Introduction:

"Within our own high-tech culture the opportunities for intimate, personal encounters are becoming rarer as mediated experience supplants direct contact and public and private realms increasingly converge. The function of objects … should be assessed against the backdrop of this growing depersonalization and blur of modern life" (Ramljak 186).

Because they can be an active participant in the user's life, useful pottery vessels have the potential to go beyond being merely a commodity. Most analyses of functional pottery tend to focus on formalist aspects, ignoring the potential role that functional ceramics can play in our lives. Utilitarian ceramic vessels are intended to be used, therefore locating their meaning requires a critical analysis that includes an examination of the relationship between user and vessel. The particular relationship between an object and its "viewer" becomes the field upon which meaning is interpreted. Examining the role of the body in the use and enjoyment of functional ceramic art will add to our understanding of the meanings of contemporary pottery. Ceramics can communicate meanings that are pertinent to people's lives and the society we live in.

The artworks I will present in this paper highlight some of the ways to understand the processes with which pottery can communicate to its user. To do this, I will be utilizing a critical methodology that is based upon semiotic theory. This theory will be used to look for and then interpret meanings in the work of two ceramic artists, Julia Galloway and Lisa Orr. Their complex works will highlight the width of the range of possibilities of encoding meaning in functional ceramics.

Orr and Galloway are potters who encourage a combination of sensory communications through what I am calling 'strategies of engagement' in their work. Both present complex and sophisticated visual messages in their work which maintains at the same time its existence as a functional, useful object that must be touched in order to be fully appreciated. They utilize a wide range of tactics that maximize involvement and participation. The viewer/user is thus encouraged to use her physical as well as her mental intelligences to understand and to complete the artwork.[i] These two artists

understand that vessels intended for practical use at a dinner table can also embody a wide range of messages.

Both artists make pots that encourage the user to create occasions for celebration. Lisa Orr’s work is more “rough-and-tumble” than Galloway’s’, whose work is often ornate and complex. Orr also presents a somewhat more utilitarian approach than Galloway, yet she also succeeds in pushing form and surface to the edge of functionality, using dense and textured surfaces. Julia Galloway makes vessels that can be described as elegant and serene. Her vessels are layered with metaphorical meaning, often bearing on their surface intricate drawing and patterning, and frequently including the use of gold luster. These aspects make her work the kind that one is most likely to save for “special” occasions. Orr’s vessels, on the other hand, are a riot of color and texture, yet are more “ordinary” in choice of form and possible utility. They are heavier and more visually grounded then Galloway’s more cerebral work.

What these two artists share is their considered yet playful approach to surface, form, and utility. Both pursue in their work meaningful expression at many perceptual levels. These include visual, tactile, and temporal (or time based) levels. Visual and conceptual communications join with the activity of use in these works to provide direct as well as implied meanings. “Usefulness” is one of the primary functions of their vessels, and their work celebrates this activity.

Part 1: Defining The Methodology.

"A relationship between the vessel and its 'viewer' is established – and it may then be interpreted as a textual object to be interpreted as well as an 'object' to facilitate an activity of daily ritual" (Carpenter 55).

As M. Anna Fariello writes, craft objects have mainly been analyzed using traditional art historical practices, which tend to apply formalist principles that not only subtract from our understanding of a work's cultural specificity but perpetuate the subordination of certain art forms to others ("Regarding the History of Objects" 3).[ii] Therefore, I have chosen here to use a different type of analysis, one that utilizes semiotic theory to encourage a deep level of critical reading. In this paper, I hope to answer Stephen Carpenter's call for a more multi-faceted critical approach to the analysis of ceramics. In doing so, I will be "interpolating" each object by, as Fariello suggests, "reading it as a document, a metaphor, or as an object of ritual" ("'Reading' the Language of Objects" 149).

Using Ferdinand de Saussure's basic dichotomy of *language* versus *speech* (*langue* vs. *parole*) (Cobley and Jansz 15), the language of functional pottery would be its basic forms: pitcher, cup, platter. Each maker's own individual take on these forms is their use of speech. The individual vessels that I examine have both universal elements (language) and particular ones (speech).

I will be "reading" the evidence of "speech" in these artworks, with the hope of shedding light upon the "language" of utilitarian pottery. To do this, I will be borrowing heavily from the analytical techniques proposed by Stephen Carpenter, who conducted an extensive meta-analysis of ceramics criticism. Carpenter found that few critics provided a truly *critical* approach when dealing with ceramics (Carpenter 38-9). In response to this, Carpenter presents his own methodology for ceramics criticism that utilizes Roland Barthes' and writer Umberto Eco's' distinctions of levels of interpretation combined with (film critic) David Bordwell's categorizations of textual meanings. In Carpenter's format, both the semantic and critical levels are given the opportunity to be both described and

"conjectured;" this is an important activity of the critic for Carpenter (Carpenter 20, 103, 107-14).

Carpenter finds that there are four levels of meaning in an artistic text. Carpenter proposes a critical approach where these levels of interpretation are layered on top of each other (Carpenter 22). These four levels are: *referential meaning*, *explicit meaning*, *implicit meaning*, *and symptomatic (*also called the *repressed)* meaning. The initial levels, those of the referential and explicit readings, (whether semantic or critical,) are the basis upon which the final two, the implicit and symptomatic, rest (*Image 1*). [iii] Referential and explicit meanings are obvious to the critic; implicit meanings are slightly hidden, requiring the critic to seek the implications of symbols, codes, or other signs evident in the work. Symptomatic meanings are conceptual in nature, and are the furthest removed from the physical aspects of the work, and reflect issues, philosophies or consequences that are relevant to contemporary society and culture (Carpenter 116).

critical level of meaning				
semantic level of meaning				
	referential meaning	explicit meaning	implicit meaning	symptomatic meaning

Figure 1.6

Levels and Types of Meaning

Image 1

Stephen Carpenter, <u>Levels and Types of Meaning</u>.

