

The Economics of Labor and Authenticity in Minnesota Art Pottery

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## Dedication

This project is dedicated to my mom. The older I get, the wiser she gets.

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## Introduction

I want to make things that I can't afford.

*-Brian*

This is a paper about craft. It investigates labor, consumerism, and the notion of authenticity: all things that make craft a discrete and meaningful category of objects. This paper explores the reasons why one person will spend \$65 on a coffee cup, and why another will spend \$50,000 to learn a trade that will not likely pay for itself, much less support a middle-class lifestyle. I began this paper curious about what would compel an individual to wait in line outside a closed storefront on a winter morning in Minnesota just for the opportunity to buy a set of dessert plates. I wanted to know how that \$65 coffee cup functioned differently from other, cheaper cups. I also wanted to know why the person who made and sold that cup, who spent six years in school to learn how to do so, is living on credit cards, second jobs, or in a precarious balance of solvency referred to as "success."

In essence, I endeavor to understand craft economically. However, through this project I try to move beyond "economics" in its narrowest usage, as reflecting only actions and movements that transpire through the medium of currency. Instead, I try to understand craft as economic behavior in all its complexity: production and

consumption, use and exchange value, quantitative, qualitative, and affective object properties, financial and non-financial transactions.

The theoretical framework for my project is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital. These models crystallize the interactions between culture, class, and currency that flow through the outwardly-transparent transactions described above. Through this work, then, I hope to unravel the micro-economy of Minnesota art pottery as a site of capital exchanges, both cultural and economic. I also interrogate the stakes in these transactions for the class position and economic empowerment of the actors in these transactions.

In order to probe the exchange processes deeply, and to better understand the stakes, and the motivations of the participants involved, this project enlisted the ceramic makers themselves. Based in my previous experience with this population, I pursued the input of professional potters through ethnographic interviews. I asked them to explain their own relationship with the processes of making, selling, buying, and using pots; the qualities that distinguish crafted objects from other ones, and the affective information they convey; and the costs and compensations, both financial and otherwise, they incur from their profession. In this paper, the potters' testimonies are combined with the discourses around craft, labor, and authenticity, as well as an examination of the art pottery economy in Minnesota. By drawing on these sources,

and contextualizing them in the literature of consumer culture, this paper constructs a cultural economy of functional art pottery.

The organization of this paper starts with the groundwork. First I provide a literature review, covering an abbreviated history of fine crafts in the Industrial and Post-Industrial eras in the United Kingdom and the United States; the literature of economics and authenticity in art, craft, and DIY communities; the literature of labor and class as it pertains to craft; the theoretical framework used; and the ethnographic studies upon which my project was modeled. Second, I articulate my method and what Ruth Frankenberg referred to as the “vital statistics” (1993) of the project, data that contextualizes my informants and their social positionality. Third, I provide an overview of my site of inquiry, which is constituted as the Minneapolis art pottery scene, embodied by the Northern Clay Center (NCC), a ceramic arts nonprofit in Minneapolis. Fourth, I analyze the relationship between labor and habitus, the potter’s role as supplement to the pot, and the effect of these on the object. This section also addresses the potters’ construction of two contrasting lifestyle myths: that of the artisan, and that of the cubicle worker. Fifth and last, I use the information on potters’ labor and lifestyle to understand the heightened value of the object, and the importance of authenticity in modern consumer culture.

## Literature

### History

Craft has been a simmering concern since the principle production of goods started shifting from independent artisan labor toward mechanization. Glenn Adamson (2007) describes this period as a classic paradigm shift, wherein a conventional pattern of thought, e.g., that pertaining to the place of the independent artisan maker in the larger economy, as the production needs for goods began to be filled by less-skilled labor in industrial settings. The result of this paradigm shift, Adamson argues, was the “largely symbolic and often elegiac character” newly embodied by artisan labor and craft in general (p. 6). One outcome of craft’s new role was the transition of artisans’ position from that of laborer, to “the ‘designer-craftsman’ of the 1930s” which itself was “incompletely displaced by the ‘artist-craftsman’” (p. 6), a term that aptly describes the position of art potters.

During this paradigm shift, as artisans became less essential economically, Robert Lee argues that the idea of “craft,” and the craft worker, became articulated to a nostalgic version of pre-industrial labor dominated by small producers (1999). As the methods used to produce handmade pottery remain archaic, and the labor model pre-industrial, the 21<sup>st</sup> century pottery workforce resembles the preindustrial ideal Lee

describes among 19<sup>th</sup> century white working-class Americans under the banner of “Free Labor,” which “maintained a craft consciousness based on a nostalgic reconstruction of the pre-capitalist workplace and home” (p. 56). Like Free Labor proponents, modern potters seek to escape the prevailing labor system and abide in a worker-driven one, wherein craftsmen establish prices, rather than employers establishing wages (Lee R. G., 1999, p. 54). This idealized vision of pre-capitalist craft labor remains in place: in the course of modern resistance to globalism, functional craft goods are positioned as alternatives to dominant economic production, distribution and consumption systems. Likewise, people pursue careers in craft as an alternative lifestyle that removes them from the capitalist wage-based workplace.

Several figures became prominent during this transition from skilled laborer to designer-craftsman and beyond, and intellectual descendents of these figures have affected the community values and philosophy in Minnesota. Perhaps most prominent was William Morris, an active polymath and political agitator in mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century England. Morris’s Arts and Crafts movement represents the Western incarnation of a philosophy that advocated for returning to traditional methods, materials, and techniques of goods-production; for valuing aesthetic objects in daily life; for creating objects that could be consumed by common people, and not just elites; and for idealizing a pre-modern lifestyle. Morris and his collective produced diverse craft objects, from ceramic tiles and stained glass to handmade wallpaper and art prints.

Known as a founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, Morris's essential philosophy held that industrial production dehumanized both worker and consumer, and that a full and meaningful life meant employment in creative and rewarding labor. Given this attitude, Morris is also rightly remembered as a prominent socialist, and over the course of his career he produced a great quantity of articles, letters, and speeches. E.P. Thompson (1955/1976) argues, however, that Morris had "not the least interest in 'politics'. He was interested in 'free and full life and the consciousness of life'. He was in uncompromising rebellion against the shadow life of Victorian middle class" (p. 726-7). Morris held both the idealism and iconoclasm that have come to characterize the modern craft worker. Furthermore, in his life and work, he embodied the articulation of socialist political thought to the production of fine craft objects.

While craft pottery is a diverse category, pottery in Minnesota has taken on particular set of cultural referents which trace their heritage back to Morris. Beginning in the 1950s, Earl and his wife brought back a clay tradition they learned from working at the pottery of Bernard Leach, an influential 20<sup>th</sup>-century English potter; Leach himself had been strongly influenced by traditional Japanese potters such as his friend Shoji Hamada. This Japanese tradition, which favors humble, rustic, wheel-thrown pots in earthy colors, is part of the Japanese folk-craft movement known as *mingei* (Adamson, 2007), which itself bears connections to the contemporary English Arts and Crafts movement. As Leach adapted *mingei* into a style of peasant pottery for his own area by

drawing on English pottery traditions, the *mingei* influence eventually took root in Minnesota through the MacKenzies. *Warren Mackenzie: an American Potter* by David Lewis (2006) is a comprehensive biography on the influential potter. The MacKenzies were responsible for introducing handmade pottery to Minnesota as a cultural phenomenon. Settling in Stillwater, they began a campaign of educating the populace, through workshops for the community, advertising and selling his work, not to mention teaching at the University of Minnesota for decades. Many of his students followed his tradition and his lifestyle, by settling in Minnesota and around the upper Midwest, and defining a regional style. As their work developed a following, and as Warren's students began to establish their own potteries, Minnesota itself became associated with the "humble brown pot," leading to the portmanteau "Mingeisota."

### **Contemporary Craft**

Modern scholarship on handicraft tends to fall into one of two camps. Work pertaining to the economics of craft generally analyzes non-western and developing economies' engagement with craft, which operate under substantially different parameters from those of western craft economies. This literature of craft touches heavily on objects made by indigenous populations. Frederick Wherry's work on global handicraft markets (2006) has as its object Thai artisans, but analyzes questions of authenticity that are germane to this investigation. Wherry describes shifting modes of authenticity, as objects created for local use cede ground to those produced for

economic reasons to sell to tourists. The very fact of their being sold instead of used locally can interfere with an object's authenticity (Wherry, p. 7). Molly Lee (2003) writes about the social aspects and "sharing networks" involved in the craft markets held by native Alaskans. Noting that the vendors at these fairs are predominantly women on account of traditional labor divisions, and that women are increasingly relocating to urban areas for economic reasons, she makes an argument for seeing these craft fairs as important social environments for native women, fostering social, cultural, and political exchange, in addition to economic trade of materials and goods. These non-economic forms of exchange are particularly important for communities in flux or transition, e.g. those moving from rural family villages. She holds that craft fairs "can be viewed as a site of power production, linking women vendors to local and national politics and to women elsewhere in Native America" (p. 589). Likewise, native crafts can become symbols of resistance (p. 590). Rhoda Packer and Tamar Frankiel's (2001) history on Anglo women's engagement with and promotion of Native American culture at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century treads related ground. Tracing three women's histories, Packer and Frankiel describe several forms of prosocial consumerism they promoted. Several were politically motivated, interested in focusing America's energy on American (rather than European) cultural concerns; one became involved with a "basket fraternity," a turn-of-the-century effort to direct consumer and connoisseur attention toward locally-produced native crafts rather than European imports (p. 69). One saw the Native

system, with its woman-centered craft industries, as a way of ennobling the position of women in American culture (p. 72).

The most current scholarship on the role of handicraft in the westernized United States, by contrast, by and large focuses on the indie craft movement and Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture, a grassroots phenomenon which encompasses a range of practices performed by amateur crafters. These works have emphasized the role of community formation, the internet, and feminist engagement with the current craft movement. In *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture*, Amy Spencer (2005) assembles a history of 20<sup>th</sup> century DIY culture, focusing primarily on movements such as those of the beat poets, and punks, but contextualizing DIY generally in American culture. The community and commercial dimensions of the popular craft-retailing website Etsy.com are explored in Sarah Abraham's thesis, *Handmade Online: the Crafting of Commerce, Aesthetics, and Community on Etsy.com* (2008), as well as my previous work, *Indie Craft Enters New Media: Desire, Gender, and Labor in Etsy.com* (2010). Recent popular publications have also addressed DIY, indie, and home-based craft. These works reproduce the discourse articulated in recent scholarship. *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design* (2008) surveys the contemporary craft scene around the U.S., largely through brief profiles of individual crafters and collectives. *The Close-Knit Circle: American Knitters Today* (2007) ethnographically investigates the modern popularity of knitting. This book particularly emphasizes the importance of social aspects of knitting, which

becomes a form of community-formation, as well as an intergenerational transfer of information.

Along with political implications, the elevation of handicraft has an element of woman's empowerment. As the works above suggest, crafting has fallen traditionally to women in several cultures, such as the native Alaskan community Lee describes.

Adamson (2007) notes that the stigmatization of craft as "less than" fine art has a long tradition in Western cultures as well.

The disregard for such objects has been convincingly critiqued as one subplot within the more general history of the devaluation of women's art. . . . So there are good reasons to despise the lopsided scheme in which craft, often coded as feminine or even as 'ethnic,' is always seen as inferior to the hegemonic category of art (p. 5).

While taking craft seriously has been recognized as having potential to elevate the position of women in communities, women face marginalization in large heterogeneous craft communities as well. Emily Orlando (2009) argues that the Pre-Raphaelite art community, affiliated with Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, set out to raise women's profile from that of the passive object in Victorian art. Writing on the women featured in the Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Orlando notes that many of these women are depicted in frail, fainting postures, lacking agency, and presented sexually. Furthermore, many of the women who sat for these works were themselves artists and crafters, creators with reputations in their own right, sometimes bigger than their male counterparts, but which faded beside the cultural memory of their objectified form.

Finally, while craft is functionally and economically distinct from art, a body of literature exists on the economics and funding of art, written largely in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Texts such as *The Economics of the Arts* and *Patrons Despite Themselves: Taxpayers and Arts Policy* (O'Hare, Feld, & Schuster, 1983) focus primarily on the problem of developing and defending (or dismantling) a rationale, economic or otherwise, for the public funding of fine art. The disappearance of major taxpayer support for art through the National Endowment for the Arts during the 1980s, and the dwindling of discretionary public funds in the United States in general thereafter, has made this particular track of economic inquiry a largely moot concern. Beginning in 2010, however, the state of Minnesota, where my ethnography takes place, instituted the *Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment*. The Legacy amendment enacted a sales tax starting in 2010 of 0.375%, proceeds of which partially go to support art production, education, and access. Discussion of this amendment returned public debate temporarily to these issues, and these analyses have the potential to return to some currency through subsequent debates. However, the majority of arts funding in Minnesota continues to flow from private corners, so my analysis traces primarily these private sources of revenue.

### **Authenticity**

Of interest in consumer studies in recent years has been the significance and symbolism of authenticity as a taste-marker for commodities. Authenticity is a fraught

concept with diverse meanings. Glenn Carroll and Dennis Wheaton (2009) note that the label of authenticity, regardless of its specific meaning, persistently “imbues an object or service with deeper meaning to its transaction partners, at least its consumers” (p. 4).

As Wherry (2006) writes, under globalization, authenticity in ethnic handicraft has been argued to be threatened by following fickle consumer tastes and even by the simple exchange for currency (pp. 7-8). Wherry argues instead for recognition of multiple modes of authenticity, rather than conceptualizing it as a single spectrum (pp. 27-28).

