed and Reza Aramesh, whose work is moralistic, but convincing because it is not mediated through theory and complex ironies but dramatically, directly and affectively depicts the reality of bodies and suffering. Wealleans, on the other hand, seems caught in the post-colonial trap of desperately trying to not cause offence, or rather of trying to undo the deliberate offence he causes with a clichéd primitivism by framing it with self-ridicule. This is his bad strategy, a double negative apology for all those offences given by his culture to the other.

S&M frame this tangle positively as precarious negotiation of the paradox of shamanism, of wanting to be a shaman, but having to simultaneously critique its primitivist appropriations. Wealleans and his pseudo-Polynesian ritual is their key example. His performance is an elaborate fake that included a calling on the earth, a Maori haka-like dance, and exhorting the audience to join in chanting in his made-up primitive language. It culminates in the artist making an incision with a spear into a Western primitivist painting causing it to ‘bleed’ an oozy liquid, presumably paint.

S&M say,

> It is no longer possible for an artist to escape the stereotypes of the shaman artist role – which...pervades the modern era and pervades the modernist visual arts stretching back beyond Abramovic and Beuys to Len Lye and the expressionists...even as Wealleans amplifies what is absurd about playing up to this primitivist shaman role today, his practice equally testifies to how enticing such a role remains. Wealleans wants to poke fun at the pretence of being an artist-shaman, while preserving his critical autonomy by adopting the attitude of an outside observer of his own culture. This is the paradox of all artists in the wake of primitivism...it is the gap between customary and contemporary cultures that we inhabit today. This leaves any practice in a precarious space between mystification and demystification.¹¹⁹

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¹¹⁹ McNamara and Stephen, "The Double Risk of Primivitism," 44.
S&M argue the paradox is that artists are caught wanting to have it both ways, immersion and critique, and they pose it as an insoluble but provocative position. Weallean’s performance has been positioned as provocative in a politically correct context by blogger *Leg of Lamb*.

> *In the latest issue of* Art and Australia *curator Emma Bugden described* Wealleans as “a white man whose work behaves badly in a climate of correction, and in doing so makes us think about the question of permission”... pushes appropriation to the limit.*

But is Wealleans critical of political correctness, or correct himself, adhering to the model of the bad artist caught between immersion and critique as defined by S&M, behaving badly as an example of bad Western behaviour that should be criticised? Is genuine shamanism impossible, and any attempt is kitsch misappropriation, and all that is possible is a futile gesture of Western exploitation?

What his performance reveals is that despite all its convolutions, post-colonial discourse is dependent on a moral dichotomy at its base, of good intentions towards the other that are the standard by which post-colonial primitivist art is judged. But this morality can be shown to be flawed at its outset if it is thought about in terms of G.C. Spivak’s idea of the deceptive construction of equality. Spivak claims in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’,

> the theory of pluralized “subject-effects” gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge. Although the history of Europe as Subject is narrativised by the law, political economy, and ideology of the West, this concealed Subject pretends it has ‘no geo-political determinations.’

Victor Li sees this fake equality in a similar way where moralistic efforts by the Western subject to engage with the other don’t actually give anything but instead are a

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form of ‘a renewed epistemic advantage that once again opens up a gap between the West and the rest.’

Acting badly, Wealleans makes a spectacle of doing good and being critical and therefore falls into the trap that Spivak and Li discuss, that Western theories such as equality cloak Western advantage. Even if he’s trying to reveal the fakeness and futility of critique, it is just a gesture that doesn’t have any real effects, it is an illusion of a critical stance which only reinforces the interests of himself as an artist in particular and Western art, politics and aesthetics generally. His work falls into the trap Li suggests of Western co-option of the primitive.

Wealleans’ performance reveals the limits of post-colonial primitivism based on the moralism of good intentions expected of artists through conforming to institutional doctrines that offer at best the freedom to be bad, where bad is an ironic covering over the moral imperative to be good. By being bad an artist can claim to retain creative freedom whilst conforming to an otherwise uncool, moralistic agenda. This leads to the failure of the artwork because it puts a prescriptive political moralism to do good - that will inevitably only reinforce what it sets out to critique - before any thought of affirmative creative potentials.