A critical framework that is concerned primarily with formal issues, says Carpenter, is essentially modernist in nature, and is lacking a search for multiple angles

of approach. This, for Carpenter, is discussion that is merely semantic in nature, not critical, and limits the exploration of meaning to the referential and explicit levels. It is the implicit and symptomatic/repressed meanings that are the most useful, Carpenter maintains. Socially relevant interpretations are constructed through revealed implicit and symptomatic meanings. These "force" a critic to go beyond the "mere comprehension of signs or codes presented in a work" (Carpenter 118).

Image 2

Julia Galloway, Cream and Sugar Set.

Carpenter recognizes that visual evidence is quite useful as a place to begin analysis. Descriptive observations about the (visually perceived) formal elements of an artwork can form the source of its immediate reading (Carpenter 115). Using Julia Galloway's Cream and Sugar Set (*Image 2)* as the jumping off point for a deeper analysis, a visually descriptive approach would include information such as the form of the components and the way they differ from traditional works with the same intended utilitarian function. Also included could be description of the visual imagery and an analysis of the technical methods of construction, which are useful insofar as they describe the artwork to a non-viewer.

If we continue on, however, to look for further interpretations, an initial semantic interpretation of this artwork could include the observation that although the title of this piece declares its intended function, the vessel itself does not follow the traditional or expected format. Next, looking for deeper meanings, we can guess that by placing the "body" of a vessel upon a couch, Galloway is calling attention to the way in which we tend to view ceramic vessels as actual bodies. This is an *explicit* level of meaning, derived from the *referential* reading of the roundness of the creamer as visually referencing both the (female) body and the roundness of a woman's breast full of milk or "cream." The little creamer is quite expansive in its volume, describing both the "fatness" of its contents as well as its metaphorical associations to the (again female) body. The "soft" cushion has buckled under the weight of the vessel above, adding to its implied density; a visual *reference* to the way furniture buckles under people possessed of their own weight.

At a further, *implicit* level, Galloway's use of gold luster on the surface of the vessels in *image 1* tells us that components of one's everyday, even the mundane one represented by the couch, are deserving of the (expensive) application of gold – a universal signifier of wealth or "richness." The visual imagery - merely described in a formalist approach - takes on deeper meaning when we realize that it both *references* the domestic fabrics used to cover items such as a couch at the same time as it presents a careful approach to line quality that suggest deliberateness. Finally, elements of *suppressed* meaning are seen in the way that through the signifiers of fatness, volume, and the use of a (traditionally female) domestic object - the couch - this piece both reclaims the value of the feminine body and material concerns, while simultaneously reiterating stereotypes that deny the feminine the ability to move out of the domestic sphere they are placed in.

Carpenter's methodology is intended to provide the critic with a set of possible types of meanings to look for in a work. In the following analyses, I will be using my understanding of these levels of meaning, without necessarily using the particular wording described here. At the critical level of engagement, a critic supplies reasoned explanations; these include using research material to support their interpretations. These include "external texts, contexts, or ideologies" (Carpenter 116). I will be including such

external contexts to locate my interpretations in the context of critical and theoretical writing in the ceramic and other fields.

Part 2: Tactility in use.

"Ceramic objects for use are maybe the most touched everyday objects …. Handling these known objects is in tune with our senses and routines" (Ionascu and Scott, 86-7).

Carpenter's thesis decries analyzing ceramic artworks from a critical-center based approach[iv] but in essence, he is implicated in setting up a similar center, one revolving around visual interpretation. We need to apply criteria such as Carpenter's to examine all dimensions of a utilitarian vessel if we are to fully understand the value that functional ceramics can have for us today. We have tactile responses to three-dimensional artworks with our bodies *as well as* our visual cortex alone.

The utilitarian nature of a vessel can only be understood fully through the physical and lived interactions that make up the ongoing contact with a utilitarian vessel. This is a time-based process rather than a categorization. As Paul Mathieu writes, "if certain objects are, by necessity, part of quotidian life, it might be due to the fact that they are too complex to be apprehended by a simple glance, through vision alone. They have to be lived with for a long period of time, in the most intimate manner possible, in order to be fully understood" (Mathieu 3). It is inconceivable to try to imagine the full quantity of the meanings of the objects we incorporate into our lives without adding the process of use over the dimension of time as well as that of physical space.

Image 3

Lisa Orr, <u>Salt and Pepper.</u>

Lisa Orr is making a deliberate reference to time in this very non-traditional work (*Image 3*) The half-burnt candle in the photo describes a specific moment, which is the amount of time it took for the candle to burn down to this level. Not content to be either decorative or useful, Orr has elevated the act of seasoning food to a higher level.

In practice, the use of this piece creates intimacy. Condiments are shared, so all members of the table would need this vessel. Candleholders, on the other hand, need to stay secure in one place because of the possibility of dripping wax and, of course, fire. This adds to the sharing necessary: those in direct proximity will be asked to assist the other guests, either by carefully passing the dish around, an act of giving, or serving the condiments themselves to the plates passed to them, an act of sharing. While not

necessarily functioning as the "perfect" utilitarian salt and pepper holder, it "functions" instead as an instrument of communication from one person to another.

Carpenter advocates that the critic employ conjecture in their interpretations (Carpenter 16). I am therefore asking the reader to imagine that they are sitting at a table discussing functional ceramics, where they are presented with food presented out of the very ceramic vessels they were discussing. Next, imagine that these are like the ones pictured below (*Images 4 & 5.*) Lisa Orr's dinnerware is so obviously tactile that it is a good place to begin discussion of the how we encounter the physical form of pots while they are in use.

Images 4 & 5

Lisa Orr, L: Dinner Plate, R: Mug

First, I will admit that Lisa Orr's dinnerware present a bit of a conundrum, because the density of decoration on the surfaces of her plates, for instance, seem to indicate that they are meant to be seen as they are, not covered over by food. It may be difficult for some to imagine placing actual food into vessels whose surfaces are highly topographical. Although the surfaces of her work are physically dynamic, they are quite glossy, and this is what allows them to remain useable as utilitarian vessels. If they were

not so glossy, it would be extremely difficult to keep these vessels clean, as traces of food would inevitably be trapped in the lee areas of texture. A high gloss, however, ensures that food will slip off the surface when washed.