Writing in the context of authenticity as it pertains to food and fine dining, Carroll and Wheaton develop this notion of multiple authenticities by dividing authenticity into two key definitions: 1) “type” or genre authenticity, “indicating something is true to its type (or genre or category),” and 2) “moral” authenticity, “signifying the choices behind something reflect the morally sincere beliefs of those involved,” e.g., the producers or brokers (2009, pp. 5-6). These two forms of authenticity, they contend, have spawned two new adapted forms in response to modern pressures. Type authenticity spawned 3) “craft” authenticity, meaning “craft” in the sense of process, and referring to the use of “sophisticated craft techniques, personnel and ingredients” to lay claim to the term; moral authenticity spawned 4) “idiosyncratic” authenticity, which refers to the “unique and often quirky aspects of an object,” and which seems to rely chiefly on compelling origin narrative (p. 6). These four definitions of authenticity work very well to describe the dining sector, where an

authentic steakhouse possesses type authenticity, an organic grocer possesses moral authenticity, a microbrewer, craft authenticity, and a landmark ice cream stand, idiosyncratic authenticity.

## **Labor**

Describing class distinctions, Thorstein Veblen (1899/1953) writes that historically, the upper echelons of a society set themselves apart by not engaging in professions of manual labor: “The upper classes are by custom exempt or excluded [...] from industrial employments, and this exemption is the economic expression of their superior rank”(p. 21). Veblen describes these industrial professions as “manual labor, industry, whatever has to do directly with the everyday work of getting a livelihood” (p. 23). Pottery is historically and essentially one of these sorts of industrial professions: the labor is physical, dirty, and produces objects intended for everyday purposes. Yet culture has shifted: handmade pots are no longer the essential tools of everyday kitchen activities for most people, the labor performed by potters is no longer part of an essential industry, and as such, artisan production is no longer typical, “everyday work.” Instead, potters occupy a unique position in the post-industrial era. Their social position is neither that of the blue-collar wage worker, nor that of the cubicle worker, nor that of the upper-class collector. Potters work as much as cultural producers as object producers. Artisans accrue a form of embodied cultural capital, and produce objectified

cultural capital, which can be exchanged in the form of craft objects for economic capital.

Karl Marx's theory of estranged labor holds that, while labor should be fulfilling in itself, waged labor alienates workers from the product of their labor, because the objects and the wealth they create are not theirs to control. Colin Campbell (2005) holds that the popularization of Marx's theory led to craft work being adopted by intellectuals and "advocates of craftwork" as the "very symbol of the premodern age," with the artisan "set against a division of labour that involves the separation of design and manufacture" (p. 25). In other words, the artisan became a symbol for the precapitalist labor system, and their work interpreted as "inalienable, humane, authentic and creative" (p. 25).

### **Value**

The literature of consumer culture and commodities indicates that economic transactions are complex affairs, with emotional, social, aesthetic and cultural aspects to consider. Marx identified the difference between the usefulness of a commodity and its exchange value on the market as consisting of the relative social valuation of the labor invested in the thing, occluded through translation into currency: "The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves" (1867/1990, pp. 164-5). Jean

Baudrillard (1988/2005) complicated Marx's concept of use-value to show that use-value too is abstract and culturally contingent.

Veblen draws a distinction between the use of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption of goods as modes of establishing status through distancing oneself from productive occupations (1899/1953). From the perspective of commodity production, however, both are one. As Marx argued, the commodity acquires its value on account of the labor invested into it by workers: it is the worker's "human labour-power . . . human labor in the abstract" that get exchanged (1867/1990, 166). As such, Veblen's gentleman of conspicuous leisure survives due to the sustaining labor of people he hires, just as his gentleman of conspicuous consumption acquires consumables produced through the labor of others, and each outlay of human effort gets translated into a monetary amount. Bourdieu develops the relationship between the particular goods consumed and the specific class position expressed by the consumer.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Introduction, 1984), or "systems of dispositions characteristic of the different classes" (p. 6) clarifies the types of culturally-contingent use-values that come to bear on the consumer marketplace. Taste, he argues, operates as a set of preferences produced and internalized through one's cultural and social upbringing, which are functions of social class. It is through

expressions of taste that individuals communicate their class position, and the consumption of goods is a key site of this sort of communication: “consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (p. 2). One of the claims I make in this project is that the production of consumables can likewise be an expression of habitus, insofar as boundaries blur between producer, commodity, and consumer.

Bourdieu’s exchangeable forms of capital represent another key concept for the theorization of craft and crafting in this project (*The Forms of Capital*, 1986). Under this model, capital, which is always generated through labor, manifests culturally in three forms: economic capital, which refers to capital as it is most familiar: currency and liquid assets; cultural capital, which refers to the accretion of formal and informal education, social class-informed knowledges and skills, and signifiers thereof; and social capital, which refers to the wealth of interpersonal assets upon whom one can draw from their network. Cultural and social capital can be converted to economic capital under certain circumstances, and with certain limitations, as economic capital can be converted to cultural and social capital, under certain circumstances, usually requiring an outlay of time.

The dimensions of cultural capital Bourdieu describes are central to this project. Bourdieu articulates three distinct manifestations: objectified cultural capital, e.g.,

works of art or literature; embodied cultural capital, wherein cultural capital adheres to the individual, through the training, education, or experiential knowledge an individual accrues; and institutionalized cultural capital, which refers to the sanction conferred by an external institution on an individual, e.g., a student being graduated with a degree. These three modes of cultural capital do not function independently; objectified cultural capital, for instance, usually requires a degree of embodied cultural capital from the possessor of the object in order to be fully consumed:

A collection of paintings, for example, can be transmitted as well as economic capital (if not better, because the capital transfer is more disguised). But what is transmissible is legal ownership and not (or not necessarily) what constitutes the precondition for specific appropriation, namely, the possession of the means of 'consuming' a painting or using a machine, which, being nothing other than embodied capital, are subject to the same laws of transmission (50).

Likewise, institutionalized cultural capital gets deployed only insofar as it attaches to an individual's person.

Finally, Bourdieu makes the point that cultural capital is not an autonomous environment of value and exchange, but in fact meaningful only "insofar as it is appropriated by agents and implemented and invested as a weapon and a stake in the struggles which go on in the fields of cultural production . . . and, beyond them, *in the field of the social classes*" (1986, pp. 50, emphasis added). With this Foucauldian notion of wealth, like power, being meaningful only in the process of exchange, Bourdieu opens a path to a new way of looking at the deployment of objectified cultural capital and

signifiers of habitus as an expression of habitus as an agonistic manifestation of class struggle.

### **Ethnography**

In the process of developing and structuring my own ethnographic study, I sought out several existing ethnographies as models. First, I referred to Ann Jordan's *Business Anthropology* (2003) to formulate methods for the interviewing process. Jordan's description of the loosely-structured interview and content analysis techniques became useful to me. Next, Judith Adler's *Artists in Offices: an Ethnography of an Academic Art Scene* (2003) provided a model work on an art community. This book is a study on artists finding monetary refuge in academe, where teaching allows them a stable income. The population is more structured, and better remunerated, than the population I investigated, but the concerns about maintaining financial security were consistent. Perhaps most useful to me, though, was Ruth F White Woman, *Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993). This work's strong positional voice and reflexivity I found useful in conceiving my own project, wherein my presence and preexisting relationships with many informants made my presence in the interviews an unavoidably dynamic variable.

## Site and Method

I began studying potters before I began researching them. In 2006 I began working at Northern Clay Center (NCC), a nonprofit organization in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that promotes the ceramic arts. NCC is a community resource and a destination for “academic potters”, a term which refers primarily to potters who came to the profession through college and often graduate school, and who focus to a certain extent on the aesthetic, historical and philosophical context of pottery, and which differentiates these potters from “production potters,” who do not pursue terminal degrees, primarily produce stylistically simple wares of consistent style and limited repertoire, and make money through volume of sales. Both sorts of potters make what is referred to as “functional” pottery – work that can be, and are indeed meant to be, used for dining and serving. The term functional pottery differentiates this work from sculpture, which is intended to be primarily decorative. Some potters, particularly academic potters, produce both intentionally; many more functional potters find their work, particularly the more expensive and decorative work, purchased and used primarily as decoration by their customers, a move about which some potters feel conflicted or philosophically opposed.

The ceramics community is small and networked. Due to NCC's stature in the United States and even internationally, along with the residency system in ceramics, I encountered potters with active presences in, and ties to, other major arts centers and universities. Around NCC, an individual potter may have a studio on premises, sell work in the sales gallery, exhibit, teach classes, teach workshops, and work for the institution itself; naturally, some of these artists I came to know quite well. In 2010, almost two years after leaving NCC for graduate school, I started to pursue a research project focused on the potters themselves. I wanted to know what motivated them to pursue this eccentric (yet in many ways highly structured) career, and I wanted to understand how they supported themselves and survived financially, as the means of support were not always clear and never straightforward.

In the pursuit of this project, I interviewed a small selection of potters representative of the population I met while working at NCC. Selection of informants was based on factors such as access, involvement, and demographics. I spoke with eight potters in all – three in their twenties, either about to enter, currently in, or just departing an MFA program; three in their mid-thirties, all having completed their MFAs, married, and settled geographically in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area; and two potters over 50, who had been, in different ways, instrumental in establishing the pottery scene in the Twin Cities. Three of the potters were women, five were men; seven were white and one was Asian-American.

Each of the potters I spoke to had sold or exhibited work at NCC; most had had at some point substantial relationships with the organization – some had studios on premises, some were hourly employees, some had earned a spot in the sales gallery to sell work, or received artist grants through the enterprise, and most had more than one of the above. Five of the eight had received some education, either undergraduate or graduate-level, at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University (Alfred). Alfred is widely regarded as the premiere institution for ceramics education in the United States, and their MFA alumni include a number of prominent American functional potters. Alfred provides tuition waivers and funding for all of their admitted MFA students, which is uncommon among MFA programs. Most were economically limited enough to make decisions on higher education based in part on funding and scholarship opportunities at the schools in question; most explicitly attributed this decision-making process to the foreknowledge that pottery-making would be inadequate to pay down school debt. All potters have received pseudonyms for this paper.

I spoke to the potters in their homes, in their studios, over the phone, and at restaurants. I consider these interviews to be one part, albeit a formalized part, of the ongoing discourse about functional pottery in which these potters engaged, and which I often followed and occasionally contributed. Because of my ongoing relationship with most of the interviewees, I was sometimes able to prompt them to address specific

subjects I'd heard them speak about before. To focus the interviews, and to provide lateral comparison, I asked all potters the following seven questions:

- How did you get started in ceramics?
  - What is your ceramics education or training? What did your education cost? How did you pay for it?
  - How do mass-manufactured ceramics compare with handmade ones?
  - How do you see your labor: as a job, or as artistic creation, both, or something else?
  - What are the political or social motivations for making functional ceramics (if any)?
  - What (if anything) are you resisting? The mainstream work world?
  - Can you think of a quality or attitude that all ceramicists have in common?
- Some of these questions focused on economic or political issues; others focused

on cultural or aesthetic issues. The first two questions partially establish the potter's class position before beginning a career in pottery. The last question tries to evoke an examination of the wider potter community. The question about mass-manufactured ceramics is a rather naïve question among functional ceramicists, and was naturally received as such by most of them. However, this question asks potters to articulate the position of their customers; it is foundational to understanding the motivations for the production and consumption of handmade pots in 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture, when pots and utensils can be had so readily and inexpensively from mainstream retailers.

While the population of potters that became my informants for this project is relatively small, I attempted to collect a population that would be representative of the potters I got to know at NCC, and tried to be cognizant of the "clumps" or clusters into which these potters fell, based on factors such as training, era, motivation,

housing/studio arrangement, and aesthetic. Eight potters cannot represent the full breadth of common situations on all of these variables, but I extrapolate from the interviews where possible, supplementing with my experience of the larger NCC potter community, and external data where necessary.

### **Site**

NCC was incorporated in 1988 by a small group of clay artists and interested benefactors in the Twin Cities who felt the need for a ceramic arts center on par with those in other major metropolitan areas: a location for workshops and studios. At present, NCC is an institution of national, even international standing in the clay arts. The work of potters from NCC appears in *Ceramics Monthly* or other clay or craft periodicals, or in exhibitions around the country. Likewise, potters and sculptors from around the country and beyond accept residencies to stay and work at NCC.

By the time I encountered the organization in 2006, NCC had grown to a million-dollar nonprofit operation in Minneapolis. The building houses a sales gallery, which sells work on consignment from about 50 ceramic artists; two exhibition galleries, which host 8-10 shows per year; four classroom spaces for community classes and workshops; shared- and private-space studios, which house 40-50 artists; and a set of facilities and equipment that include two glaze bays, a kiln room, a raku firing yard, a room equipped for milling and selling soft clay, and a glaze-mixing room, where studio artists formulate glaze recipes that call for things like powdered cobalt and iron oxide. Beyond the

physical plant of the facility, NCC runs outreach programs, teaching art classes in local schools and community centers via a mobile clay studio; runs a membership program that entitles participants to various discounts; houses a subject-specific book library focused on ceramic arts, as well as a teaching library of pots and sculptures; performs re-licensure workshops for art teachers; hosts lectures, tours, and workshops; organizes international collectors' tours; runs summer camps for kids; and dispenses artist grant awards funded by local arts-oriented foundations. The organization puts out four 16-page newsletters on a quarterly basis and publishes two to three exhibition catalogues a year.

### **Personal Positionality**

I entered NCC with an art degree but marginal knowledge of clay. I was hired as the information and communications coordinator. My job was to manage their sprawling database, manage their library and archives, process memberships and donations, handle donations of books and periodicals, produce their newsletter, produce advertisements for local newspapers and magazines, and manage the printing and dispersal of miscellaneous paper literature. The operation was small, with not more than 15 core staff members, and everyone performed multiple roles, not including temporary responsibilities.

During my first staff meeting, I was overwhelmed with the pattern: names and acronyms of artists and organizations, references to materials and techniques I was

unfamiliar with. Other questions arose for me over my tenure there: why electric firing and gas firing were different, and why gas firing was preferred; why only earthenware pots seemed to receive brightly-colored glazes; why firing temperature was measured in cones, why one rough, plain-looking pot was prized and another considered amateur. Employees were entitled to a free class per quarter, so I started educating myself through classes; I thumbed through the literature and bothered my coworkers, many of whom were themselves makers, and more than happy to share their opinions. Most importantly, I handled lots of pots.