422 Li, The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity, 221.


Figure 111. (left) Attic Greek black figure vase, harvesting olives, probably 5th century BCE. Reproduced from Barhoumadel blog. https://barhoumadel.wordpress.com/. Accessed 29 April, 2015.
Figure 112. (right) Nicole Cherubini, G-Pot, Vanitas #3, 2006. Ceramic, terracotta, lustre, yellow and crystal ice, fake gold and silver jewellery, chain, purple rabbit fur, plywood, polyurethane, enamel and red plexi-glass, approx. 33.5 x 21” x 64.5”. Reproduced from Jameswagner.com. http://jameswagner.com/mt_archives/CerubiniGGredfullpot.jpg. Accessed 30 April, 2015.

10. Nicole Cherubini: creative misreading or inauthentic lumps?

In her address ‘Born not Made’ to the 2015 Australian Ceramics Triennale, Tanya Harrod proposed the idea of authenticity has currency in contemporary clay-based art, discussing the appeal of clay as a return to basics and reaction to the digital age. She entitled her presentation after Yanagi’s line ‘born not made’ (quoted above from his book The Unknown Craftsman) to place contemporary artists using clay in relation to ideas about ‘unmediated innocence and spontaneity.’ She talked about a ‘rediscovery’ and ‘creative misreading’ of studio pottery, a ‘deliberate ignorance and selective looking’ by artists who want to distance themselves from studio pottery

423 Harrod, “Born Not Made.”
424 Such deformations as they [e.g. Joseon] contain were born, not made, unlike the kind of distortion that is current today. Their oddness was unplanned. Contemporary “free form” is willful and unfree.”
425 Harrod, “Born Not Made.”
426 Ibid.
427 Ibid.
and its complex array of conditions, histories and traditions such as skill and finish, but take from it what they need in terms of materials, certain basic techniques and the idea of innocence. For example, although she notes that ‘1970s hand-building is studied in old copies of Ceramic Review magazine,’ she also sees the strong influence of authenticity and naturalness from other sources that are just as important to contemporary artists such as Folk, Outsider Art, Art Brut and mid-twentieth century artists such as Lucio Fontana and Leonardo Leoncillo.

Looking at American artist Nicole Cherubini’s ceramic work (figs. 95, 99) I wonder if it is intended to be ‘born not made,’ ‘a creative misreading’ of studio pottery that seeks a return to a Yanagian authenticity, a return to earth and innocence? Or does Cherubini intend to replace studio pottery authenticity - that of the humble, naïve, rustic potter - with a different kind of authenticity – a contemporary, knowing, urban one - that operates in a free space of material experimentation, process and creativity? I think she does, and that she also intends her process-driven creativity to be a critique of the authenticity of traditional ceramics, for example, a post-colonial critique of the hallowed status of the antique Korean Moon jar, and a similar critique of the iconic Greek urn. She pursues these critiques by parodying the originals through processes of cutting up, re-assemblage and exaggeration. However, I suggest that her work tries too hard to be bad, experimental and exaggerated and though it is an over-the-top critique of repressive traditions, it fails aesthetically because it rejects what is best about the objects it critiques, their intrinsic quality of being skilfully made.

Cherubini’s work is argued by writer Elizabeth Reichert to be feminist in origin, a challenge to the patriarchal order, perhaps represented by Yanagi. In her article ‘Nicole Cherubini's Art Pots’ in the magazine Ceramics: Art and Perception Reichert suggests Cherubini’s impulse comes from psychoanalysis and the artist’s reading of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva: ‘Both had taken up Lacan’s theories of desire and redefined them in positive terms of pleasure and excess rather than in negative terms.'

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Elizabeth Reichert, “Nicole Cherubini’s Art Pots,” Ceramics: Art and Perception, no. 77 (2009).}\]
(envy of the phallus, lack of the phallus and so on.)

Reichert also notes the influence of Eva Hesse.