What does it mean for Orr to make dinnerware that possesses characteristics (raised surface areas) that interfere with practicality? What is implied by this choice? For it is a choice - Orr uses her own dishes and is thus well aware of the way they function. In fact, these dishes, to her, are a culmination of a lengthy process of research in both making and using her own work. "It has taken me more than a decade to become my own favorite potter, but now I prefer works from my studio for the table," says Orr. She adds, "when I dine, the plate I made is exactly what I want to see under my food" (Orr 35).

Perfect utility is not necessarily the ultimate goal of the potter. As Wayne Higby states in his 1999 lecture, entitled suggestively: "Intellectual and Sensual Pleasures of Utility," that "it is clear that form cannot be determined fully by function .... " (70). To prove this statement, he asks the reader to first imagine that it possible to produce an object of "absolute utility." Next he explains the logical outcome of such a theoretical proposition:

> In order to fit a utilitarian object with its function, the conditions must be explicitly outlined. To achieve the solution shovel, it is essential to pre-conceive in detail the need to dig. Digging <u>describes</u> the function of a shovel, but it does <u>not</u> automatically suggest a single, appropriate form (70) (my emphases).

If there is no single, perfect form for the shovel to take, then all shovels will be *de facto* approximations of the perfectly functioning shovel. Further, when a vessel actively stretches the limits between absolute utility and aesthetic experience, it involves the viewer in a constant re-evaluation of their own needs, values, limits and preferences.

Image 6

Julia Galloway, <u>Cream and Sugar Set</u>,

In Julia Galloway's <u>Cream and Sugar Set</u> (*Image 6*, above) the artist presents us with a traditional type of ceramic vessel pairing, the "cream and sugar," but in a format that is very non-traditional. The use of this work is a much deeper experience than that of a merely "well-functioning" cream and sugar holder. As Galloway writes, "pottery is a reflection of us. In making cream and sugar sets I am curious about their own inherent dialogue; the set itself is reminiscent of close conversations and their ritual celebratory use" (Galloway http://www.juliagalloway.com/conversations.html). Galloway's frequent use of the "cream and sugar set" (as well as her pitchers) is her continued conversation (her speech) within the language of the general format.

Many layers of surface information and metaphor are evident to the viewer of this work. We can see how the blue glaze becomes a fabric-like surface that coats the "chair." This represents almost a visual conundrum, as the surface becomes a slippage between hard glass and soft fabric, as well as functioning as the seat for the small vessel sitting upon it. The geometric forms on the right hand of the piece contrast with the more organic ones on the left. This visual contrast is a referent of the substantive contrast between the two substances intended to be held inside: sugar cubes are square; cream is organic and mutable.

This vessel, because it lacks a handle, communicates to its holder via the way the person who is using it must hold it. The user must use the entire inner surface of their hand and thumb in order to grasp it safely, thus becoming inserted bodily into the workings of the vessel itself. This too, allows a metaphoric association to take place, this time forcing the user to in essence pour the cream out from their hand itself. This is meaning at a referential level, here understood physically rather than visually. This serves to implicitly remind the user that cream, too, is poured out from a hand, the hand of the person milking the cow. The act of emptying of the contents thus implies the "emptying" of the original, living vessel itself.

It is important to remember, however, that this object is intended for actual use. Time and continuous, repetitive use physically illustrates a continual re-filling and re-emptying taking place over time, which sets up a metaphor with the cycle of emptying and renewal inherent in the production of milk. Although the cream we drink in our coffee originates from cows, the shape of the creamer is close to that of a woman's breast. This brings the cycle of drinking and emptying into a personal context in two ways, the first a reinforcing the connection between the contents, cream, and its source, and the second, between the "lip" of the pouring vessel and the lips and mouth of the user. Galloway, as maker of the vessel, is offering her own body (as a vessel) to the user.

Part 3: What else are they saying?

"Pots readily lend themselves to a language of inside/outside, container/contained. Often this may involve the creation of a humanoid image although not necessarily so. Rather, it presupposes the body as a container of forces" (Britton 13).

Both Lisa Orr and Julia Galloway's pitchers are functional at a basic level of utilitarianism. Both present to the viewer entirely different interpretations of what is a basic and familiar form. What does it mean when two such entirely different objects result from the same set of requirements? Most importantly, how does each pitcher speak? Galloway highlights the regularity and simplicity of her pitcher's form (*Image 7*) by showing us irregularity on the surface: one glaze is seen to be dripping over another. By allowing one glaze to escape its boundaries, Galloway is pointing out that there are boundaries in the first place, and that "escape" from them is only allowed in unique circumstances.

Image 7

Julia Galloway, Pitcher

Photographs replicate the piece beyond the "hands" of both the potter and viewer. It is a testament to our ability to mentally translate an image into an imagined three-dimensional object that we are able to read not only three-dimensionality but also the activities of the body of the maker while she made the work in question. Orr (and to a lesser extent Galloway) attempts to circumvent this alienation through the insistence in her work of rendering visible the physical process of making; Orr's use of indexical markings assists us greatly in this task. Evident in *Image 8*, Lisa Orr's pitcher, is the anticipation of the feeling of direct contact the holder will have with the handle.

Image 8

Lisa Orr, <u>Pitcher.</u>

Galloway's work is translated somewhat differently in photographs than is Orr's. Although the "dripping" glaze on Galloway's pitcher provides the viewer with a sense of the thickness of the layers of decoration, the variations in surface textures are relatively subtle, so her work often appears in reproductions to have a smooth surface quality. In reality the surfaces of her vessels are rougher than the images suggest. Because of her firing technique, there is a variation in color and surface texture, some of which can barely be seen in an image.

The diminutive scale of much of Galloway's work is another surprise to many who have seen her work only in photographs. Even fellow ceramist Paul Mathieu finds the small sizes of many of Galloway's pieces a surprise. This small scale creates a

concentration, a density of information that speaks of an intimate environment (3). In this situation, ownership allows the user a privileged understanding.

A key item to point out is that the way that both artists have interpreted the pitcher form in a distinctively feminine manner. Elements such as the rounded “belly” and the frilly or curving rims create a form that has many signifiers of the “feminine.” Pitchers are containers of liquid, and as such can be automatically seen as signifying the female, who is herself a “container” of liquid.