My time there was nearly two years, roughly the amount of time it takes to complete a master's degree. While I didn't come close to mastering the art form in that time, I did receive an education. Many potters' names fall neatly onto maps of technique, style, geography and history now, and materials and techniques reveal themselves through surfaces and shapes. Even the ceramic collectors' compulsion makes a bit of sense now that I've begun to accrue one of my own.

### **Potters: Training and Background**

It is probable that few people in the United States grow up chasing the dream of becoming a professional potter. Of the professional potters I interviewed for this project, only one told me that she set out (in her case, to college) with the intention of pursuing ceramic arts. Two others told me they had intended to become artists, but in drawing or painting. Four others began college pursuing more traditional majors, such

as psychology, education, or natural sciences. One fully intended on starting a career as a city fireman. For most of these, ceramic arts were something they were introduced to in school (high school, college, or art school), and found enjoyable enough to dedicate their time to. From the point of this decision, potters begin one of the paths described below to pursue training.

### **Apprenticeship**

Traditionally, pottery was a trade craft taught to new potters through an apprentice system. Some categories of potters still follow this system. In particular, potters following a folk pottery tradition, such as those following the *mingei* tradition, might choose to work as apprentices and journeymen in a pottery for an established master potter working in that tradition. Other potteries are less ideologically oriented and more profit-oriented, such as a pottery that serves a tourist clientele, or a production pottery that produces, for instance, cups with customized company logos.

In both such arrangements, there is typically a hierarchy of tasks or jobs handled by apprentices, based on seniority and/or skill level. Dennis is an example of a potter who developed his experience through the apprentice system. He described the hierarchy at the Wisconsin pottery where he worked:

I was an apprentice. I did all the shit work, I did all, you know, all that stuff. And so the next level of position was the associate, which was, the associate's position was just to make pots. They didn't do any of the . . . cleaning and packing and loading kills and all this stuff. They made pots. That was their job . . . to make pots. And so I graduated to that position of associate, and so for the second year I just was, you know, the pot maker.

Skilled apprentices and journeymen will throw pots to the master's specification.

These pots may be sold under the name of the pottery or under the apprentice's own name; some potteries assign workers a list of wares to make (e.g., 50 cups, 100 soup bowls) in the house style, but allow workers to make their own work on their own time. Less skilled workers, meanwhile, might perform menial tasks or simple labor: mixing clay and glazes, loading raw clay, firing kilns, maintaining the studio and equipment. Workers are frequently, though not always, provided housing and meals.

Typically, wages earned by apprentices, if they are earned at all, are nugatory; workers draw, as their primary reward, the experience of working in a professional pottery, learning from the master potter and other workers, having access to professional studio equipment, and the ability to hone their technique and develop their craft. Without a salary, workers who do not receive bed and board through the organization for which they work often have to seek extra employment to subsidize their living expenses and training. During his apprenticeship, Dennis tended bar in the town in which he lived to support himself. The additional job put pressure on his apprentice schedule.

[For] my job as an apprentice . . . we worked from Monday to Saturday, we worked from nine in the morning, and you had to be there AT nine o'clock. You couldn't be there five minutes late . . . We were not making any money. We were not collecting a salary. But we had to be there at nine o'clock. And then we were done at six o'clock in the evening, Monday through Saturday. In the summer we worked from Monday through Saturday, from nine am to nine pm . . . Bartending had to fit within that schedule . . . There were times that I would work around the clock, because I'd go from working in the studio and then go work at the bar, and work until three o'clock in the morning and then sometimes I had to get up at five o'clock in the morning to start a kiln and fire a gas

kill, [or] get up at five o'clock in the morning, fire a gas kiln, and then turn it off, and then go work in the bar until three or four o'clock in the morning.

Earl's apprenticeship by contrast was a residential arrangement, with food and housing expenses built into the pottery.

### **Academic Training**

The 2004 Arrowmont Survey of Utilitarian Potters, which surveyed artists participating in the Utilitarian Clay Symposium, indicated that slightly more than 90% of full-time studio potters had at least a bachelor's degree, and nearly half of all respondents reported earning a master's or above (Rosenfield, 2004). Like many professions, pottery has adapted to the modern higher education system in the United States. Ceramics have become a regular component of many undergraduate arts programs, offered alongside art forms generally accepted as "fine arts," such as drawing and painting. Even within the ceramic arts programs, including the highly respected program at Alfred University, functional pottery takes on a marginalized position within a department that inclines toward sculptural, conceptual, and decorative work. At the same time, Brian, a functional potter who attended Alfred, encountered and resisted pressure from his instructors to recognize disciplinary boundaries between functional work and sculpture. He noted the integrated roots of functional pottery and sculpture in the ceramic tradition, and in the work of his peers: "everybody in my class had seriously pursued utilitarian objects in the past. Not just dabbling, [but] seriously

pursued that. So at some point . . . every one of us had made [a] call between one or the other. I don't think any of us were truly doing anything that was really integrated."

The primary difficulty with pursuing higher education in the ceramic arts is the low return on investment for the degree. While many potters have found ways to support themselves financially with their work, pottery is very rarely a lucrative pursuit; college degrees, however, cost approximately the same regardless of discipline. When I discussed with the potters how they had afforded their education, several told me that they began their degrees at less-expensive institutions, such as two-year colleges. Several found some support through scholarships, work-study, or part-time jobs. A few mentioned being supported financially by their parents while they pursued their undergraduate degree. Several acknowledged that they still carried debt from their undergraduate degree.

All but one of the potters I spoke to had acquired, or were in the process of acquiring, a Master of Fine Arts degree in ceramic arts. While this level of academic attainment does not approach universal in the general population of professional potters, among the potters who worked, abided, or sold wares at NCC, the pursuit of a terminal degree was highly common. MFA degrees are one of the elements that distinguish art potters from production potters. The additional formal training produces work that is frequently more innovative, involving more complicated forms, finishes, and surface decorations. The social cachet of pottery changes together with the

academic background of the potter, as well. Potters who sell work nationally through the gallery and boutique networks, whose names are recognized and sought by collectors, usually have gone through graduate education. This phenomenon especially holds for younger generations of potters, who are under increasing pressure to pursue a traditional higher education. Even Dennis, the only professional potter I spoke to who did not have a college degree, said he “would really encourage” a young potter interested in pursuing the discipline professionally “to at least get their bachelor's degree.”

Several potters identified problems with pursuing the MFA, concerns that would make them hesitate to endorse the path to others. Dennis suggested that the degree could be “really harmful,” asking “the MFA kind of teaches you how to think, and teaches you how to analyze, and come up with, you know, different things, but in the long run, is it really going to help you to be more successful [and] make a living in clay?” For Dennis, the distinction noted above between MFA-trained art potters and other potters represented a key concern: the MFA process changed the nature of the work of the potter. For most other potters I spoke to, financing this degree was the primary concern. The three potters between 20 and 30, who were respectively about to start, in the process of, and newly graduated from, their graduate education, had all thought carefully about the cost of education. All three intimated the decision not to consider attending an unfunded program in ceramic arts. The three potters between 30 and 40,

all of whom were in the throes of wrestling with serious concerns about the long-term viability of selling handmade pottery for a living, all said they would not tell a young potter to pursue a graduate degree in the field if they would be taking on debt in order to do so. Finn and Gwen related the story of an acquaintance they met while working at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana who had just completed an MFA degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, and who had accrued \$50,000 in student loan debt.

Gwen: Which luckily you can defer while you're doing your residency. But, that's hanging over you.

Finn: You can have an MFA in ceramics, \$50,000 in student loans, and if you don't get a teaching job, or even if you do. . .

Gwen: That's a lot of money.

Erin: It's going to take a while.

Finn: Yeah.

Gwen: And she wasn't interested in teaching.

Without a solid job prospect, managing debt (on top of living expenses) on pottery sales alone is an unrealistic prospect for young potters. Teaching represents the ostensible objective of pursuing an MFA degree in ceramics. That said, potters who have pursued, or considered pursuing, a graduate degree, have to be realistic about the state of the academic job market in the arts. The 2008 financial crisis in the United States set off a set of public budget crises that led many colleges and universities to attempt to reduce expenses through practices such as hiring freezes. Many elected to reduce faculty positions in arts programming, which tend to be less lucrative to run and less conducive to cost-saving measures, such as increasing class size. Even when such decision-making at the expense of the arts did not take place, art faculties frequently

lost spots due to their relative lack of seniority, and the significant rates of adjunct faculty in the departments. Helena was one such worker. While she maintained her studio practice, she started teaching part-time at the University of Minnesota, which paid her by the course: “until [2009] I was teaching part time at the U, and so I was really, my income was about half of teaching and ceramics. And now since they fired all their adjuncts, I'm not at the U, and it's, it's rough. Because I have to figure out now quickly how to sort of make up for that income.” While Helena has applied for teaching jobs at other institutions, she's found little traction. She accounts the labor imbalance in part for her lack of success: “there's something like 200 and something MFAs a year in ceramics, right? So like there's no way. There's not that- there were eight jobs last year. You know?” The potters I spoke to were emphatic that a university teaching position was not to be relied upon for graduating potters.

### **Hybrid**

Most modern potters, particularly those pursuing the apprenticeship model of training, actually engage in a hybrid combination of practices. Outside of educational institutions, few would-be potters have access to the extensive equipment and other studio elements (e.g., wheels, kilns, high-voltage wiring, air filtration system, physical space) required to explore an interest in the medium. While Dennis credits his training primarily to an apprenticeship he underwent in Wisconsin, his ceramics education

actually began in high school, and continued at a community college, where he worked as a technician in the studio. Only after these experiences did he pursue apprenticeship.

While wheel-throwing is perhaps the most common technique for producing functional wares, Earl described to me a ceramic program at the art school he attended wherein the wheels were left fallow while students were asked to dedicate to handbuilding and perfecting a single pot over the course of weeks. In Earl's case, Bernard Leach's book, *A Potter's Book*, was introduced sub rosa to the class by a student. According to Earl, the book, following Leach's peasant-pottery philosophy, argues that all potters should be able to do things such as throwing 50 good pots in a day, or building a brick kiln of their own. For the class, the book was revolutionary and introduced a spirit of rebellion into the classroom, where ceramics students would sneak in after hours to experiment with wheel-throwing, to the irritation of their instructor. After completing his degree, Earl and his wife decided to pursue positions at Leach's pottery in St. Ives, England. Leach initially turned them away for a year on account of their skill level, but eventually took them on as production potters, making the pots he sold as part of his stock list.

### **Residencies**

Neither part of a formal academic program, nor part of a pottery's production shop, residencies form an alternative *curriculum vitae* item, particularly for less-established potters. Residencies are offered as a type of financial award with a

geographical requirement. While requirements vary, residencies tend to offer potters a place to work, sometimes including a place to live, or funding with which housing can be secured. Time commitments tend to be predetermined, running from a few months to two or more years. Residencies must be applied for, and are competitively awarded. Opinions varied on their utility. Finn and Gwen noted the problem with sculpture residencies at NCC on account of the cramped studio space allotted to each resident artist. On the other hand, Helena was dismissive of residencies as a viable option for a functional potter:

Because one, like why would I leave my studio. I have my whole studio set up here. Every time I've ever done a residency, nothing's turned out, because you have different kilns, you have different firings, you have different materials, the water's different. So like if you want to make a product, you'll never leave your studio. And it makes no sense. Unless you want- like residencies and fellowships are for rich people, or for people who have- academics? Who like are supposed to go off and have great thoughts? And they're for students who are trying to get into grad school.

By contrast, Carmen, as a student trying to get into grad school, found them rewarding. At the time of our conversation, she had secured residencies in Minnesota, Montana, and China.

They're definitely an experience, but this is kind of another tactic . . . for young artists. [It's a good tactic to] attach yourself to these institutions that provide residencies and support for young artists instead of trying to hash it out on your own, in the beginning. And so, going to China for me was another way to maintain my studio practice without having to work. You know I'm trying to, I'm constantly trying to adjust these, these figures of how much time I have to spend outside the studio making money, and how much time I can spend in the studio making whatever I want regardless of whether it's going to sell or not. So I'm always looking for ways to adjust that. But also, you know, I went to China for an adventure, obviously. And but always, yeah, think that these residency formats are really good ways for artists to spend the majority of their time in the studio.

Carmen was a recent college graduate without the resources to establish herself in a private studio of her own, and without the name recognition and gallery representation of a more-established artist. For her, residencies represented a way to learn from other practicing artists, to sell through a well-known ceramic arts gallery, and maintain a studio practice. The financial support from the granting institution further allowed her to practice her craft without looking for external forms of financial support, such as a part-time retail job.

### **Age/Era**

The potters I spoke to fell into four generations. Three potters I spoke to were under 30; three were between 30 and 40; one was over 50, and one was over 80. I have already discussed the relationship between age and desired educational attainment. A potter's generation also affected the intended aesthetic of their work. In ceramic circles, Minnesota developed a reputation for favoring and producing pottery in the *mingei* tradition. In keeping with *mingei's* peasant-potter tradition, these pots tend to be simple, hefty, imperfect, and humble of decoration. Every potter I spoke to expanded on the distance between this Minnesota tradition and their own work. Among these and the other potters I encountered at NCC, this *Mingeisota* aesthetic was connected to both an ideology and an era. While the earthy brown pots continued to be very popular in the sales gallery at NCC, younger potters I encountered were far more likely to experiment with decorative surface treatments, bright colors, and

eccentric forms. Part of this relationship of aesthetic and era relates to the educational background of younger potters. Young potters are highly mobile: these artists wind up moving to attend school, again to attend graduate school, and several times in between, as they pursue residencies at ceramic arts centers around the country and the globe. Every person I spoke to engaged in significant travel in their twenties, as they completed their fine arts education, pursued apprenticeships, and/or pursued residencies. Indeed, for the younger potters, NCC is frequently a way-point on this path: of the three 20 to 30 year old potters I spoke with, only Alec has returned to the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro to reside permanently. Of the other five potters I spoke to, four grew up in other parts of the country, far removed from the Minnesota clay aesthetic. As the artists who established Minnesota's reputation and pottery culture fade from influence, and younger potters drift into the area, it seems likely the *mingei* aesthetic, and Minnesota's clay culture and reputation, will continue to drift. Gwen and Finn, who settled here from Hawaii and Ohio, described the shifting tradition in the Minnesota ceramic scene.