Is Cherubini’s work bad, pleasurable, excessive, provocative, materialist, experimental and creative, an authentic inauthenticity that challenges the ‘otherwise symbolic and structured patriarchal order,’ of Yanagi’s repressive modesty? Are her exaggerations and deliberate deformations an expression of freedom or clichés of innocence and/or transgression? Are her exaggerations fun or bad excuses for unskilful work that is ignorant of ceramics traditions and throws out what is valuable in them, such as fineness, finish, technical knowledge, virtuosity and artistry?

This seems to be a battle of the authenticities, the authenticity of tradition versus the authenticity of freedom and experimentation, both in their ways referencing the primitive. Although I like Cherubini’s work and its fabulous badness and admire much other lumpy art for its attitude, nevertheless, I want to defend my own way of working - a traditional, fine manner that I love because of the challenge to express myself through a more difficult mode – against what seems to be the default assumption by contemporary artists making lumpy clay-based art that traditional skill is repressive, irrelevant and must be parodied.

Although Cherubini’s work can be positively regarded as wild and critical, it is weak in its assumption that bad technique necessarily succeeds as a critique of what is strongest about traditional ceramics, its authentic characteristic of being well-made, its craftsmanship. Although her work offers an alternative to traditional forms and methods, and perhaps works as a critique of established values within ceramics traditions, her work perhaps ultimately fails to devalue the Moon jars and Greek amphorae that it parodies. They assume that technique and skill are necessarily repressive, and that all deskilled making is necessarily a successful critique of repressive values. They also assume that political implications necessarily trump aesthetic values. Although Mingei and studio pottery have been shown to have problems, the hypocrisy of its founders, imperialistic justifications, and repressive

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430 Ibid., 18.
431 Ibid.
aesthetic limitations, nevertheless craftsmanship can be redeemed from it and brought back to demonstrate the limits of parody as a critical strategy.

In its clear references to historical models, Cherubini’s work lampoons the iconic masterpieces - and their descendants throughout modern bourgeois ceramics - as constructions of dominant cultures, museology and art historical ideologies. Her bad parodies mock conventional ideas of what is good, tasteful and authentic. Her urn *G-Pot Vanitas #3* (fig.112) is wildly deformed, lusciously decorated with extreme glazes, outrageously accessorised with gold chains and other baubles, bulging growths barnacled to its surface, and perched precariously on a tall plinth with other extraneous materials attached. In its similar urn form, but excessive difference in execution, it parodies the elegance and good taste of ancient Greek amphorae such as the one above (fig.111), like a decaying over-ripe version of it, and as such intends to be critical of the canon of Western ceramics history.

Cherubini’s work *Astralogy* (fig.108) can be read as a post-colonial critique of Japanese art history, parodying the compromised esteem in which antique Korean Moon jars are held. However, although it might work as a reference to the post-colonial critique of Yangi’s aesthetic position, *Astralogy*’s badness looks bad next to the 18th century Joseon Moon jar it parodies. *Astralogy*, is like the Moon jar, they are both constructed by joining two bowl shapes around the open edges to form a globe-like vessel with the joins visible around the equators, a mouth at the top and resting on a low base. Moon jars are known for this particular central joining technique, so Cherubini’s use of it asks for a comparison to be made. As evidence of her lack of interest in craftsmanship, Cherubini reveals in her interview that her husband, a potter, does a lot of her technical work, throwing pots and casting objects, as if these processes are merely technical support to her creative work, saying, ‘[his assistance] has allowed me to push the material and have it actually hold together.”432 The Joseon jar is joined beautifully around the middle and the line is neither hidden nor overtly stated, it seems to be smoothed out to the degree necessary for it to be sealed, not rough and difficult to handle, and not calling attention to itself. The pot is asymmetrical, leaning slightly to the right, but this does not appear to have been necessarily intended but a ‘natural’

technical variation, and it looks well-formed and lively in shape with a beautiful lustrous and subtle celadon or celadon-like glaze. Overall, it conforms to Yanagi’s requirement for nonchalance and the avoidance of over-statement, being neither overly-perfected nor crudely made.