By looking for the suppressed meaning in these pitchers, we can see that their “feminine” qualities in these make them interesting pieces to examine in relation to feminism and body politics. What are the artists saying by visually referencing “female” characteristics? The bigger issue that this question leads to is the concern whether ceramic work made by a woman can be safely “feminine” at all.

In ceramics, as in many art fields, men have historically played a dominant role. Orr and Galloway are representative of the growing number of female ceramic artists that are only now becoming respected as teachers as well as makers; they have an influence with younger artists. The presence of strong female voices from within the field allows more women to join the ranks of ceramic artists that receive space in publications. By insisting on the validity of the “feminine” as subject matter in their work, Orr and Galloway are participating in creating a space for women that had not existed before.

My guess is that Orr and Galloway are well aware of some of the implied associations such as this. What they may not be capable of responding to comes from a “symptomatic” reading of their work: at the deepest level, the making and distributing of pottery operates within the framework of our extant economic and material society. Rather than a beautiful object to use, many will view these artist’s’ work as an unaffordable luxury good.

Indeed, many craft artists even joke about how they could never afford their own work. Because of the labor-intensive manner with which their pieces are made, it is likely that their prices would be well above what many could afford to own, let alone use practically. Therefore, the ownership of one of their works can partly be seen as a luxury.

“Today very few first-world potters make a pot because they or their clientele have a practical need for a container, Nancy Selvage writes. “Industry has long ago taken

care of this level of necessity. The studio potter is presumably working towards satisfying needs beyond those of functional necessity" (Selvage 11). The freedom of these artists to pursue their own satisfaction is a product of the financial security that we in the first world take for granted.

According to Marxist theory, a "fall from grace" occurred when labor became separated from its true value - when workers began to work for money and other abstract symbols rather than in direct exchange for goods, they became alienated from their own culture (Oswald 59).[v] As Christopher Short writes,

> … pottery has its own integrity and certainly is not in need of alignment with fine art to be considered valuable. On the contrary, the total subscription to commodity-based economics which characterizes so much contemporary art leads often to a thoroughly debased activity, one which engages uncritically and promotes the commodity fetishization and alienation which Marx so clearly and accurately described in relation to a capitalist economy such as ours…. (61).

The use of handmade objects has the potential to ease some of this alienation.

Handmade objects represent the pure labor of another human being, therefore the use of these objects allows people a vicarious sense of the true value of the artist's labor, and by extension, their own. If Kant's "autonomous aesthetic object" can be seen as "an alternative reading to that of '*use value*'"(Forrest 2007), then ceramics present us with an alternative to the devaluation of human labor. One of the ways this happens is through the visible presence in the fired object of the hands of the maker.

Part 4: Finding the Mark of the Hand

"Perhaps the starting point for ceramic theory is to be found in the way ceramic objects are perceived rather than conceived... we should look carefully at the relationship between people and objects" (Greenhalgh "Discourse and Decoration" 166).

Image 9

Lisa Orr, Creamer.

The employment of such non-specific mark-making as Lisa Orr uses in the above creamer *Image 9* is a signifier that the maker chose this form of drawing, rather than a more representational form. The lack of "finish" in Orr's creamer can be seen as a metaphorical statement that emphasizes the process of making rather than the perfection of technique. This choice, in turn, can become a sign for lack of skill and ability. That Orr's forms are not "classically" proportioned adds to this potential reading.

Although potters no longer rely upon the traditional standards of what makes a successful form, there are still types of forms that are considered more sophisticated than others. The lack of "classical" proportions is associated in many people's minds with

lower value craft objects. What separates Lisa Orr's pitcher from a version available from a more "anonymous" (read un-skilled) craftsperson? Followers of the writings of Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach would counter that this is the exact point of handcrafted ceramics – to represent the average worker rather than an educated elitist.

Whether one sees sophistication or not in Orr's work, it presents the viewer/user with visual and tactile relics of the hands of the maker. This intimacy is further sustained when one imagines the many ways that the body of the maker has touched the vessel while making it, which is a parallel contact to that of the holder of the vessel themselves. The evidence of a maker's hand in an object provides a linkage to the viewers' mental image of the moving hand necessary for this to occur. This then becomes a link for the viewer to his or her own set of significations regarding handwork, and becomes a sign of its own. This will then be interpreted by their own ideologies of whether they associate handwork with labor or artistic creativity.[vi]

As seen in Galloway's work, the fluidity and motion of many of Orr's' surface marks indicate that her hands were relatively relaxed while making them. Therefore, another possibility is that they (the marks) are communicating the artist's full enjoyment and playfulness involved in her making this piece. There is then the possibility of the deliberate intent to encourage the vessels' user to also find sensual playfulness and enjoyment.

Image 10

Lisa Orr, <u>Platter.</u>

In *Image 10*, Orr's platter's shape is not very different from many serving platters, however the unevenness of the rim and surface are quite unique. The uniqueness of Orr's work lies in the many ways it celebrates the process of its own making. Orr's hands have left indices at every stage of the process. As we can see in *Image 11*, there are even actual fingerprints visible as impressions made into the plastic clay and cemented into place through the firing process.

Image 11

Lisa Orr, Platter (detail).

Galloway, like Orr, believes in the power of the marks that flow from the artist's hand. Galloway's use of cursive writing as decoration is here (*Image 12*) functioning as a decorative element as the more obviously decorative elements (such as the pierced holes) do. A utilitarian vessel here becomes the bearer of a message about the value of decoration - Galloway presents it as equal to that of speech.

Image 12

Julia Galloway, <u>Salt and Pepper Pot.</u>

The writing itself is not <u>saying</u> anything, however; Galloway has not written words, rather she has abstracted the visual characteristics of writing. There is no text, just visual interest. The muteness of an inanimate object is maintained. At a deeper level of meaning, Galloway is, by placing this decorative writing on a vessel as small as this one, which highlights the "small" amount of vocality that women have traditionally been allowed.

Where then, is there power in the marks of the artist's moving hand? When marks such as these are made as the result of repetitive (and therefore to some degree instinctive) physical activity by the hand and body of the maker, they require muscle and nerve memory achieved through years of practice and experience. The more evidence of the maker's hand and eyes present in a vessel, the farther it moves away from an industrial version of the same object. This implies that Orr, as well as Galloway, have an interest in making evident the human contact involved in the making of her work.