Gwen: Minnesota pottery. . . . From Bernard Leach, to Earl, to all his students, [with] the humble brown pot or whatever, right? [That's] the way we saw it from the outside. . . . Don't you think?

Finn: . . . I also think it's very static . . . there's that clique or that world, and you can name the potters who like are in that circle, and then there's a whole lot of people outside of that too, [that] are completely unknown. [laughs] Yeah, like you know there's the Linda Christiansen [and] the Pottery Tour group basically. Bob Briscoe, and that whole group. And like there's constantly people moving here or you know, people like Helena, who grew up here and went to school and came back, who are just not part of that world at all. So I think that whole Minnesota thing's like going to end with them. [laughs] . . . And if something else continues it'll be something completely different.

Erin: So [in] 50 years in Minnesota, it's just not going to be famous for that . . . ?

Finn: It's hard to say.

Gwen: Well, it still might . . . have some sort of residual interest, you know, in ceramics.  
But. . .  
Finn: Like Motown.

Motown, of course, retains the reputation for a musical scene the moment for which has long passed. Minnesota's pottery culture remains more "niche" knowledge than Detroit's music culture, but among collectors, phenomena like the St. Croix Pottery Tour continue to fix the meaning of Minnesota pottery as humble and brown.

### **Site and Method**

The paths taken by my informants were strongly informed by the class position with which they began: individuals who came from middle-class or privileged backgrounds accrued more education, did so earlier, and often at more prestigious or distant colleges than those who were brought up in blue-collar families. After completing training, however, these class relationships grew less clear. Nearly every potter I spoke to struggled financially at points in their post-college career, and many described periods spent working at potteries for subsistence compensation. Finally, potters' education did not produce a strong relationship to their pecuniary success; education did, however, appear to coincide loosely with a potter's relative prestige, and recognition within the discipline: first, potters with advanced degrees were enabled to teach at the university level, thus reinscribing them in the context of academic pottery; second, these potters produced work with an articulate philosophy of style. Classroom

practice, art historical education, and the recurring need to refine artists' statements for competitive submissions, reproduces academic potters.

These patterns reflect Bourdieu's description of the conversion relationship between institutional cultural capital and economic capital. Economic capital can be converted into cultural capital with the added element of time (e.g., time spent acquiring a college degree), and possessing capital in one form is essential to accruing more (e.g., developing a post-graduate *curriculum vitae*). Transferring capital between modes is a venture susceptible to risk and loss, however, without assured exchange value in return. A potter may convert her or his parents' economic capital into cultural capital in the form of an education, but converting that education back into financial capital is difficult, not least because some capital is necessarily lost in the conversion (The Forms of Capital, 1986).

## Economics and Patronage in Art Pottery

Questions concerning money are present throughout the art pottery discipline. While seldom superseding aesthetic questions in the potter's mind, simmering questions of the financial variety shoot through a working potter's living concerns, either regarding the pressure to sell, or the management of secondary professions in conjunction with object-making.

This chapter takes as its premise two competing positions regarding economics, articulated here through two competing quotations. "Economics, the discipline, is everywhere, but this is because 'the economy' . . . everywhere precedes it" (Amariglio, Childers, & Cullenberg, 2009, p. 1).

One might represent economic practice as comprising a rich diversity of capitalist and non-capitalist activities and argue that the non-capitalist ones had until now been relatively 'invisible' because the concepts and discourses that could make them 'visible' have themselves been marginalised and suppressed" (Gibson-Graham, *Queer(y)ing capitalism in and out of the classroom*, 1999, p. 82).

It is true that the economy pervades our experience of the world, and it is also true that the interpretation of what constitutes economic activity is generally quite narrow. In this chapter I extend the description of art pottery's place in the economy beyond that of a good exchanged for currency. The financing of art ceramics, and the support of their producers, takes many forms, including several variations on institutional patronage. Insofar as the financial models of most arts-supporting

institutions leave them heavily reliant on individual gifts, the individual patronage of interested collectors and donors are also major sources of support for such artists. Finally, potters engage in a gift economy with one another, forming a third, non-capitalistic form of support.

### **Revenue Streams**

The economic life of potters is structured by institutional, governmental, and cultural factors. Handmade pottery is surprisingly expensive: cups can sell for upwards of \$50, teapots run easily over \$250. Out of that price, however, comes the cost of clay and (often expensive) glaze materials such as Cobalt Carbonate, firing costs (kilns can exceed 2000° F, and run hours at a time), shipping (items are only insured if double-boxed and wrapped carefully), and studio rental (at NCC, \$65-400 per month in 2010) (Studio Amenities and Access), not to mention time and labor, and that is presuming only successful firings. A bad firing – an error involving firing time or temperature, a glaze formula mishap that fuses pots to a kiln shelf, or an inexplicable bad result – can ruin weeks, or months, of work. Assuming a successful firing, potters still typically edit their output to protect their reputation, destroying any pieces deemed subpar.

Once a pot survives the edit it may be delivered to a sales gallery like the one at NCC. Artists who wish to sell work through the NCC sales gallery must first apply for the privilege. A juried review is held every two years to replace poorly selling artists with new ones. Sales gallery pots can sell quickly or linger in inventory for years; the potter

doesn't get paid until the pot moves. Once an item is sold from the NCC gallery, the potter receives 50-55% of the sale price, which is market rate for gallery sales (Tatsuda, 2010). In the end it seemed remarkable to me that any potters at all made a living solely through the sale of their work.

What I subsequently discovered was that most art potters do not; certainly, no potters make a living just through one sales gallery. Instead, artists draw revenue from a number of different sources. The potters I spoke to used sales, grants, residencies, and teaching to create a living. For retailing their work, potters are represented by a variety of galleries across the country; some participate in street fairs, locally or otherwise (out-of-state fairs incurring their own steep costs and fees); most put on their own private studio sales, the entire proceeds of which they keep. Artists often invite other artists to participate in private sales to expand the network of potential customers, and to share costs such as food, wine, and postcard printing. Work also gets sold from gallery exhibitions and invitationals, art crawls and studio tours, and on commission directly from customers. Some potters conduct online sales, through personal websites or through online marketplaces like Etsy.com. One potter I talked to manages a pottery storefront at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival.

Most potters I met at NCC, however, did not make a living selling their work alone. Many held part-time jobs – some as grocery stockers or janitors, though lots of the ones I met worked at NCC. The exhibitions manager, sales gallery manager,

education coordinator, facilities coordinators, sales gallery assistants, materials technician, and even the janitor all made pots. The materials technician job was considered an artist residency – in exchange for stocking, mixing, and milling the clay, managing the glaze ingredients and other materials, the job-holder received a funded studio space and materials allowances, in addition to a salary, and was not permitted to stay on past two years.

Most commonly, the dedicated art potters I met subsidized their income through teaching, or hoped to do so. New, unestablished potters working through NCC usually started through jobs with a low need for name-recognition, by teaching children at summer camps or teaching outreach classes at area schools and community centers. Seasoned teachers led the regular curriculum of community classes for adults – standard fare such as beginner wheel classes, though the right teacher and subject could attract students to less common fare. Popular and established teachers could attract a regular stable of students, some enrolling with the same teacher each quarter for years. A potter whose work generated a following of collectors might lead a slide lecture; one with a well-developed signature style might be asked to lead a workshop demonstrating their method. Most of the potters I met had (or subsequently pursued) a graduate degree in pottery. The MFA degree qualified them to pursue university teaching positions, which some of them did. University teaching provided a more stable

financial foundation for some potters, though those in lecturer positions at the University of Minnesota experienced job cuts in the past two years.

Finally, potters brought in money through fellowships, residencies, and grants. This form of income was episodic and unreliable, but potentially substantial: winners of the McKnight Artist Fellowships for Ceramic Artists awards received \$25,000 dollars (2010 McKnight Artist Fellowships). As noted earlier, young and unestablished artists in particular develop their careers by serially pursuing residencies at clay studios around the country or the world. Traveling allows artists to gain exposure, to learn from other potter communities, and to live cheaply while they develop their skill, often working for the facility in exchange for fee remittance. The Archie Bray Foundation, one of the most prominent residency programs in the U.S., asks potters to “help out with various tasks” and pay for their own materials, firing, and housing, in exchange for space to work their craft in a community of other dedicated art potters, and the opportunity to sell their work in the Bray’s sales gallery (Archie Bray Foundation Residency Information). The Bray also dispenses fellowships and scholarships to potters based on merit and need. In some ways, the residency system carries echoes of the traditional potter apprenticeship program, wherein a student would study with a master potter sometimes for years, helping in the studio and sometimes learning to duplicate the master’s pots for sale (a phenomenon known as production pottery).

Like the apprenticeship system, though, residencies involve an application process. Even artists interested in renting an unfunded studio space at NCC or the Bray must go through an application process, in addition to paying rent on their space. A studio on-site at NCC entitles an artist to access to the kilns and the glaze room. When artists plan to fire, though, they must reserve space and time in a kiln, for which they are assessed firing fees to compensate for the fuel usage. Glaze materials too must be accounted and paid for; the pigments involved can be quite expensive. Clay too is available for a price.

Most potters could not afford to limit themselves to one revenue stream. Aggressive young art potters engaged in a constant cycle of pot production, slide photography (an art in itself), and application submission, in addition to keeping up with side jobs and examining other potters' work.

### **Institutional Funding**

Based on its most recent Annual Report, NCC took in over \$1.4 million in 2009. Of that amount, earned income amounted to 58%, with individual and institutional donations making up the rest. Of the \$612,620 received as donated funds, individual donors – generally those who signed up as members – provided \$65,000. The tax return for 2009 indicates over a \$1 million from contributions and grants, but much of this income is restricted – earmarked by donors for specific artist fellowships, for instance,

or to be released over the course of a three-year period. (Northern Clay Center - Annual Report, 2010).

Regarding the earned income, it is worth pointing out that the sales gallery at NCC operates at a loss – over \$66,000 in 2009. Other income sources, namely education, outreach, and studio rentals, are subsidized in part by donors. The Fogelberg Fellowship supports two studio spaces; the McKnight Residency Grant, one; and one studio spot is funded by an anonymous donor. Scholarships are available for interested students with financial need, and educational outreach events at schools and community organizations, while sometimes paid by the organization, are often subsidized by donations or grants. The Annual Report indicates that \$411,300 was disbursed by NCC to individual potters in 2009, by way of teaching fees, sales commissions, and artists' grants, with an additional \$9,000 in the form of subsidized studio space (Northern Clay Center - Annual Report, 2010). Of that amount, however, the subsidized studios and artist grants come to NCC in the form of earmarked grants from donors; only the sales commissions and teaching fees are generated by the operation itself. NCC does support some artists by providing them with hourly jobs at NCC, though since the sales gallery and exhibition galleries are not self-supporting through sales, these jobs too are compensated indirectly through other income streams. NCC's existence, then, is substantially premised on financial contributions from a series of benefactors, including corporate contributors and charitable foundations.

Financial relationships are fundamentally social relationships. To better clarify these relationships, Viviana Zelizer distinguished between different ways to categorize any form of monetary exchanges: “as *compensation* (direct exchange), as *entitlement* (the right to a share) and as *gift* (one person’s voluntary bestowal on another)” (1996, p. 482). She further articulates the different social relationships presumed and produced by each form of exchange:

Money as compensation implies an equal exchange of values and a certain distance, contingency, bargaining, and accountability among the parties. Money as an entitlement implies strong claims to power and autonomy by the recipient. Money as a gift *implies subordination and arbitrariness*. [...] On the whole, entitlements and gifts imply a more durable social relation between them than does compensation. (1996, pp. 482, emphasis added)

Financial contributions from individual or institutional givers would be classified in Zelizer’s system as “gifts” – indeed, donations are referred to as “gifts” by NCC itself (e.g., on the “Donate” page of the website). Elsewhere in the organizational system, payments appear, in the form of compensation to artists for teaching, or performing hourly work, or commission checks for sold pottery. Entitlements appear in the form of member benefits: members receive discounts on purchases, classes, and workshops, among other benefits, and the basic membership levels are not tax-deductible (Northern Clay Center - Give). The gift-based economy of NCC, and the potters by extension, puts into tension the artists’ basic desire to live and work autonomously.

Analyzing NCC’s system of financial exchange as a network of social significance reveals a number of socially complex and culturally-contingent financial decisions.

Board members, for instance, are expected to make significant annual gifts to NCC; many are invited to serve based in part on a presumption of their ability to contribute. Board members are also expected to network on behalf of NCC, inviting donations and purchases from their networks of acquaintances, or from their places of businesses, many of which appear among NCC's institutional donors. In exchange, board members become part of a new elite social network – that of the art patrons who form the Board of NCC. In exchange for their donations, Board members and other wealthy patrons also accrue a form of cultural capital through their association, by way of the organization, with art and artists. Engaging with the NCC space allows competency to be “acquired simply by contact with works of art” and exposure to their language and codes (Bourdieu, Introduction, 1984, p. 5). By earning a plurality of financial support through the gift system, NCC, and in turn the artists who depend on it, rely on a form of income that is highly contingent, arbitrary, and bound in social meaning.

### **The Consumer: Collectors and Prices**

Potters depend on collectors of various sorts for their sales-related income, but the relationship between potter, collector, pot, and price are complex and contingent. As noted in chapter 2, the relationship between potter and collector is bound to class position, cultural capital, and a romanticized model, shared by both, of free labor.