In contrast, Cherubini’s work is self-conscious and every part of the process is left obviously on view. The two halves and neck bear the scars of their forming, with fissures remaining visible either because irregular slabs of clay were pressed into a bowl shaped mould and later roughly joined, or because the plastic lining of the mould has left impressions in the clay. The marks are left visible to tell the viewer about the pressing process, and that the work is about process. The sharp edges of the lips of the bowls were deliberately left in evidence with the filling of the gap between them left unfinished, and the way the neck was dropped into a roughly cut hole is apparent. The blue glaze is loosely slapped on top of a base white slip (you can see the darker uncovered clay below) in an ‘expressive’ manner, and made a bit runny so it will dribble artfully. A second neck in orange is dropped into the first one, to provide extra height and a colour counterpoint. All of it is then plopped onto and pressed into a squishy base of loosely formed clay to keep it stable which has a bit of an indeterminate grey wash on it to suggest ‘dirty.’ The finished piece, for total contrast, is placed on a precision constructed plinth of immaculately coated MDF board, to create the desired Baroque minimalist effect.

Because each step is self-consciously stated, Cherubini’s deformations are ‘insisted upon’ to serve a critical program of positioning her work as about process, provisional construction and the rejection of beautification. The result is that her pot is overwhelmed by this program and looks clumsy compared to the antique Moon jar which has a gentle and full rising energy. What I propose is that as a fragmented, assembled parody her work may succeed as a post-colonial critique of the concept of traditional authenticity, but it doesn’t necessarily succeed in undoing the intrinsic qualities of the object in question, and the Joseon pot retains its convincing formal aesthetic properties and craftsmanship even if it is shown to have served a humanist ideology of wholeness that supports a dubious patriarchal and colonialist agenda.

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433 Yanagi, The Unknown Craftsman, 123.
Justifiable arguments about the post-colonial context of a Moon jar don’t necessarily invalidate its aesthetic value. It could be argued that strategies such as process, materiality, fragmentation and assemblage are assumed to automatically produce a successful critique, and this is a problem because it results in the blanket rejection of everything that is not the same, such as the highly crafted.

The argument that authenticity can be critiqued away by demonstrating 1) that it contributes to the negative construction of the other by a dominant culture, 2) that there can never be a pure cultural origin to validate it, and 3) that it represents a repressive humanist philosophy, has been shown to be flawed because authentic craftsmanship can be brought back to critique the critique of authenticity and reveal that it is a political argument that fails to acknowledge the inherent qualities of an object. By bringing back authenticity against critique, critique’s limitation - that politics don’t necessarily overrule aesthetics - is suggested.

11. Piles of clay, buckets of mud

Many artists have made performance works with clay seeking (or depicting) self-effacement and transformation through immersive material encounter. Spanish artist Miquel Barcelo in collaboration with the French-Serbian dancer and choreographer Joseph Nadj, immersed themselves in a playful clay environment, using thrown clay vessels as costumes (fig.115). In the other images below artists have made similar work, for example, Kate Gilmore’s Through the Claw, (fig.118), Melanie Bonajo’s Spheres (fig.116), Houseago’s studio process (fig.120) and Alexandra Engelfriet’s La Fonderie performance of 2011 (fig.117), in which they wrestle with piles of clay are in a similar vein to Kazuo Shiraga’s famous Challenging the Mud performance of 1955 (fig.119). The Viennese actionist Otto Murhl’s Action, Military Training, performance of 1967 (fig.124), Jim Allen’s Contact, of 1974 (fig.125), a participant at the 2013 Gulgong Clay Edge ceramics conference, in a spontaneous performance (fig.122), and Klara Kristalova’s ceramic sculpture (fig.123) all feature buckets of slip, mud or other substances, some perhaps suggesting bodily fluids, being poured over the head, and the buckets left there, fully effacing identity. For Jim Melchert’s Changes performance of 1972, he and his collaborators immersed their heads in baths of slip, which was then left to dry and crack (fig.114). William Cobbing’s The Kiss, (fig.113) and Jan Švankmajer’s stop motion animation Dimensions of Dialogue (fig.114) feature heads of couples
totally obscured with clay in Cobbing’s case, or made of clay in Švankmajer’s, where the couples claw and dig at each other trying to reach the other inside the clay. These diverse works from the heyday of performance in the 1950s, 60s and 70s share common themes of immersion and effacement in material and struggle with the sheer matter of clay with more recent work by contemporary artists and ceramicists and provide a context for my performance.