A hand-made object is itself symbolically a sign for the individual (Ullrich 199). In hand-made objects, "traces of the maker's body and its movements often remain … such marks record the presence of a living person…ordinary people recognize this intuitively, and they read a craft object as a symbol of human presence (Metcalf

"Evolutionary Biology" 224). The assertion of the individuality of the maker goes a long way to limit the alienation that the user feels. As Barthes tells us, "signification cannot be divorced from the operations of myth or ideology" (in Silverman, 4). We tend to have an ambivalent relationship to "handwork" in our culture, and so our interpretation of the value handwork will depend upon our own ideologies concerning manual versus non-manual labor.

Vision has long been considered to be primary in our culture. Products of the mind have also been considered more valuable then those of the hand. Descartes' "I think therefore I am" places the source of the self in the mind, rather than the body. As in the word "handicraft," craft objects have an obvious connection to the human hand. They are therefore considered of lesser value than "fine art" objects that are seen to require more the skill or talent of the mind of the artist rather than their hands.

Image 13

Julia Galloway, <u>Tumblers.</u>

The placement of Julia Galloway's tumblers in *Image 13,* on a wall rather than a table, is almost the antithesis of a utilitarianism that would have cups functioning only to hold liquid. Galloway has used this set of six tumblers as a canvas for the detailed drawing of a cityscape.[1] It is only through use, however, that additional meanings can be felt.

Using these objects as the vessels that they are intended to be would entail removing them from the wall and placing them on the table, in what amounts to a subordinate position with their users. Further disrupting the idea of the rational city described on the surface, the dinner guest holds sections of the city in their hands, thus claiming temporary ownership. Galloway's tumblers are an obvious example of the potential for the disruption of existing categorizations that exist in ceramic objects.

[1] Rochester, New York

Part 5: The Meaning of Use.

"The craftsperson can orchestrate an experience that is fully encountered only through use…such experiences pull our attention back to our own bodies…they offer pleasure where we have become accustomed to having none…." (Metcalf "Evolutionary Biology" 227).

In *Image 14,* this second pitcher of Galloway's is a much larger one than that seen earlier. Galloway uses a golden colored decoration that is slightly raised above the surface. The white area is recessed almost as if the fence-type decoration was an exterior layer. This gives this surface a sense of being carved, of it encroaching upon an inner layer of skin or flesh that sits inside the fenced perimeter of the body of the pitcher. Touch and use could tell us much more. If you were to stroke the surface with your fingertips, you would be able to imagine that you are reading a new type of Braille for the first time.

Image 14

Julia Galloway, Pitcher (front).

Invisible in this photograph is the way the handle forms a “gate” into the fenced area around it. If you were to pick it up, this pitcher would also reveal other secrets. You would note that it feels much lighter than its size would indicate. Galloway has subtly changed wall thicknesses, thinning the widest area around the “belly.” Both the mouth and the foot of the vessel are therefore slightly heavier, which creates a very specific type of balance in the weight of the pot when held in the hand. The care and foresight required to do this implies a level of quality that Galloway herself finds important.

A vessel of this size and stature has an added value: “it is precisely in these objects that we see ceramics in a spiritual role that humanizes the domestic environment, a stripped down sculptural language serving as a metaphor for ourselves and animating our homes and lives“ (Ionascu & Scott, 88-9). Whether Galloway’s pitcher is used to pour liquid or to hold flowers, it has an important presence in the life of its owner.

Image 15

Julia Galloway, Dinner Service.

The interior of the bowl in *Image 15* is covered with very slightly raised decoration that can only be fully seen when it has been emptied. Conversely, when empty, the bowl is a reminder of the life-giving substances that occupy it at the table. The decoration, as well, represents an enormous amount of labor (over time) on the part of the artist. As in the "Slow food" movement where food is prepared from raw ingredients, requiring more time to cook, the user is thus asked, by inference, to slow down the eating process. This makes a statement about the world today and how one can live in it more fully.

Image 16

Lisa Orr, Terrine Set.

Implicit in Lisa Orr's work is the connection between nature and our use of the vessels to hold natural substances. Orr's terrine "embodies" the natural world on its surface and through its contents, soup. The excess that Orr offers us in this terrine (*Image 16*) is a beneficial one, similar to that of the bounty of the harvest.

This terrine also "embodies" community. Presented on a stand, when in use it would be elevated above table level. A terrine holds foods like soup or stew, which are made of a blending and commingling of a number of ingredients. The pot itself is therefore a metaphor for the coming together of a group for the benefit of the larger whole.

By adding the cups to the display stand where they become part of the presentation, Orr is alluding to the community of various members of the invited dinner

party. As Christopher Short writes, "… it [pottery] is also so often – particularly through the rituals in which such wares are used, such as drinking and eating… part of our social being" (Short 61). Bowls will be allowed to leave the stand during use, but must return to it when the meal is over. Each bowl thus participates in the creation of a work of greater value, while at the same time providing individual sustenance.

Conclusion: What can functional ceramics offer us?

"The hand of the artist reaches through the object to touch the hand of the user, creating a bond of friendship, caring and aesthetic gratification that nurtures human life and fortifies it from indifference. This dynamic of handmade functional pottery leads to what we call enjoyment in its most profound sense" (Higby "Intellectual and Sensual Pleasures" 73).

This paper began with my desire to understand what it is that makes functional ceramics special, and to explain what many potters understand instinctively – that when people use their work, a very special type of relationship can develop. When a person uses the precious work that the artist has guided through the often frustrating and lengthy process of creation, they will interact with the vessel in a manner that is so intimate, so sensuous, and so direct that it will be incorporated into their daily lives. Not only will they touch it with their hands on a regular basis, but it may be held to their lips or cradled in their arm.

The emphasis on the role of the viewer in the creation of the art object dates back to conceptual and installation artwork of the 1960's and 1970's. Ceramics has always required the viewer, or user, to participate in the completion of the useful art object. These pots are now involving the user in a further dialogue through the direct or indirect communication with both the body and mind of the user. In this sense, these ceramic works are part of the postmodernist project, as begun in the fine art world through the direct inclusion of the (individual) viewer in the completion of the art object. The vessel has effects upon the user, and the user has effects upon the vessel. (Ionascu and Scott 87).