Some collectors follow particular potters; others a pot form (e.g., only teapots); others, a particular style of work such as *mingei*. Some potters attract loyal followings

from individuals, who follow the potter's career and purchase their work repeatedly.

Most potters are themselves collectors of pottery: it is common for a potter's kitchen to be furnished with handmade ceramics made by other makers. Most also develop a keen sense of the aficionados of their own work. Dennis, who exhibits work at a number of street fairs over the summer, has developed a following of customers loyal to his work.

Dennis's experience with his own collectors' attraction to pottery, art, and himself as a representation of both, indicates the affective relationship many collectors have with pottery. The affective association is one made by potters themselves, who not only collect pottery themselves, but build a way of life around pottery. The potters I spoke to frequently mentioned feeling an attraction to the "romantic" lifestyle of the artist, or feeling an aversion to the typical jobs available in the white-collar workforce.

Most potters lack the economic privilege of their customers. While potters have their own sprawling personal collections of handmade pottery, a significant portion of this collection often comes as gifts from other potters, or through trades. Beyond the gift economy, many potters simply prioritized pottery as among their chief financial indulgences.

Collectors have a class position that is distinct from most potters. In 2007 NCC organized a show titled *Magnificent Obsessions*. The show presented work held in private collections from the Twin Cities, drawing on work from the collections of individuals with ongoing relationships with the organization, such as membership of the

Board of Directors. The six collections involved included work by historic and famous clay artists of interest to ceramic aficionados generally, but it also demonstrated the collectors' global travels, and demonstrated the cultural education that the collectors possessed. Copy from the exhibition stated that "The objects from their collections showed not only the range of possibilities for expression in clay, but also what happens when individuals apply a balance of mind and heart to the decisions about what to acquire" (Northern Clay Center - 2007 Exhibitions, 2007). This pronouncement elevates the act of consumption itself to a form of intellectual or curatorial work, amounting to what Colin Campbell describes as a form of "craft consumption": "it does not normally involve the physical 'creation' of a product. Rather what is actually 'created' is an 'ensemble' or a 'putting together' of products, each of which may itself be a standardized or mass-produced item" (34). Campbell names collecting specifically as an example of this form of consumption, which imparts on the consumed objects "a new meaning and significance" through their juxtaposition with other consumed items (34).

The pronouncement from the NCC exhibition catalog also attributes to these collectors the 'pure' gaze: "purified, first of all, of reference to economic value" (Bourdieu, Introduction, 1984, p. 3), which goes unmentioned in the copy, yet remains an element of primary importance in the shaping of both show and collections. The line praises the collectors' "balance of mind and heart," but does not mention the financial balance that collectorship requires; rather, it erases the prerequisite of financial means

to the exercise of intellect and passion, or rather, taste. Not only are financial means necessary at the point of selection and purchase, they are also necessary for developing the education and cultural capital needed to desire to acquire ceramic art at all. Pierre Bourdieu describes consumption as itself a part of the communication process, arguing that “art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded,” and that knowledge of this code is necessary even for aesthetic enjoyment alone (1984, p. 2). By means of their personal collections, ceramic collectors are able to communicate to their peers their particular cultural cultivation, which is an expression of their class position.

### **Price**

Potters are conscious of the class position of their collectors, as well as their own class status. For this reason, pricing is a point of tension for potters: according to Carmen, dealing with price-setting is a matter of constant negotiation.

[T]his is a confusing conversation that artists and potters and craftspeople have all the time about how much things should cost, and whether or not we should make them really cheap so that everybody will buy them, or whether we should make them really expensive because they're difficult to make and they take a lot of time, or just so that we can make a living off of it or whatever. (Carmen, 2010)

Margins for handmade work are tight, yet pots of analogous use that are mass-manufactured can be sold for significantly lower prices. Mid-market customers unfamiliar with art pottery are faced with sticker shock. For the high end, however, high prices are not a barrier to purchase, but rather a mark of exclusivity. Art markets

presume a relationship between price and quality, or the prestige of the work. This pricing system causes problems for potters particularly in the context of the Minnesota pottery market. As mentioned earlier, the *mingei* folk art philosophy strongly influenced the Minnesota pottery scene, not least with regard to pot pricing. The philosophy maintains that pots should be affordable for the public: they should be produced in volume, quickly and competently made, and austere decorated. Not all local potters share this philosophy, yet they are judged in its context. Dennis, whose production volume approached that of a production potter, explained the difficulty of producing, and pricing, work in an environment with a low price tolerance:

I live in a, in a land where the philosophy that's been laid down by my forefathers is that pottery should be affordable for the masses to consume, and to purchase, and to buy. And that it doesn't matter whether it's, you know, economically profitable for the artist, but that's the way it should be for people to afford, and so that you should be making pottery for the love of making pottery, and you do something else for your living. And being an artist, a clay artist who doesn't have that luxury, I make pottery to, to sell and to make a profit, and to make a living from. [...] [Earl] sells teapots for 67 dollars. [Earl] has been making pots for 50 something years. Internationally recognized clay artist. Work sells for much more than that on eBay. But locally... sells teapots for 67 dollars. I can't sell teapots for 67 dollars. I mean, my teapots begin at twice that much, at least 125. [...] Randy J\_\_\_\_\_, who is a local clay artist internationally recognized clay artist, his teapots sell for 1,000 dollars. Mark P\_\_\_\_\_'s teapots sell for 1,000 dollars. But [Earl]'s sell for 67 dollars. I don't know how you kind of navigate that, but I have to sell work that supports my way of living. [...] And I can't sell things for a fraction of what they really cost to make, because I love to make them.

Because the work is already expensive for a mid-market consumer, Dennis gets pushback from customers when he sets higher prices, despite increases in his fixed costs such as clay, firing fuel, and cost of living. Carmen, in contrast, maintains that people without means do not buy handmade pottery regardless of the price point, so pricing

for the bottom of the market is unnecessary: “the low end of the spectrum I see is maybe 20 dollars for a mug, and then the high end of the spectrum is like, maybe 90. And it’s still the same people that buy those things, you know. People without disposable income don’t buy handmade ceramics.”

Some potters do share the *mingei* value of pots for the people. Earl maintained a studio practice alongside a university teaching career; upon becoming a full-time potter at retirement and living off sales alone, he claims his income rose, despite never once raising prices on his wares in 50 years. Selling pots “as inexpensively as possible” was part of Earl’s philosophy, which he rationalized as keeping them accessible, but also as a way of liquidating production, which he implies is incessant and unbound to intrinsic costs: “if I make 600 pots, and fire them, and people can't afford to buy them, what am I going to do when I make the next 600? I, I'm finally going to be inundated with pots, you know? [...] No, I want to get rid of pots” (Earl, 2010). Earl does not mention overhead or materials costs, nor is he driven to raise his prices to maintain reputation or exclusivity; his reputation is already quite solid, and his work can command higher prices. Pottery as Earl describes practicing it is less a financial enterprise and more an exercise rooted in ideology or ritual.

Carmen, Brian, and several other potters expressed varying levels of irritation over the disjunction between their intended audience, and the audience they actually catered to, on account of the cost of their wares. Brian finds it dispiriting that “the only

people that will buy my pots are people who can afford them” (Brian, 2010). Carmen rationalizes that by making some work for a high-end collector’s market, “People will spend more money on them and then I can make smaller pots that I can afford to give away to the people that are my intended audience” (Carmen, 2010). Carmen deals with the disjunction between her intended and actual audiences by making monetary value for the work contingent on the consumer, their class, and their relationship to the artist.

Even being financially independent is aspirational for young potters. Recent potter graduates have to find an apprenticeship, studio tech position, or marginal work to support themselves. Gwen discussed finishing college and moving to a new town and signing on to work at an art guild that provided lodging and meals in exchange for her labor as a production potter (“eight hours a day, six days a week”). This job suited her until she realized the place was essentially a religious cult. Finn interjected to explain the desperation of the new pottery graduate.

Finn: A lot of people who do ceramics like especially when you're just getting out of school will just like apply for anything. [...] Like Peter's Valley I didn't get paid. They housed you. And then you got to eat in the cafeteria twice a day during the week. [If] you want to keep working, because the equipment is so expensive, and it's competitive for a lot of stuff...

Erin: So you need an institution to be affiliated with in order to have a studio, really?

Finn: Yeah. [...] I mean there are people who... went a completely different route, and honestly I don't see how they did it [...] Like setting up their own studio... buying lands... I don't know if... the property value was that different back then, or what. But it just didn't seem possible. (Finn, 2010)

While Brian accepts financial austerity, the work he produces is large, elaborate, and highly ornamental. His teachers encouraged him to price his work up, while he pushed to keep parts of his collection affordable to average consumers. While his work is

stylistically and economically different from Earl's, his work is still driven by philosophy and class considerations manifested aesthetically:

I think that there's a lot of social class in my work. [...] I love ornament, you got to know I love ornament.... And I think a lot, I think critically about a lot of ornamental stuff. [For] the most part, all the ornament I see is very labor-intensive. It's very obvious that that labor is there. It's things like symmetry. [...] Things are just so labored over and they're so expertly crafted. And I think about what that must mean. You know, okay, so I can afford a craftsperson that can do that tight of work. So what if, ornament on an object was super-squishy, and messy, and sloppy? Well what does that say about you, if that's the ornament that you can afford? [There] are places where I'm giving it my craftsman's all. I'm trying to make that thing as tight and awesome as I can, but there're other places where I'm making...

I'm sort of helping that class war, there's sort of this little class struggle in my work between somebody who's trying to attain that status, and live up to that... all the indications they have reached that status, they have achieved that sort of level of decorum, versus somebody who's maybe faltering in that. You know that they're sort of trying to build up this façade of wealth and status and it's just not working. You're just seeing all the gaps and you're seeing all the holes (Brian, 2010).

Value in functional art pottery is a complex question. Monetary assignments of value are ambiguous, complex, and highly contingent. Payment for work is not without social and emotional meaning; audience and pricing are not without political intent. Much of potters' own collections perpetuate themselves through barter or gift economy, both in spite of and because of the high market value of work. By electing to become potters, individuals sacrifice financial autonomy in exchange for autonomy of labor; by sacrificing economic status, they accrue cultural and intellectual status. Wages based solely on pottery sales, still the ideal model for most potters, remain distressingly low for most potters.

For several potters including Brian, the matter of social class arose most acutely when settling on the pricing for their work. Pricing became a locus for this conversation,

because the price of a pot becomes the boundary between the potter and the consumer, which is to say, someone maintaining an often-precarious income directly from their labor, and someone who has sufficient disposable income for a non-essential good. Pricing becomes a fraught affair on two levels. First, potters struggled to negotiate pricing their work appropriately for the labor and materials invested (together with overhead, such as exorbitant shipping costs and gallery mark-up when work was sold through a third party like NCC), with the prices their consumers expected to pay. Second, some, particularly young, potters struggled with the idea that their work was financially inaccessible to people like themselves.

At NCC, potters periodically managed this tension through gifting friends and associates with work, or through exchanges in kind. New potters especially are uncomfortable committing their work to monetary terms. Carmen once had me set my own price for a piece of her work, and Alec once adamantly rejected payment when I attempted to do the same for one of his pieces. Brian mentioned battling with his faculty over the prices of his work during his graduate show:

It does bug me [that poor people can't afford my work]. And I got a lot of flak from it when I put my show up, and I put up a price list. You know it was, you know, I had a lot of sort of discourses with my faculty about what my prices were, because I didn't want them to be so absurd. . . . I wanted them to be more affordable. And I actually did make work. I didn't make cups and bowls but I made small jars in my show that I hoped that anyone that really wanted them could afford. And I made them because I wanted some more accessible work in the show.

Among handmade wares, cups and bowls tend to be the most affordable; high-end forms tend to be large pieces like platters, or complex forms like tureens, ewers, and

teapots. As such, it is not uncommon for potters and enthusiasts to accrue cup collections, as relatively affordable ways to acquire samples of diverse potters' work. Helena described her prices: "the cups were \$45, and the bowls were like \$60 and the plates I think I had at \$75? So, you know, it's under \$100, which is sort of like the magical thing." These prices are retail, however, and galleries like NCC keep 50% of the sale. When asked, she said she would need to double these prices to recoup her labor investment. Earl, on the other hand, works to keep his work accessible to average people by keeping output high and prices low; he has not raised his prices in 50 years, despite the fact that his work commands substantially higher prices on the secondary market. When I asked him why he maintains this particular arrangement, he told me, "it's to make [the pots] accessible to people. I mean, I don't want to sit and make a lot of p- if I make 600 pots, and fire them, and people can't afford to buy them, what am I going to do when I make the next 600? I, I'm finally going to be inundated with pots . . . . No, I want to get rid of pots." Earl is in the unique position of knowing that every piece he makes for sale will turn over quickly on the strength of his reputation in the area. As Helena indicates above when she argues that "no one really wants the stuff in the end," other potters have considerably more trouble liquidating their inventory.

Colin Campbell argues that activities like "collecting, gifting, or stylizing . . . effectively 'negat[e]' the product's status as a commodity" (pp. 26-27). While Campbell's position maintains that consumption frequently becomes a form of craft

itself, I argue that the nature of the labor of the professional craftsperson enable the boundaries of economic production, collection, consumption, and social exchange to become ambiguous. While a line-worker at Chrysler could not produce and gift a car, or even a car part, for a friend or acquaintance in need, potters can make a piece of work as a gift or give a piece in trade for another useful service, like photography or website assistance, and frequently do.

### **The Hourly Wage Question and the Cass Position of Potters**

While artisan potters are afforded higher status on account of their self-directed careers and their status as cultural producers, they are seldom compensated financially in accordance with these social markers. Potters seldom break out the precise hourly work-rates and expenses for their trade, but the numbers can be revealing. When I spoke with Helena, she was producing work for NCC's annual fundraising sale, the American Pottery Festival (APF). She indicated that the prices she'd set for her work were not commensurate with the labor and skill she had invested into her work.