Figure 116. (right) Melanie Bonajo, cover image from publication *Spheres*. Date and source unknown.


Figure 122. (right) Participant at Gulgong Clay Edge conference, 2013. Spontaneous performance. Photographer and source unknown.


12. Queer Primitivisms and Orientalisms

My work is bad because it blatantly samples from the exotic and oriental, contravening the moralistic strictures of post-colonial convention, and because it explicitly presents sexual content in an open and honest way. So what may seem inauthentic may actually be inauthentic (meaning ironically authentic.) Gay and queer culture has a long history of utopian consciousness in what appear at first to be trivial or camp forms, from the 19th century photography of Sicilian youths in exaggerated classical poses by Wilhelm von Gloeden, to the cultures of communal experience in the gay underground dance music scenes of disco in the 1970s and early 1980s and house from the mid-1980s and 1990s. The ethos of these subcultures is exemplified in titles and lyrics such as the group Sister Sledge’s 1979 song We are Family and the remix version of Mr Fingers’ track Can you Feel It, with its famous vocal demand - and reference to the Jackson’s song of the same name - ‘can you feel it?’ (meaning, can you feel the love, the groove, ‘the wiggly world’, the underlying connection between all of us.) Contemporary artists operating in an urban queer context often reference utopian ideas and appropriate from primitive and oriental sources, claiming at the same time to work in a knowing and authentic way.

The allure of primitive authenticity is no longer lingering, it is in full flight. In contrast to the anxious knowingness of post-colonialism, many counter-cultural gay, queer and assorted other alternative gender identifying and sexually oriented people from the Radical Faeries gay men’s consciousness-raising movement (fig.127), gay pagans and shamans to mainstream contemporary artists like Canadian artist A.A. Bronson (and some heterosexuals as well), are evolving and inhabiting myriad alternative primitive, exotic and creative identity formations, sampling freely from other cultures. For example see Sister Kali Vagilistic X.P. Aladocious’s multi-armed Indian goddess look, (fig.69). Sister Kali is a member of the San Diego Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a genderfuck AIDS charity and education organisation.

Bronson was a member of the collaborative gay art trio General Idea from 1968 to 1994 that ended when his partners Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal died of AIDS. Several years

434 Larry Heard, "Can You Feel It," in Mr Fingers (Youtube, 1988).
435 A lyric from 'Can you feel it.'
later he began a solo career and has since brought the Radical Faerie ethic and aesthetic into mainstream contemporary art. Whereas General Idea critiqued popular culture and consumerism within a conceptual framework, Bronson now works in a provocatively authentic way as an art shaman in numerous collaborative projects using alternative body, spiritual and healing practices as a performance mode. He says of his interest in Eastern philosophies and other esoteric practices such as Tibetan Buddhism, Tantra, Transcendental Meditation and white witchcraft that,

the 60s obsession with Eastern religions, states of the ecstatic, and theories of radical living and working fit me perfectly. General Idea never presented itself as spiritual, but behind our corporate mask, we were the product of our generation.436

Bronson has incorporated and adapted Eastern influences freely. For example, in 2013 at the Stadelijk Museum in Amsterdam, his collaborative installation Tent for Healing - the tent for which was created by weaver Travis Meinolf - seemed to reference nomadic cultures of all kinds from Central Asia to West Africa, with its rugs and cushions, vivid colourful hangings, low couch and tea service for entertaining guests. Underpinning this ‘ethnic’ design charm however, was the serious intent of creating community, sharing knowledge and healing connection with others in a temporary faerie hideaway. When the work was performed at the University of Toronto Art Centre, written applications were taken from those wishing to meet with Bronson for twenty minute appointments. The Stedelijk website said about the artwork,

The tent itself is a studio, cocoon, and spa – a site for divination, flirtation, and meditation. AA Bronson is both subject and object in this hybrid work. He is the artist become an artwork. He is the wounded healer, who asks to be healed...[the performance] is a meditation on death but also on community, collectivity, and human caring. ‘Tent of Healing’ invokes the spirits of populations that the artist describes as excised from written history, for example the countless number of slaves who passed through the auction houses of the Netherlands during the colonial era; the hundreds of