Only through the "workmanship of risk" (or work made by hand), says Polly Ullrich, "is it possible to reveal the sense of life and the moment-by-moment human decisions that are recorded in the act of making" (Ullrich 205). Consumers face simulacrum every day in the many versions of ceramic objects made for quick and cheap consumption. For many, these suffice to fill basic needs. Handmade pottery, on the other hand, is by essence never a "copy." [vii]

As Kochevet Bendavid writes, “producing tableware enables potters to develop a particular relationship with other people on physical, sensual and intellectual levels, to get to the heart of people’s lives, to connect with the natural world as well as to issues of food, culture and customs” (40). Because these objects are included in the daily activities of the home, they participate in the rituals of use. They are thus capable of presenting communication at a level beyond that of non-utilitarian artworks. The ceramic works discussed in this paper are examples of the potent possibilities for communication in utilitarian objects.

By providing us with tangible examples of the presence of the human body of the maker, ceramic vessels such as those of these two artists are intentionally cultivating acts of giving, sharing, and participating. Craft objects that “help” around the home are expressing sympathy, a key component of the human sense of morality, which Metcalf explains is part of an innate human nature (“Evolutionary Biology” 218).

In the works of Galloway and Orr, the presence of their unique, singular identities is visible in each piece that they make. The choice these two artists have made, that of making utilitarian vessels, communicates itself a coded meaning, and it is important to understand the implications of such a choice. As Wayne Higby reminds us, potters can see the utilitarian function of a pot as open to interpretation (70). The task of the potter is to understand that this is not merely a problem to solve, “but as a context for revealing the subtle and exquisite joys of human life” (71-2).

Ellen Dissanayake uses evolutionary theory as a base for her assertion that humans have an innate need to “elaborate” upon their material world. (2000, 130). She shows that the arts are fundamental to human’s ability to survive as social groups. The arts, she says, “have been intrinsic to human life, inextricably entangled with the most fundamental endowments of human psychobiology” (Dissanayake 129).

For Dissanayake, the arts, and by extension art objects, are necessary components of human existence (2002, 92). “Making special” is a phrase Dissanayake uses to describe the human activity of changing one’s natural surroundings.[viii] Utilitarian artworks supply their owners with the ability to participate in the “making special” of their home life. The handmade object presents to its user the solid proof of the existence

of its creator. Crafts are not merely holdovers from an earlier, simpler age, but active participants in how we currently shape our identities and future.

Julia Galloway and Lisa Orr's functional works fully engage with the user by speaking to many different senses. The activity of use is as important as visual examination in the full understanding of the layers of meanings in their vessels. The user is encouraged to engage with their vessels as completely as did their makers. The evidence of this engagement is present in the way Orr and Galloway have dealt directly (and indirectly) with issues such as time, femininity, community, utility, and, above all, communication.

Notes:

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[i] My use of the feminine pronoun as the universal pronoun is deliberate – not only has the feminine pronouns "her" and "she" have long been excluded from the "universal" use of the (masculine) pronoun, but I myself am female, as are these two artists are female. I look forward to at time where such use of the feminine pronoun would not have to be explained by a notation.

[ii] Attitudes shift, however, Fariello notes Such a shift is represented by the increasingly common publications of essays that analyze a range of theoretical issues specific to the crafts in general, as well as ceramics in particular.

[iii] A *semantic* reading is the literal interpretation of what is seen, a *critical* level is when this is given further meaning (Carpenter 22).

[iv] Carpenter talks about "centers" of critique or points of view, He groups critical approaches to the vessel:

> 1) The vessel as (anthropological) artifact
> objects defined as artifacts are not considered to be "artworks" p. 41, however in a object is created - "intended" as a visual (and full of meaning, right?) object rather than as a "tool or ornament"
>
> 2) ceramics as second-class citizen through the art-craft ordering schema: craft is "non-art" therefore is "less-than-art" (42) Art world writers/curators do this.
>
> 3) limited criticism from within the field.

Carpenter asks for a more intellectual mode of criticism: to "make connections to themes and issues pertaining to the world in general or the art world specifically and/or how" (44).

[v] The term "exchange-value" is used for the abstract value placed upon goods or services that were initially acquired through direct exchange with labor, which contrasts with "use-value," or the value associated with an object through its utility.

[vi] These trains of associations are partly what Eco describes as “unlimited semiosis**” (**in Carpenter, 105-6).

[vii] Polly Ullrich sees this as a “new paradigm” of artistic endeavor, and contemporary craft as a way for “the juxtaposition of our embodied selves and our corporeal world within a technological and scientific worldview that relies on decoherence and cybernization to explain and depict the material environment and human relationships.” (Ullrich, 198).

[viii] In Art and Intimacy, Ellen Dissanayake make the following points:
Humans are born with “psychobiological” needs, the we have an innate readiness to:

- search for and to enjoy “mutuality” (infants are born ready to learn from loved ones and receive love through learning)
- belong to a group (safety and increased mutuality)
- to search for and to create “meaning” (ceremony – sharing)
- to make things with our hands (thereby “acquiring a sense of competence for life”)

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Image List:

Image 1.

Carpenter, Stephen "Levels and Types of Meaning." A meta-critical analysis of ceramics criticism for art education: Toward an interpretive methodology. Diss. Pennsylvania State University, 1996: 34.

Image 2.