So like for . . . APF I'm making this stuff but honestly I'll get paid a lot less than, like I'm underselling what it is . . . I'm going to sell it at the prices that everyone sort of, at the high end of the prices that everyone sells stuff at. But it's still . . . for the amount of time I'm probably making, I don't know, \$5 an hour at the most? [So] part of me is trying to figure that out, because I feel like this is not sustainable.

Between overhead and commission, Helena had a difficult time making pottery financially worthwhile. Dennis described similar tension in managing his financial

situation, as the rising cost of fuel affected the costs of firing, shipping wares, and transporting clay.

I have to sell work that supports my way of living. I have to pay my insurance, I have to pay my child support, I have to pay my rent, I have to pay my natural gas bills, I have to pay my electric bills, I have to pay my clay bills, I mean, this all costs money. And I can't sell things for a fraction of what they really cost to make, because I love to make them. [I have] to pay for things. So I, I try to keep things within a reasonable level, that people can afford, [but] I have to charge a certain price that makes it profitable to continue [to] make pots . . . I've been able to keep things status quo [during the economic downturn], but it's [cutting into my] profit margin. Everything costs more. Insurance, the clay . . . I use porcelain clay . . . Four years ago, it's like, I don't know, like \$43 per 100 lbs. It's now . . . \$52 per 100 lbs. . . . When you start dealing with ton prices and stuff it [adds up]. Everything's more money. Natural gas is more money. Electricity is more money. Homeowner's insurance is more money. Gasoline is double what it was. You know, traveling to shows, hotels, eating out, the whole thing.

Two perspectives can be drawn from the myth of the artisan contrasted with the economic pressures under which they labor. One perspective, the traditional economic interpretation, asserts that their economic position is precarious out of proportion with the other markers of social position which they carry, such as educational attainment, cultural production, aesthetic code-interpretation, or skilled labor. This position would argue that the labor of the potter is not valued in contemporary United States culture, and their financial position will trend more volatile as wealth continues to concentrate in smaller and smaller proportions of the population. The romanticism attached to this lifestyle, the economic interpretation argues, forms a sort of consolation prize for hard labor and tenuous income; in other words, a sort of cultural dupedom.

A counter-perspective argues that the economic status of potters is substantially beside the point with regard to the more important matter of quality of life. Every

potter I spoke to elected to enter the field because some part of the work gave them pleasure, and many seemed to see the practice as a way of life as much as a career. By privileging the economic interpretation of their lifestyle, the scholar forces a capitalist market logic onto an incompatible system, producing a reductive analysis that ignores the non-capitalist economic activity, much less the productive, non-economic activity these workers perform. Such a move prioritizes an economic system with which artisan pottery is incompatible, and of which artisan craft serves as a rebuke and a challenge.

Helena discussed the importance of a potter's ability to sell the work she makes, highlighting the importance of maintaining the capitalist perspective for independent potters:

I think people often do that, and . . . in retrospect, [I feel like] they've got it. They understand. How to make a product, and how to sell it. . . . I look at all the successful functional potters of my age or era, [and] for the most part, they make sort of a caricature of their work by the time they get to the point where they can make enough to make a living off of it. Right? Like, Ayumi H\_\_\_\_, . . . is she happy doing woodland creatures on her pots every time? I'm not sure. Maybe? But you know, at this point there's not a lot of difference between the work she made five years ago and her current work.

Helena's comments point to a tension in the artisan potter's existence: balancing their own authentic expression with the need to maintain a commercially viable practice. A potter who becomes known and followed for producing a particular style of work risks alienating customers upon transitioning to something new. During our conversation, Helena discussed the possibility of adjusting her trademark pottery style to something faster to produce, for her lower-priced work. Such a move might appear to compromise

the authenticity of the new, adapted work. On the other hand, such a move might allow her to maintain a viable income through the sale of her work alone, thus affording her to more authentically claim the identity of a professional potter.

### **Economics and patronage**

The economics of functional art pottery do not articulate well to a rational capitalist logic: as a market commodity, art pottery fails because it cannot be sustained by market processes alone: in order to sustain their output of saleable pots, potters rely on alternate revenue streams, from part- or full-time jobs, to private grants, to public assistance. Yet functional pottery production cannot be constituted as a practice of resistance, because the trade at its core continues to be fundamentally a capitalist exchange. The practice and consumption of handmade pottery are highly socially contingent: both depend on social networks of patrons, socially-obligated patrons and donors, cultural encodings of status, taste, and education, political, nostalgic, and affective associations. Finally, not all exchanges are remunerated. Limiting the discussion of economy to capitalist economy, however, denies the thick layer of economic behavior that takes place outside the pecuniary economy. This extra-capitalist economic behavior by its existence presents a challenge to the notion of capitalism as inevitable. In that sense, pottery's failure to thrive economically might represent a partial story.

### **Potter as Worker, Potter as Supplement: Selling the Myth**

“Whether the underground espouses an overt politics or not, it is set on being culturally radical”

- (Sarah Thornton, 1996, p. 129).

This chapter addresses the question of the artisans’ relationship with their labor, the lifestyle in which they engage, and the social position afforded by that lifestyle. It looks first at their motivations for pursuing an artisan occupation. Next, I explore two prevailing myths that emerged through interviews with my informants: the myth of the artisan, and the myth of the cubicle worker. Finally, I examine the curious social position of the artisan potter, and assert that potters and their lifestyles become incorporated as a sort of supplement to the goods which they produce. This section argues that potters perform several kinds of labor. Beyond the construction of pots, potters, through their status as artists living a particular lifestyle, enact a service to their consumers.

One of the texts I consulted to understand the role of labor among artisan workers was Robert Lee’s “The Coolie and the Making of the White Working Class (Lee R. G., 1999). Lee describes the organization of laborers under the philosophy of “free

labor,” which is to say, independent labor performed by autonomous craftspeople. Unlike the partisans of the Free Labor movement, however, potters are not avoiding proletarian labor so much as postindustrial white-collar work, and the wages of the job they’re pursuing were at times acknowledged to be lower than those of the jobs they’re fleeing.

Carmen notes that being an artist is for her “a rejection of mainstream culture, of popular culture, of being a wage-slave, of capitalism as I see it,” though she notes that while her political position and values have led her to become an artist, her work is “pretty poor in actually serving any of my political agendas” (Carmen, 2010). Brian plays with class and price in a different way. Like Carmen, he views his career choice as an alternative to, or an escape from, corporate culture. He acknowledges financial means as a trade-off for this lifestyle; however, he finds value in his productive and creative capacity:

It’s like when you go out and you work your job, here you work your corporate job where you make all this money and you can afford to buy a thousand dollar pot. But I can make a thousand dollar pot. You know what I mean? So it’s sort of like, you know, so who’s the big shit now? [It’s like] ‘yeah, I may be broke forever because I chose to do this, but I can *do* something.’ [...] And I know that’s a really pompous and sort of arrogant perspective to have, but in some respects it’s true.... I want to make things that I can’t afford (Brian, 2010).

As a potter, Brian has a financial expectation of never getting rich. For Brian, economic capital is irrelevant to the type of capital he is attempting to accrue; rather, Brian is accruing cultural capital. While he is unlikely to ever reach the purchasing power of some of his customers, Brian can outmatch them through embodied cultural capital.

Brian related an experience from graduate school that betrays discomfort, as well as a complex relationship of cultural capital and taste:

There was this guy that came, and it's so gross, but like he's been buying pots at Alfred for years and years and years, so he's like this big shit collector guy, whatever, I don't care. But he came in, and we're all supposed to sort of line up at our studio doors like we're prostitutes, you know, and he's going to walk the line and see which work he's going to buy. And it was funny to hear him like talk about my work, because he totally didn't get it. [...] And maybe that's kind of an asshole thing to say, but I felt like he didn't really get it. But he bought something, and so, it's sort of this like, yeah, he's super rich, but he just didn't get it. (Brian, 2010)

In this anecdote, Brian makes clear the power afforded the collector by dint of his financial position, and his influence at the school. The story also makes clear, however, that the collector had failed: his ability to decode meaning in Brian's work was lacking, creating a mistranslation that positions the collector as culturally incompetent beside those with the ability to see the "true" meaning of the work – beside Brian himself. As a purchaser and aficionado of Brian's work, though, the collector may choose to imbue the work with his own received meaning, but it will be outside the preferred meanings identified by Brian and his school. Brian did not correct this collector's interpretation partly to retain control over his own embodied cultural capital, but also because he is economically reliant on collectors such as this, both to buy his work, and to develop a market for his work by deeming it, through their own interest, worthy of others' interest.

### **Motivation**

Erin: What are your political or social motivations for doing handmade ceramics, if any?

Finn: Hmm.

Gwen: Hmm.

Finn: We are kind of hippies.

Gwen: [laughs] it's kind of a crazy romantic thing to do.

One of the questions I asked every potter I spoke to interrogated their motivations for producing handmade pottery. In particular, I asked them whether their political or social belief systems motivated their decision to make this their career. In my experience at NCC, potters often seemed to have thought deeply about culture, politics, and their particular role in society; asking this question, however, taught me that many potters did not claim to factor such rumination into their professional self-concept, and most of the potters I interviewed demurred at this question. A frequent refrain I received was, "I don't think I'm saving the world" by making pottery. Helena expanded on that idea: "I don't think I'm saving the world by making ceramics, I feel like in some ways it's a really idiotic thing to do, given the environmental state of the world, and the fact that no one really wants the stuff in the end, [and] there's some big questions about . . . the merit of doing it." Throughout the interviews, the potters I spoke to were happy to elucidate certain ideals of lifestyle and socio-cultural position to which they subscribed, but they did not articulate these lifestyle ideals as containing an explicit political objective.

Time and labor flexibility, and the ability to independently produce a complete utilitarian object, represents a source of pleasure that my informants repeatedly brought up. For these potters, the lifestyle that comes with pottery was a motivating

factor for adopting the profession. Gwen noted that the particulars of this lifestyle varied even from that of other types of artist: “I think [the lifestyle] differs from other artists . . . . Other artists are maybe thinking that they want to you know, give talks around the world and have big gallery shows in New York, or something like that.” As a craft form, ceramics continue to maintain an uneasy relationship with the fine arts; likewise, individual potters seldom seek or receive the kind of celebrity granted to prominent artists in disciplines such as painting or electronic arts. Rather than being driven by money or celebrity, potters are frequently driven to the field by the retiring lifestyle of the potter. There is a discipline-wide tendency to desire to “opt out” of mainstream United States culture, and a tendency to exhibit strong resistance to mainstream professional life. Throughout the interviews, the potters I spoke to described their own lifestyle, or the lifestyle to which they aspired, in contrast to a quintessential United States way of life which they rejected. These two lifestyles became two themes, one describing artisan labor, and one describing non-artisan contemporary white-collar labor. Through the interviews, these themes coalesced as competing narratives, which I limn below. I term these “the myth of the cubicle worker” and “the myth of the artisan.”

### **The Myth of the Artisan**

So I've been reading Laura Ingalls Wilder books to my daughter. . . . There's this great line I was reading . . . the train's not going to come through, so they get these magazines in the mail, [and] they're worried they won't have any Christmas presents, so they say,

well let's save them until Christmas, and then we'll give them to ourselves to make sure we have Christmas presents, right? They say oh, it's such a good lesson in self-denial; it'll make us stronger, right? And I was like reading this, and I was like. . . good God, that's like my thing, you know? [They're] hard-working . . . the harder the task, the [stronger and more] virtuous you are, [and] I really think like that. [Lazy] people cannot be potters. . . . I like that things are made by hand. And I think it's like a value, like I'm trying to teach my kids, you know? [How] to do things, and . . . how to teach your hands how to do things, and how to be knowledgeable in multiple ways . . . . There's a cultural value to what you're doing, a material cultural value to making stuff, you know, you're continuing on something that has been done by people for 10,000 years. [But] I don't think this culture values it much. (Helena)

Whether or not the potters I spoke to ascribed to the *mingei* aesthetic that is associated with Minnesota pottery, most of them described some ideals of lifestyle that closely resemble the *mingei* peasant potter philosophy. The reasons for this arrangement are half rhetoric, tradition, and romance, and half the result of economic pressures.

The myth of the artisan potter places them in a rural pottery. The rural potter owns a piece of property in a rural area, where a homestead and a studio can be built. Along with the studio, the potter builds a brick kiln, powered by gas, with which to fire their wares. The potter may choose to sell work through galleries, shows, street fairs, or other formats, but almost certainly there is a home-based arrangement by which pots can be sold directly to consumers from the studio.

One of the original models of this lifestyle in Minnesota, Earl states that his and his wife's decision to settle on a small farm property had less to do with the romance of the lifestyle and rural environs, and more to do with the comparatively low cost of the property, which had been portioned off until the remaining piece was too small to farm

effectively. Given the cost structure of selling pottery, living and working in very rural areas is sometimes the only way for a potter to keep costs low enough to establish a long-term independent practice. Many potters who settle in Minnesota and Wisconsin do so in remote areas. The St. Croix Pottery Tour represents an example of this: artists dispersed around the Upper St. Croix River Valley collectively decided to market their work through an annual weekend event for pottery enthusiasts. While the studios are commutable from the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro, executing the entire tour represents a significant amount of driving.

Of course, many potters live in the metro area. Even these potters, however, aspire to living largely independently within the confines of their property. Finn discussed his and Gwen's own living arrangement, within the metro: "we garden in our backyard; we bought an old house thinking that we'd do all sorts of stuff to . . . fix it up. So there is kind of that like romantic, back-to-the-earthiness, even though we're not like completely out of touch with society or anything, it's there." Helena, who lives in the metro with her husband and two children, recently received an artist's project grant to build a studio on her property, partially to conserve time as she balances the demands of the studio with the obligations of rearing two children. Since I spoke to Alec, he has finished his MFA degree, moved back to live with his partner, and begun converting their suburban garage into a studio space. They plan to hold studio sales at their house.