“witches,” both male and female, who were slaughtered here during the Inquisition; and those who died of HIV and AIDS in more recent history.437

In the tent the visitor would have encountered the artist reclining on his couch in costume offering tea and serious conversation, a ‘can we talk’ therapy situation. Whether he performed any laying on of hands is unclear, although this has been central to his healing practice and previous art work, such as his famous (or infamous) butt massage for men, a therapeutic massage of the sphincter muscle. In another performance he collaborated with artist Ryan Brewer wearing only body paint and long black wigs at the wooded ‘meat rack’ cruising grounds on Fire Island, a gay holiday resort near New York City known for its decadence in the pre-AIDS era. It was a shamanic ritual, the details of which are not known, that attempted to reconnect to ghosts and lost histories of ‘the island’s long lineage of queer history.’438

Bronson has staged a number of these secret performances such as the Invocation of the Queer Spirits, series of collaborations with fellow queer Canadian artist Peter Hobbs and others, photos of which (fig.128) have been published in their book Queer Spirits.439 The performances, without audiences, are male only, floor-based and like serious adult pyjama parties but with no pyjamas, instead nudity and the compulsory wearing of butt-plugs440 for continuous body awareness. According to the artist these events are ‘a hybrid between group therapy, ceremonial magic, a séance, a circle jerk, and a quilting bee.’441 They attempt not only to connect with the spirits and forgotten gay/queer histories of host sites that have significant gay or all male histories, but are intended according to blogger Tyler Morgenstern, in his review of the book, to,

sit, in their [the artists’] estimation, at the intersection of disparate historical trajectories of marginalization. In the “queer shaman” imaginary occupied by Bronson, colonialism and the extermination of indigenous populations comingle with legacies of slavery, the HIV/AIDS crisis, the

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440 A butt plug is a sex toy, usually made of latex, designed to be inserted into the rectum for sexual pleasure.
extinction of animal populations, hate crimes and racism, suicide and bullying.\textsuperscript{442}

Morgenstern is unconvinced by the post-colonial claims of Bronson and Hobbs to connect with such broad issues, saying,

\textit{rarely do the relationships between these histories feel substantively thought through, an oversight that in fact becomes politically and ethically troubling at a number of points.}\textsuperscript{443}

Notable among these points are the exclusion of women and people of colour from the performances and photographs. I agree that Bronson and Hobbs are stretching it trying to connect gay trauma to the entire history of exclusion. I think this strategy tries too hard to justify itself in a post-colonial context and borders on the moralistic. However, I think the work operates very well as gay art where it has particular resonance, is more personal in ambition and where individual experience and affectivity take priority over big concepts. In the context of performances involving gay male sexual activity the exclusion of women is justified. Why he has not collaborated with men of colour is an issue I can’t address because I have no information about it.

Bronson’s consciously provocative and appropriative orientalism is explicit in a black basalt Hindu lingam sculpture he had made (fig.130) and that, in a performance of blessing, he poured libations of milk, honey, yoghurt, warm water, sugar water, and ghee over (fig.129). The flow of these liquids is like ejaculatory semen running down the shaft of the sculpture. Creativity in gay/queer identity, maleness, phallicism and the generation of male energy through all-male performances are strong themes in his work that connect to an interest in the role of the phallic lingam as an object of devotion in Hinduism, a symbol of the god Shiva and in its hard verticality, representative of male potency and generative energy. Bronson can’t be ignorant of potential post-colonial and feminist objections, however, I think he is justified because his use of these forms and ideas are deeply personal and meaningful to him as an investigation of masculinity and queer sexualities. I see these ideas as a connection between his lingam performance and

\textsuperscript{443} Ibid.}
my 2012 *Evil Flowers* performance - which also involves worship of a phallic object with close associations with Hindu iconography.