Galloway, Julia. Cream and Sugar Set. 2004*, 6" x 4"* x 6". 12 November 2007 http://www.juliagalloway.com/gallery13crepuscular.html

Image 3

Orr, Lisa. Salt and Pepper. Date and size unknown. 8 October 2007 http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Image 4

Orr, Lisa. Dinner Plate. Date and size unknown. 12 November 2007. http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Image 5

Orr, Lisa. Mug. Date and size unknown. 12 November 2007. http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Image 6

Galloway, Julia. Julia Galloway, Cream and Sugar Set. 2004, 5" x 5" x 6".
12 November 2007
http://www.juliagalloway.com/gallery13crepuscular.html

Image 7

Galloway, Julia. Pitcher. 2004, 6" x 8" x 10"12. November 2007
http://www.juliagalloway.com/gallery13crepuscular.html

Image 8

Orr, Lisa. Pitcher. Date and size unknown. 12 November 2007.

http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Image 9

Orr, Lisa. Creamer. Date and size unknown. 12 November 2007.

http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Image 10

Orr, Lisa. Platter. Date and size unknown. 12 November 2007.

http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Image 11

Orr, Lisa. Platter (detail). Date and size unknown. 12 November 2007.

http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Image 12

Galloway, Julia, Salt and Pepper Pot. 2000, 3" x 3" x 4". 12 November 2007.

http://www.juliagalloway.com/gallery6tending.html

Image 13

Galloway, Julia, Tumblers. 2005, size unknown. 12 November 2007.

http://www.juliagalloway.com/gallery15solace.html

Image 14

Galloway, Julia, Pitcher (front). 2005, size unknown. 12 November 2007.

http://www.juliagalloway.com/gallery15solace.html

Image 15

Galloway, Julia. Dinner Service. 2007, size unknown. 12 November 2007.

http://www.louisvillevisualart.org/dinnerworks_files/Julia_Galloway.jpg

Image 16

Orr, Lisa. Terrine Set. Date and size unknown. 12 November 2007.
http://www.lisaorr.com/gallery.htm

Appendix A: A History of "Studio Ceramics."

Studio ceramics has had a long history of integrating the historical with the contemporaneous. Although this presents itself within ceramics today in a very postmodernist manner, the field has always looked to the past for inspiration. It is impossible to discuss current theories in contemporary ceramics without mentioning Bernard Leach and the powerful role his work and writings had on pottery and pottery makers in the first half of the 20th century. Leach is the historical monolith that all ceramic artists have had to at least touch on their way by, whether they feel they are continuing his historical lineage or merely brushing by his theories on their way to a theoretical platform of their own.

When Leach brought to Europe and North America in the 1920's the ideals that he had found in the traditional folk potteries of Japan, he initiated, through both his work and his influential writings (A Potter's Book, 1940) a parallel movement to return to a simple, humble approach of making pottery (du Waal 87-91). Using the Soetzu Yanagi's theories of the importance of the "humble craftsman" as his base, Leach and his followers also asserted the necessity of the decorative arts to remain tied to craft through the celebration of the labor of the individual potter who carries on the all-important tradition.

Where Walter Gropius of the Bauhaus design school promoted a functionalist approach to product design that celebrated designers' new ability to design for mass-production and the beauty of the machined, the studio pottery movement Leach started saw instead craft, and ceramics in particular, as having values of "continuity and closeness to the natural order" (du Waal 88). Leach-type ceramics of the first half of the 20th century embraced the Japanese aesthetic in an almost colonial manner while simultaneously claiming to be re-establishing ceramics as a populist art form. The vigor with which Western artists applied this to their work is similar to the way painters responded to influential critics such as Clement Greenberg.

Leach's influence upon Western pottery makers created the major force in the field's 20th century approach to Modernism, a trend that was unchallenged until Peter Voulkos began making 'expressionist' pots in the 1950's. Our second particular version of Modernism is rooted in the ceramics produced at Otis as part of Peter Voulkos and his

students' explorations. The materiality of clay and abstract expressionism took primacy over the vessel form, although those forms initially continued to be created through the use of the potter's wheel.

The type of modernism that the Otis artists embraced was a rough, physical, (and usually masculine) form of ceramic experience. The emphasis was on large, difficult to make forms, sweaty, physical acts of maneuvering and ripping clay away from the traditional vessel's expected shape. Material exploration in clay coupled with a general desire of many practitioners to move the field of ceramics away from its concentration on the working vessel.

Voulkos and his colleagues such as Paul Soldners' challenge of the vessel's function was just that, a challenge, and rarely produced objects that actually "functioned" in any literal way. The material of clay became the primary subject for discussion, with vessels presenting the object upon which this subjectivity was released.

If the Voulkos group was the first generation of post-Leachian ceramists, then the second generation consisted of artists who continued to challenge the conventional vessel forms. Wayne Higby, noted ceramicist, teacher and writer, used the phrase "contemporary ceramics" in 1985. Although Higby re-affirms the importance of the vessel format, he calls for works in this category to distinguish themselves from functional objects in order to avoid "confusion" (Higby "The Vessel is not a Pot" 42). Purely visual concerns, therefore continued to play a large role in the works of Andrea Gill, Kenneth Ferguson, Adrian Saxe, Kenneth Price, Betty Woodman, and Wayne Higby himself.

These artists made objects that were ostensibly vessel forms, yet were rarely mistaken as actually functioning pots. This generation represented the desire to confirm the subjectivity of the maker while admitting that the vessel is an equally valid subject for shifting meanings. Woodman's disassembled works that deconstruct historical Chinese forms and glazing are coupled with a rough-and-tumble approach to throwing and working with clay. Adrian Saxe's work presents an even more densely coded set of formal visual counterpoints in pieces whose perfection implicitly asserts the human subjects' power over natural elements and forces.

Later generations of ceramic artists have endeavored to reclaim elements of traditional pottery making without merely reverting to prior formats. Many post-Voulkos ceramic artists, especially those making functional pots, are reacting against the traditional methods of interpreting functional pottery forms while at the same time moving away from a reliance upon an expressionist technique as the method to do so. A resurgence of the making of ceramic vessels and the re-introduction of the appreciation for well-crafted work are important elements of post-Voulkos ceramics. A major hallmark of postmodern ceramics is a continuous referencing of the past; contemporary ceramic artists are as apt as any other artists to use strategies seen in other postmodern movements such as deconstruction and pluralism. However, the conflict remains within the ceramic community between the two modernist legacies: the craft traditions which preceded Voulkos' work and which continue through to today co-exist uneasily with the artist-as-auteur approach to working with clay.