The myth of the artisan describes a lifestyle built on handmade processes. Handmaker artisans do their own cooking, baking, brewing, carpentry, sewing, vegetable gardening, and canning. According to the narrative, artisans do these things because they value slow culture and the sensuous parts of life. Artisans appreciate the accoutrements of the pre-modern life and the involvement of human activity in the generation of useful things, and they distrust the artifacts produced by the modern United States culture, which are of uncertain provenance, purity, and quality. Artisans are process-oriented people who enjoy tasks that incorporate multiple steps.

Alec returned to these subjects throughout our conversation. For him, the relationship between creator, process, and product were inextricable.

Use that vegetable oil as an example. It's like okay, I'm cooking this zucchini tonight, and I know where it came from, I know how much I paid for it, and I know how much that farmer got for it, and I know what he or she is going to do with that money, and what it's going to do for his family . . . Having an understanding of the network. [It's] just connectedness, like being able to understand like every little ring on the tree. When you're making something . . . versus when you are buying something at Target . . . when you go through [the] consuming part of it, like the buying part, you meet the person that made it, and there's a [direct] connection there . . . you know there is like some evolution [from] start to finish . . . when you go from buying to using, you know like the steps that you go through, you know? And like as superficial as that sounds, well it's actually like a pretty special process . . . If you go to Target [you don't know] where in China that thing was drip-cast, dried, fired, and shipped over . . . We take that for granted now, because everything [is] really sped up, it's like very fast time versus slow time . . . If you lived a lifestyle where [say, you] live off the land. You know . . . where everything started and finished . . . It's special, you know? If you don't have, like, you got to like work to have that lifestyle like nowadays. Like literally you do have to work to have that . . . To have a connection to the evolution [of] all the elements of your life . . . to understand like how your life works basically, [or] where your clothes came from . . . You didn't make them, like where'd they come from?

Alec's sentiments were echoed by several other potters. As the quotation at the beginning of this section illustrates, Helena highly values the ability to produce the

useful materials of life by hand, and she is bringing up her children to be able to do these things, following the value system from the Scandinavian ancestors who settled in the upper Midwest. Earl's value preference for handmade things directly informs his aesthetic tastes. With handmade pots, he argues:

You're surrounded by expression. You're surrounded by cultures. Older pots, newer pots, the same with handmade furniture, you know? That, I wish we could afford really nice handmade furniture, but the pieces that we have which I like the best are old pieces which we found in junk shops and antique shops, where [they] have an expression about the period of time that produced them. And the, I guess, reason I don't react much to contemporary furniture is, it's an expression of machine, usually. I mean I can admire it, I can admire the design of it, but it doesn't, doesn't really warm me up very much.

Campbell claims that “present-day advocates of craftwork have tended to be labeled romantics, uneasy with the modern world and either yearning for a return to an earlier preindustrial age or nurturing unrealistic dreams of future postindustrial utopias” (p. 25). Gwen and Finn argue that there is an element of this romanticism that persists in most potters. Gwen claims that the artisan myth described here is the “romantic vision of an ideal life.” Gwen and Finn have a negotiated acceptance of this ideal; while Gwen notes that she “keep[s] reading books on sort of how to cut expenses” in preparation of the moment when they quit their day jobs and strike out on their own to pursue that romantic lifestyle, Finn notes that he doesn't “necessarily believe [the myth] completely,” though he takes an interest in the philosophy of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement. While the ideology of the artisan myth bears a strong genealogical relationship to socially progressive, politically-minded consumer

movements, as noted earlier, the potters I spoke to all maintained that they weren't trying to "change the world" (Finn). For these potters, their lifestyle choices were part of a set of personal decisions in service to the artisan myth; as Finn stated, "it's more about . . . our personal lifestyle than trying to [be] real reactionary and change the way people think about things."

Finally, Dennis described the attraction of the artisan myth from an outsider's perspective. Dennis's method of sales involves a significant degree of interaction with his consumer base, and he has developed a following based on his work and his social interactions with his customers.

[Art fair customers] love the romantic side that they feel that the working artist [has]. That whole . . . everybody wants to do what I'm doing. They want that. They want it in their real life. They want to be able to . . . live that life as an artist, whether it's [as] a writer, a painter, poet, drawer, or clay artist, sculptor, whatever. They want, they want that . . . And when they see you out on the street, selling your stuff, they love that. They love that whole thing [that] you're doing it. You're out there, you're on the street. You're, you're throwing, you're taking the dice and going [whoosh], and throwing it [to] the breeze, and taking your chances. It's . . . what most people want to do in their lives, who are too frightened, and too afraid to ever do [it] for themselves. Because society says you can't do it. And you know . . . these days most people do not have the nerve to do what I'm doing. Because, it's like . . . entering lotteries for a living.

Dennis understands the effect of the aura of his artisan lifestyle on the customers he encounters, and their perceptions of him and his work. These interactions make clear that the romance of the potter's lifestyle attracts not just the potters themselves, but also customers. These customers find the lifestyle appealing but do not have the courage to pursue it themselves. Instead, these customers sublimate their

desire for the lifestyle into a desire for the wares, which become a proxy for living the artisan lifestyle.

Part of the myth of the artisan holds that craft work is rewarding in the same way that waged labor is stultifying and oppressive. Artisan workers experience an absence of external discipline or external sources of control found in workplaces such as the assembly line or the cubicle job. Campbell describes the craft producer as “someone who exercises personal control over all the processes involved in the manufacture of the good in question” (2005, p. 27). However, an alternative perspective suggests that the artisan replaces these external sources with equal internal regulation. Self-control becomes imposed over self-employment, self-disciplined studio work hours, manual control and manipulation of clay body, and small business management.

### **The Myth of the Cubicle Worker**

The artisan myth requires a counter-myth. For potters, the counter-myth takes form from an amalgamation of their customers and collectors, the students they teach in community education classes, and the mainstream careers they considered and abandoned. I describe this myth as “the myth of the cubicle worker,” following one informant’s description of a hypothetical individual who elected not to pursue pottery, despite having a passion for it.

The myth of the cubicle worker arose most often during portions of the conversation pertaining to the informants' decision to pursue pottery as a career, or portions wherein the informants attempted to define their consumers. The individual described in this myth serves as a counterpoint to the artisan, and represents what the artisan myth does not: stable income, regular hours, and uninspiring work, indifferent and oppressive surroundings. This individual is dissatisfied with their workaday existence, appreciates art and harbors some regret about not pursuing a career as an autonomous artist themselves. To make up for this lack, the cubicle worker pursues craft as a consumer, lives vicariously through the artisan, identifying with or even admiring with them. As Dennis suggests above, "everybody wants to do what I'm doing." People develop a "crush" on the lifestyle and get interested in the novel things that the potters make, and get sucked into the artisan myth.

The star of the myth of the cubicle worker is the consumer. Campbell claims that the consumer of craft is "largely middle-class and professional people . . . just those groups who, in recent years, have experienced not merely deprofessionalization, but also increased bureaucratization, external monitoring, and formal performance assessment" (38). Helena describes her version as she works through a description of her hypothetical customer.

And who's buying? And I think it's . . . upper-middle class people who believe in this stuff, who believe in sort of all that this represents, right? So it's like, the hand, the local . . . supporting your fellow artists, supporting the dream of doing, I mean, some people want to say 'I wish . . . I did this when I was younger, and that's what I want to do,' right, so it's the . . . dream that someone's doing it even if you're working in your cubicle,

someone's out there able to make a . . . having a dream, and fulfilling it. And so that's what you're doing [as an artisan], right?

According to the myth of the cubicle worker, such consumers envy the artisan's self-directed lifestyle and creative work. This desire on the part of the cubicle worker to trade places with the artisan serves as a balm for the moments when the artisan contemplates a similar trade. Later in the same interview, Helena describes such a sentiment.

Most potters work 6 days a week if not more, and they still have a fairly low income, like maybe \$30, possibly \$40,000, but not more than that. Right? So that is still, like, not a good income. I mean, my mom just hired an administrative assistant for \$45,000. And I was like. . . you know? [laughs] I should've kept some of those crappy jobs! You know? . . . If you can get an administrative assistant job that pays more than a potter who's working their butt off . . . it doesn't make any sense, right?

For the tension between the cubicle worker and the artisan, the pot becomes a unit of capital exchange. The artisan covets the cubicle worker's financial security, job stability, and low-demand schedule. The cubicle worker covets the artisan's creative labor, aesthetic expression, and flexible schedule. In the exchange of financial capital for objectified cultural capital in the form of a pot, each party gains by portioning part of the spoils of their lifestyle for one from the alternative myth.

Bourdieu described the acquisition of the knowledge to interpret art as a form of capital: "the encounter with a work of art is not 'love at first sight' as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy . . . presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code" (1984, p. 3). When Brian described the wealthy collector failing to properly

decode his work, despite the collector's money and status, he pointed out the man's lack of access to this cultural code, which Brian can access. This code, Bourdieu explains, constitutes a form of cultural capital, noting that "this internalized code called culture functions as cultural capital owing to the fact that, being unequally distributed, it secure profits of distinction" (1984, p. 3). While Brian lacks the economic capital to dictate his own fate, he can exchange cultural capital to gain access to the former. It is this sort of exchange that characterizes the relationship between the cubicle worker and the artisan.

### **Supplementality**

Potters are not unconscious of the class implications of their labor. Pots meant for domestic use are easily attained at much lower prices, and arguably of much higher quality, as measured by durability and functionality. Consumers interested in purchasing handmade pots pay a premium over the price of analogous industrially-produced wares to compensate the maker for the labor. Collectors are, in effect, collecting particular and distinct outlays of potters' time. For this time to have meaning for a consumer, the potter on some level must mean something as well.

Writing about the relationship between craft and art, Adamson (2007) uses Derrida's concept of the *supplement* to craft's role in art production (p. 11). Adamson defines a supplement as "that which provides something necessary to another, 'original' entity, but which is nonetheless considered to be extraneous to that original" (p. 11),

offering the examples of an orchestral score/orchestral performance, or written text/spoken message. For Derrida, craft – the process of skillfully manipulating materials – is a supplement to an autonomous artwork (Adamson). In this same way, I contend that artisans, and their lives, become supplements to the standalone handcrafted object. The character, personality, and provenance of the potter fuse with the pot, and inform its value.

Handmade ceramics has heart, has soul, it has, you know, has... it, it has a bit of the artist in it. I mean, you pick it up and you can feel that. And when a person buys a handmade ceramic piece, they're buying a handmade ceramic piece, but they're also, you know, depending on where you buy it, but you're buying that artist. You're buying the history of that artist. You're buying the story of that artist. Or if you're lucky enough, you're buying the experience of, of buying it from the artist. You know, and that's what I do. I mean, I, I sell my own work for the most part. And when people come to buy work from me, it's, it's the ex- the interaction that happens in the art fair booth, or the Renaissance booth, or you know, if they're lucky, at the Northern Clay Center and I happen to be there and, and they get to, you know, kind of meet me and have that exchange.

It's when, when people buy a handmade piece, they're not just buying a handmade piece, but they're buying the story. They're buying the story of the artist that made it. And that's, you know, the Clay Center has an artist information card that goes with the piece . . . but there's nothing like the exchange of the physical contact between the artist and the person buying the piece. And, and that's what's really huge about like art fairs and things, where you kind of have that interaction, and you build that relationship with a customer, where you get that customer who then comes back to you, time and time again, because they're invested, they're invested in you, and they're emotionally, they become emotionally attached to you and your life and, I mean, I have so many people who started out as like customers who are now friends, and they just, you know, it, it, lack of a better word, art fair groupies, or art groupies. (Dennis)

Of the artists I spoke to, Dennis was among the most experienced, and unquestionably the most comfortable, with the element of interaction with customers. Dennis sells his pots through street fairs, galleries like NCC, and directly from his home, which he opens for “art crawls” (events in which geographically proximal artists collaborate for collective open-houses). He maintains a regular booth every summer at

the Minnesota Renaissance Festival, and he acquires fans through the classes he teaches at NCC, or as part of a travel adventure program in Mexico.

In the quote above, Dennis makes clear the importance of the affective relationship between the potter and the consumer: he observes that the interaction with a clay artist is valuable to shoppers. He describes the “customer who comes back to you time and time again.” These customers are interested in the pots he sells because the customers are “emotionally attached to [him] and [his] life;” the affective pleasure they derive from having and using his pots stems from the relationship they have with him as the pots’ creator. There is an unstated economic value for Dennis as well, if the sale goes well. While Dennis has the advantage of being present at many of the venues through which he sells, potters cannot always be present. As Dennis mentions, NCC encloses at point-of-sale a slip of paper that provides the background, education, and philosophy of the artist whose pot has been purchased. For most pots purchased through NCC, consumers do not have the opportunity to meet the artist, and this is the most substantial connection provided for the consumer to connect the pot and the potter. It is important to note, however, that despite the potter’s absence, a connection is established on their behalf; no pot is exchanged without a potter attached. In this sense, the potter’s presence, persona, and the romantic interpretation of their life becomes necessary to the final product, yet external to it.

Alec noted that “your style of work emits [or] says [something] about you as a person.” Several potters acknowledged the element of time in the work they produce and its valuation. As noted above, purchasing a commodity means purchasing an abstracted form of human labor-power, time and energy. As Brian states, “I think there’s always some sort of something about the handmade that always has to do with labor, and it always has to do with owning a piece of a craftsperson’s time.” For the artisan, this exchange is more direct: a potter selling work at a summer street fair is a physical presence to the customer considering purchase. Not only is the customer purchasing labor, they are purchasing the labor of this individual. The individual producer cannot be separated from their product. In discussing these issues, Brian elaborated on the relationship between the price of a pot and the amount of time and labor invested in it by the artisan.

I think more about sort of, time investment? And how, how we sort of equate time with value, and there’s some judgment call to make about how long something must’ve taken, you know the amount of labor sort of invested in something. [Before mass-production], people were investing their time, the time of a craftsperson they were investing into something, And the more . . . obvious that labor was, the more valuable the object was. . . . So [there are] places in my work where the labor sort of becomes obvious, and there’s this notion where I- this craftsperson spent a lot of time on this thing; that says something about value, versus, “oh this seems like it was sort of hastily put together, or it seems like there was a very obvious method of serial production here.” And so I think it becomes a play back and forth between the two; I would make a value between those two things... “oh this is labored over; yeah, this is sort of hastily put together or easily reproduced.”