The openness of the veneration of the phallic symbol in Hinduism and of the explicit depictions of sexual acts in erotic Hindu sculpture and painting have inspired me. Since 1987 I have travelled to India several times, visited the erotic temples of Konarak and Khajuraho, other sacred sites such as Tiruvannamalai, as well as meeting the Indian potter Adil Writer at his studio in Auroville, the utopian community near Pondicherry set up by the Sri Aurobindo Society in 1968 in honour of that guru. Since 1999, I have practised raja yoga (including pranayama breath control and meditation) and studied the texts of yoga and Hindu philosophy, for example, the *Yoga Sutras*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Upanishads*. I practised the asana (physical postures) of hatha yoga for several years, but my main physical practice has been taichi since 1990.

Can these experiences of travel, study and long-term practice provide me with a justification for using imagery from sources such as classical Indian sculpture? Some might see the sometimes sexually explicit and abject use of these sources in my work as a corruption of precious teachings I have received and of the iconography that I adapt to my personal mythology. Against the criticisms of cultural tourism, superficial appropriations and exploitation that could be made of art such as mine and Bronson’s that explicitly samples from other cultures, I would defend my work as on-going research.

Nevertheless I still ask myself whether the justifications of personal interest stand up, or am I guilty of the universalism that Spivak rejects, the claim that we are all the same underneath our cultural, political, religious and philosophical beliefs, a claim that is argued to justify uncritical appropriation and much worse, political and economic exploitation? In answer to the question above about yoga practised by Westerners, and whether it can be considered within the framework of post-colonial critique, the answer is that there is substantial current debate about the status of yoga, who owns it, and whether its practice in the West constitutes exploitation. Blogger Sri Louise, ‘a Contemporary Dancer and Yoga Teacher interested in the politics of whiteness as it
pertains to both Art and Spirituality, takes the view that the universalist idea that yoga belongs to no-one, but is a gift to humanity, is a cover for a neo-colonial attitude of disrespectful exploitation for capitalist gain. The mass popularity of yoga in the West, and the often superficial understanding of what traditional yoga really is, supports arguments about exploitation. The Al Jazeera documentary Who Owns Yoga provides an overview of different attitudes to yoga in the West, where it is mostly taught as a purely physical health regime. It has mutated into all kinds of forms and fads such as military style ‘yoga your mother doesn’t do’ aimed at tough-guy men. Most Western yoga is denuded of its other arguably more important aspects of ethics, meditation, philosophy and spirituality, set out in the eight limbs of yoga in the bible of yoga, Patanjali’s collection of aphorisms, the Yoga Sutras. However, Sri Louise and other Western practitioners such as nisha ahuja (no caps), claim that a practice that is respectful, embedded in a traditional mode, learnt from a guru in a reputable lineage, practised in all its facets, and which very importantly acknowledges the post-colonial issues of a potentially neo-colonial and exoticising gaze, is okay.

On the other hand, in Who Owns Yoga? prominent Indian yogi Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, dismisses political disputes over ownership altogether, defending a fully universal position against the idea that yoga can be claimed by some practitioners as intellectual property, saying,

*It is a certain light that arose here [India] first. This does not mean it is Indian in any sense. India today is a national and political identity. Yoga does not belong to that identity at all…it must belong to everybody.*

In the same documentary another contemporary and influential Indian yogi Swami Ramdev takes a similar position, saying ‘It [yoga] belongs to the sages.’

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446 B.K.S. Iyengar's translation and commentaries is a popular version of the Yoga Sutras. B.K.S. Iyengar, Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (London, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993). There is considerable disagreement on when Patanjali lived, with estimates ranging from 400BCE to 700CE.
448 Bhatnagar, “Who Owns Yoga?.”
449 Ibid.
The ideas that the practices of yoga are universal, that studying yoga in a sincere way outweighs the objections of post-colonial critique, and the argument against nationalistic claims of ownership though convincing on their own, can nevertheless be criticised as a cover for financial exploitation. *Vice* magazine is particularly scathing about Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, saying his,

*Isha Foundation is an exploitative cult and The Mystic deserves his fair share of atheist vitriol. He makes his members swear to secrecy, charges a small fortune for their enlightenment, brainwashes them and dupes them into free work under the guise of volunteerism.*