A third generation of vessel makers has been able to synthesize the activity of self-conscious reflection that characterizes the challenging of perceptual and metaphysical norms that the postmodern era had ushered in. These works, however, were unafraid to be functional. The re-establishment of function as a valid, if not major, concern of these "new ceramics" is seen in the work of this first purely postmodern generation of ceramists. As Alison Britton, writer and potter explains,

> In the 1970s a number of potters felt the need to distance themselves quite consciously from the dominant Leach tradition. Most of the ideas that were hatched then by my colleagues and myself were in handbuilding, and in irregular, more sculptural, forms. It was as if, for a number of years, the wheel was out-of-bounds if you wanted to escape from the increasingly complacent norm of the Anglo-Oriental tradition. Now, I would suggest, sufficient objects of other sorts have been made for new approaches to throwing to be contemplated" (Britton 12)

This movement has absorbed and synthesized rather than supplanted those who preceded them. The second generation continues to make work that directly questions function alongside the work of the third that embraces it. Peter Beseker, Linda Sikora, Mark Pharis, Victor Babu, Walter Ostrom and others make objects that are unabashedly pots, yet are never "just" pots.

An important theme of the works of this generation of artists is the “pots about pots” approach, seen in full expression in the works of Walter Ostrom, who paints historical vessels on the outside of his contemporary versions of historical vessels. Ostrom’s tulipieres, for instance, present a range of meanings that represents the combination of celebration of historical ceramics forms as well as commentary upon a them while using the medium in a contemporary manner. The tulipiere, a form that had its main cultural importance in 17th and 18th century Europe, was created to showcase the expensive, and thus status promoting, bulb flowers that were imported from Holland. Ostrom uses similar materials to those of the historical Dutch ceramics of the period (red earthenware clay covered in a white maiolica glaze), yet does so with materials indigenous to the area where he works, using local red clay from Lantz, Nova Scotia. Paul Mathieu sees Galloway’s work as a direct descendant of Walter Ostrom’s “cut and paste” school of teaching and making (Mathieu 4).

The result of the influence of the now three generations of ceramic artists for whom vessels are subject as well as object is a new crop of potters whose functional work is intended to be both utilitarian in the purest sense yet continues to express the postmodern condition. The power of these works lies in the combination of the traditional vessel formats (often traditional in purpose if not in form) with enough formal or decorative ambiguity to encourage in the viewer the reflexive double-take of the postmodern condition: there is something more to be found here. Julia Galloway and Lisa Orr are both artists working within the vessel format; each intending their work to function on a literal level – that of frequent use – as well as embodying connotative meanings that go beyond the purely conceptual.

Appendix B: The History of the "Craft" Object.

Functionalism, the belief that an objects' form should consist of the requirements of what it needs to function, was developed by the Bauhaus and other designers. Studio pottery owes a lot to functionalism, if only for inspiring the craft (read anti-functionalist) movement that looked to the Arts and Crafts movement rather than the Bauhaus. 'Form follows function' as a maxim has been credited to Louis Sullivan's publication of theories on the relation between form and function in architecture, beginning in 1896 (Lambert 5). This maxim, however, can be seen as a culmination of the thinking begun in Ancient Rome, when Vitruvius authored a treatise presenting architecture as a rational science featuring "strength, utility and grace" (Lambert 7). Other words used to describe the "fundamental rationality of the beautiful" have been the 'unity, proportion and suitability' proposed by Alberti in 1452. In 1938 the MARS (Modern Architectural Research) group structured their London exhibition around the triad 'commodity, firmness, and delight'. (Lambert 7)

Arts and Crafts movement leader William Morris looked to John Ruskin, who theorized that architects and designers needed to look back to the Gothic for examples of the integration of the abilities and talents of the skilled laborer. (Metcalf "Contemporary Craft" 15). Ruskin claimed that this period represented the ability of the worker to be both creative and respected, in contrast to the way the Renaissance prioritized the verity and accuracy of representation and therefore reduced craftspeople to mere workers (Fariello, "Regarding the History of Objects" 5). Morris's combination of the beautiful and the useful was a product of his belief on the importance of regaining the craft traditions that had been lost through the industrialized approach to making goods that had developed in the 18th and 19th centuries.

An ideal Morris factory, however, could have contained machinery, but only if the humans working with these machines were guaranteed fair wages and labor practices. The Arts and Crafts movement Morris was associated with drew a parallel between the quality of handcrafted work and the "moral uplift" of the laborers involved (Ullrich 202). The Arts and Crafts movement attempted to integrate art into life through the

transforming of an ordinary personal experience into an aesthetic encounter (Metcalf "Evolutionary Biology" 227).

The socialist idealism of Morris, however, was changed significantly in the theories of the Bauhaus, the next major influential design movement. The Bauhaus thinkers promoted the equality of artists, designers, and craftspersons in their workshops through their school's teachings and its design studio's productions. Partially eschewing Morris's focus on the quality of human labor, however, the Bauhaus conflated workers' rights with their ability to own useful household items.

Where Morris attempted to reclaim the purposeful role of the maker in the making of decorative art, the Bauhaus used mechanized production to establish decorative art as relevant to the 20th century. Modernism as style was held by the Bauhaus to be "geometric, free of ornamentation, and highly abstract" and was intended to be "simple, hygienic and affordable, thus improving the quality of life for the masses." (Metcalf "Contemporary Craft" 17)

Bauhaus designs aimed for "impersonal, standardized mass-production" (Lambert 21) The Bauhausian approach to design was the birth of the functionalism that is now bringing us the ipod and modular homes. In the present era, the beginning of the 21st century, there are very few art forms remaining where objects intended for human hands and bodies to use are still made by an individual (or small studio) maker, also with their hands.

Studio crafts, and the concept that "craft" objects are made by self-employed, individual makers, is the direction craft has taken in the last century. This, however, has led to the increased isolation of both the craft artist and the field itself. The crafts, especially fiber and ceramic arts, and to a lesser extent furniture, metal and glass, are often seen as the last bastion of the human touch, however the role of the contemporary craftsperson is far from stable. The crafts themselves are in a process of self-analysis and re-formation, as evidenced in the abundance of papers concerning the role and status of craft at craft conferences. Writer Paul Greenhalgh claims that the past thirty years have seen the destabilization of the various studio craft fields, and exhorts craftspeople to search for concerns pertinent to this era, while maintaining Morris's original ideals (Greenhalgh "Modern enlightenment").