Though this can be criticised as one-sided and there can be no doubt that genuine gurus exist and have done so, for example, the late Ramana Maharshi is widely considered to have been enlightened and ethical, the taint of charlatanism seems to stick to Indian gurus and Westerners interested in Eastern mysticism. For example Bronson’s attempts to bring together his varied interests in trauma, healing practices, therapies, gay histories and spirituality within his art practice probably looks to many like New Age fakery, especially because he seems to play up to the stereotype. However, his activities, performances, and collaborations seem to work because beneath their provocative campness they result in meaningful, cohesive, simple and affective engagements between himself and others. When he isn’t trying to score post-colonial points and focusses on the personal, spiritual and therapeutic, his performances contrast favourably with Rohan Wealleans’ performance which took an institutional line in censure and negativity. Bronson’s are based in personal experience and attempt to be positive and cathartic. In this sense his primitivist shamanism is authentic.

Michael Bühler-Rose is an American artist who studied Sanskrit and the Vaishnava branch of Hinduism in India, is an ordained Brahmin priest and now teaches photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 2014, he collaborated with Bronson on the exhibition *The Botanica*, performing a Hindu fire ritual in the gallery *Nature Morte* in Berlin (fig.133). The ritual/performance was performed ‘straight’

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without aestheticisation or irony, although whether it was a creation of the artist or a recontextualisation of an established Hindu ritual is not known by the author.

Sincerity is also an issue for Rachel Stern, the photographer of Bühler-Rose’s performance. Co-written with Matthew Leifheit, she has produced an essay entitled ‘New Sincerity Manifesto,’ which describes the centrality of fire to creativity, imagines creativity as the Orient and foregrounds sincerity. They write,

the artist must draw from...a place of mystic origin, of Fire...it is the awesome feeling of history and culture and self-amalgamated that turns the man into the artist...Needing a place to work the artist builds his own Orient. Rimbaud wrote, ‘You’re in the west, yet you’re free to invent your own orient – it can be as ancient as you like – and live in it properly’... Why must the artist create an Orient? It is to be his refuge from disingenuousness and irony. New Sincerity rejects irony completely. Irony is cowardice. ...The art of a new Sincerist will signify straightforwardly that which he means to signify.451

Straightforwardness, sincerity without irony, and fire seem to suggest the influence of Nietzsche. Nietzsche has been noted as an influence on General Idea452 and A.A. Bronson quoted Nietzsche regarding the intoxication of sexual excitement in his 1983 essay ‘The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists.’453 These artists seem to place themselves under no obligation to restrict their creativity with post-colonial anxieties about influence and appropriation. For them the orient is a source of forms, images and ideas, a zone of creativity, freedom, and self-determination. They could be argued to be appropriative orientalists, exemplifying the Western gaze that stereotypes and makes a cliché of the East, but because of deep personal investments, the ideas and forms become authentic modes of expression, earnest and playful. This attitude descends from the countercultural origin of General Idea which wasn’t explicitly political, instead, as Virginia Solomon says in her article,
‘What is Love?: Queer Subcultures and the Political Present’\textsuperscript{454} the subcultural politics that General Idea highlighted created alternative social orders in the present… to allow different possibilities for identification and subjectivization.\textsuperscript{455} Bronson, particularly in his collaborations with younger gay artists, seems to be interested in creating these localised, sincere alternative spaces for personal art and development.

Melbourne artist Adrian Doyle’s recent performance throws ideas of influence, appropriation and sincerity into relief. Doyle poured paint over a lingam (fig. 132) and seemed to combine elements from two Bronson works, his lingam blessing performance (figs. 129, 130) and his multi-coloured paint pouring over his and his collaborator’s bodies (fig. 131). Is it a clever pastiche of Bronson or zeitgeist coincidence? Justified critique of hallowed paint, or touristic appropriation of another culture? Is he claiming the post-critical condition where everything is up for grabs, or is he sincere in his appropriation?

\textsuperscript{455} Ibid.


APPENDIX B.

Documentation of work for examination
Figure 134 (pp265-271). Valley of the Dings, 2011-2015. Installation, glazed ceramics, plinths, brickie’s sand, refractory bricks, agapanthus, dimensions variable. Photos: Michael Myers


Curiger, Bice. "The Imperfectionist. Urs Fischer and His Public Clay Projects." In Tate Blogs: Tate, 2014.