For Brian, these questions of time, labor, and value become the starting-place for creative interplay of techniques in his work. The physical manifestation of painstaking labor, or its absence, becomes a method of communicating with the

consumer, who, if properly equipped with the skill to analyze and understand handmade ceramics, will interpret the sign of labor as an indication of worth or value. Furthermore, the sign of the artisan's personal intervention in the object, or "the sign of the hand," establishes the authenticity of the pot, compared to mass-produced wares. Without the clear indication of the craftsperson's labor, handmade and machine-made pots might become indistinguishable to the intended audience of sign-readers (consumers and their peers) who are intended to interpret the pots as a reflection of the taste of their owner.

Potters are often encouraged by teachers and mentors to take home and use their own pots to gain insight into their work: through use, a potter can learn about flaws in their work, or conjecture ways to develop their work in new directions. However, not all potters prefer to use their own wares; as Brian states, "I like using other people's pots so much that I don't know the day that I would look at . . . the cups I have and pick mine." Earl also mentioned a disinclination to use his own wares, or even to keep much of his work around the house. He first mentioned that he and his first wife made a practice of only keeping one pot made by the other for domestic use (if a new favorite emerged from the kiln, the old favorite went to the sale room). Later, he explained his fondness for other people's work:

I much prefer, I mean, all these yuonomis<sup>1</sup> are by other people. All of our dishes and pots and, that we use in the house, are by other people, except for a few of mine that she's got holed up. But they're, they're fun, because you use them, and you remember the person who made them, and then you, even if they're long since dead, you, you still know them, you know?

Earl's statement about remembering the potter through using wares made by that individual, clearly articulates the persona of the potter and the physical object in which it is imbued, for individuals familiar with both. Brian expresses a similar sentiment, regarding his own cup collection:

My cup collection says, yeah I know that guy, I know that guy, and I'm really into that, and I know that, you know, it's like that's what it says. And that's why it's out on shelves, instead of in a cupboard. Because I want people to walk around and I want people to see it, and I want them to know that I know all those people and I know about all that shit.

Just as potters' work is articulated to their character and personality, their personality is articulated to their work. I admit to a similar reaction to Earl's and Brian's: the warmth toward potters I have known resurfaces upon using the objects they have made. As noted earlier in the case of Dennis's regular customers, consumers who purchase regularly are likely to have a positive affective association with a potter. This association gets purchased with the work, through the supplementality of the potter.

### **Selling the Myth**

Potters' labor investment extends beyond the amount of time they spend handling pots. Potters' lifestyles, and the romantic associations that accrue to them,

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<sup>1</sup> Yuonomis are a style of Japanese tea bowl.

inform the consumer relationship with the product. As such, the effort they must put into building a lifestyle on a limited income becomes a form of labor that becomes invested in the work. Consumers purchase these affective associations—the idea of the potter—when they purchase the work; in this way, the potter acts as a supplement to her or his own work.

## Consumerism and Authenticity

This section focuses on the crafted object and its significance in consumer culture. The position I assert here is that cachet attaches to having other people make objects on your behalf. This pertains to Bourdieu's concept of habitus: individuals learn to value things based on subtle learned differences, such as the human-hand provenance of an object.

Modern craft is imbricated with a desire for authenticity that emerges in several channels. First is a concern for the authenticity of the makers, including their training, their lifestyle or sincerity (e.g., whether devotion to their craft permeates their private lives), their values, and other aspects of their embodied cultural capital. Second is a concern for the provenance of the product, a category including its "properness" of method and material, its authorship, and its uniqueness, or lack of ubiquity on the market (Carroll and Wheaton, 2008); in short, aspects of objectified cultural capital. Third is a consumer's concern for their own expression of authenticity (their own accrual of embodied cultural capital), which represents a component of sub-cultural capital accrual (Thornton, 1996). As I will show, these channels operate interdependently: potters supplement their wares with an aura of authenticity that reflects on the

consumers that acquire these pots. In this way, cultural capital can be transferred between actors.

In this chapter, I contextualize the role of authenticity in relation to ceramics by looking at the discourse of authenticity in consumer culture. I use the interviews to examine the potters' wares as consumer goods. To do this, I look at the informants' reflections on their own roles as potters; their belief systems regarding the production of handcrafted work; and the ways they identify their respective audiences, their feelings about these consumers, their reactions to the uses to which their work gets put, and their own attitudes as consumers in their own right of handmade pottery. I also address the importance and meaning of the notion of authenticity to consumers of handcrafted pottery. Second, this section traces past the point of purchase to the deployment of the object in consumer performance of authenticity and identity formation. To understand modern craft consumers and their identity formation, I look at consumer interaction with pots, as well as feedback from potters who consume pottery and sell it to collectors who establish their identity in part through this form of consumption. Collectively, these consumers form what Thornton describes as "taste cultures" (1996) built around the performance of various forms of authenticity. These taste cultures betray both cultural capital and sub-cultural capital: the former both implicit and explicit through an individual's presence in the community; the latter apparent through the individual's self-presentation. As noted earlier, in the art ceramics

community these consumers frequently double as patrons or providers of institutional support, through various capacities.

“Art pottery” describes a prodigious category of goods and trade. Potters frequently, even typically, sell their own work, sometimes additionally selling through third parties; they are dispersed geographically, and diverse of business model, production scale, aesthetic, price point, target consumer, motivation, and ideology. As such, all of Carroll and Wheaton’s definitions of authenticity manifest in one producer or another. However, I would posit that some definitions are more characteristic than others, and that art pottery requires additional definitions. Most directly applicable to ceramics are type and craft authenticity. Insofar as handmade ceramics are process-oriented by definition, type and craft nearly merge into one definition. I retain some space between the two meanings, however, to capture (in craft authenticity) the more process-oriented genres of pottery that follow cultural or historical traditions, e.g. the modern production of *chawan* (tea bowls), which are used in the Japanese tea ceremony. In general, type authenticity primarily distinguishes handmade pottery from industrially-produced wares.

By contrast, moral authenticity is a muted concept in handmade ceramics. This is not to say that some potters do not invest their work with stronger ideological philosophies than others, and that some do not differentiate on such grounds (e.g., sourcing clay from local terrain, or using only environmentally friendly firing practices).

Rather, moral authenticity in consumer culture is a tool that differentiates commodities based on ideology, a characteristic that is otherwise invisible in the final product. Handmade pottery, on the other hand, varies so greatly from one artisan to another that style becomes the primary point of comparison rather than ethos of origin. Moreover, as with type authenticity, moral authenticity adheres to the entire handmade category to distinguish it from industrial pottery.

While “handmade” objects retain a deep aura of authenticity beside mass-manufactured analogues, other senses of authenticity emerge with handmade pottery that the definitions enumerated above fail to capture. Most apparent is the absence of the author in the above definitions. In most creative texts, authorship, or the mark of the creator, is a key indicator of a form of authenticity. For example, authors sign books they write, and athletes sign jerseys, and luthiers sign the musical instruments they produce. The signature of a recognized individual quite literally “authenticates” the object. Beyond the literal signature, artisan producers often develop and maintain a signature “look” or style that characterizes most of the work, such that a connoisseur would be able to identify (e.g.) an Alexander McQueen gown by sight. This form of authenticity articulates the producer with the object, by indicating their existence in proximity at the moment of the signature, or the product’s origin as an idea of the producer. While this form of authenticity resembles idiosyncratic authenticity, it differs from the latter in that the former shifts focus from the origin narrative of the

producer/source, to the origin of the particular autonomous object, and/or its moment of contact with a creator. Since handmade pottery usually displays the signature style of its maker, as well as a literal signature, I will refer to this form as “signature” authenticity. Herein, I explore authenticities in pottery as they emerge in three channels: 1) the potter; 2) the object; and 3) the consumer. I contend that a sense of authenticity travels between these three channels during the exchange process, through potter, pot, and consumer.

### **A “Good” Potter**

By now it has been established that potters’ work reflects on their character, and their character reflects on their work. Also, handmade ceramics possess certain intangible characteristics inherited by way of their means of production at the hand of an artisan. Intangible qualities such as affect and emotional relationships with potters will affect the valuation of their work for a consumer. A good pot has affective qualities first, and possesses superior functionality only secondarily. Here I address the intangibles that establish the authenticity and value of a potter, as seen by other potters. The potters I spoke to made reference to traits such as ability, ideology, personality, and business savvy. Divorced from the other traits, none of these are sufficient to sustain a career in clay.

At one point, referring to new potters entering the field, Dennis observed how some people are dispositionally ill-suited for the profession: “There's some people, you

know, there's a couple of them that's like, oh, God, you know? Just move on, get out of here, because it's just like you don't have it. You don't have that thing that thing that's going to . . . have a longevity in clay.” While potters draw their income in diverse ways, sustaining the craft as an economic activity is a labor-intensive task. Ceramics are highly time-based: certain operations must happen at specific intervals. Moreover, the processes of pot production do not lend themselves to multitasking. Tasks such as drawing or sewing might be picked up and left off, interspersed with food preparation, computer use, or other light activity. Pottery requires the infrastructure of a studio, and prolonged commitments of time spent there; the degree of mud and dust in the environment and on the body (apart from potentially causing silicosis) generally precludes computer use (most potters I encountered at NCC could be termed “light users” at best). Without the appropriate work ethic and time commitment, Dennis maintains, a potter will fail.

Earl and Finn took up the question of the relative importance of technical ability versus meaning in producing good pottery. As Finn notes:

When people talk about how they're making handmade things to [try to] get back in touch with people [and] as a reaction to contemporary society and culture, and things they don't like about it, it's all well and good but it doesn't mean your work is any good, right? Like you can make horrible work and believe all that stuff. Or you can make good work and believe all that stuff. So [ideology is] on the edges, [rather than] really driving what I do, anyway.

While Finn points out the importance of skill, Earl cautions about the over-development of technique at the cost of erasing other necessary intangible qualities of handmade

pottery. Earl related an encounter with an English potter who threw so skillfully that he could produce an identical saucer every 30 seconds. While this ability would be valued in a pre-industrial economy, Earl maintained that his pots, as handmade craft items, lacked a certain quality that made them not pleasurable to use.<sup>2</sup> He concluded that skill was necessary, but not sufficient, to make someone a good potter: “so you got to be careful. And, and at the same time, every person who is learning to be a potter, has to learn the technique. You have to go through that period, but then you have to go beyond it. And that's the important thing, to get beyond that technique. And Harry never got beyond it.” A good potter then, one who has obtained the right kind of training, learns how to engage both technical and aesthetic skills and abilities. The access to these two kinds of knowledge, and the training to employ them, indicate an education that constitutes a form of embodied cultural capital.

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<sup>2</sup> “[Bernard Leach] decided, 'I'm going to order six of Harry's [Davis] dinner plates, so we have some nice plates in the house.' Something like that. They were plates, they had a celadon glaze, and a brushed iron decoration around the rim of them, and they were porcelain or stoneware, really hard, dense stoneware. Lightweight, lightweight, they were. And Bernard ordered six, and about two weeks, three weeks later, along comes six dinner plates in the mail. And so we took all the old slop stuff, and took it out of the drying rack, and put these dinner plates up there, over the sink. And we used them for about three or four days. And I know I didn't make the decision, so it was either Bernard or my wife, but somebody, after three or four days, just took those plates out and put them away in the cupboard, they got their old plates out again, those, those plates had no soul to them at all. They looked exactly like industrial plates. Harry had turned himself into a machine. You see? And they were just, they were no fun to eat off of. They were beautiful plates, but they were no fun to eat off of.”

### The Authentic Pot: Object/Type Authenticity

Famed, right? You know, Minnesota pottery . . . . From Bernard Leach, to [Earl], to all his students, or whatever, with those . . . the humble brown pot or whatever, right? Like that's, that's sort of the way we saw it from the outside. (Gwen)

Most informants did not categorically reject industrially-produced ceramics (sometimes referred to as “designware”), and several noted advantages of these ceramics from a strictly functional perspective. Alec states, “I have no problem with mass production, and especially now, because you can buy like things at Target for like pretty cheap that are designed quite well. . . . They’re beautiful, you know, and they function much better than most handmade things.” Finn and Gwen, who attended Alfred University, which houses both a renowned ceramic arts program as well as an industrial ceramic materials engineering program, pointed out that mass-manufactured ceramics have significant engineering advantages over handmade ones, such as specially-formulated clay bodies and glazes that are resistant to damage. Helena spoke of the same properties, noting that handmade work “cracks, it breaks, it chips, way more than industrial stuff does. And then like, salt-firing . . . automatically cracks your piece pretty much.” A pot requires more than a hand-origin to qualify as a “good” pot. Writing for *Studio Potter*, potter Mark Shapiro describes this problem from a marketing perspective.

To compete in this artisanal market (and be paid a living wage) our pots have to function every bit as well as industrial ware, though it may not be possible to compete with durability and convenience. Still, 'handmade' is not a sufficient condition for virtue. More than once while giving workshops, I have reached for a studio mug at break time and, sadly, chosen a factory-made one because handle and lip were simply more

comfortable. If we are to be successful in the artisanal market along with the signed goat cheese and the couched sourdough, our spouts have to pour, our lids fit - and quite a bit more (2005, p. 34).

Like Shapiro, Helena found favorable qualities in some industrially-produced pots.

If you get really nicely made designware, it's, you know, it's GOOD. It feels good, it's nice to use. And I totally appreciate it. . . . I would say the same problem within functional, within handmade ceramics as in designware is [that] 90% of it is awful, and then 10% of it is really good. And that 10% . . . becomes its own special thing, [and] it's so worth it that you put up with the 90%.

While functionality is an important quality for most functional potters, Brian de-centers it as the first consideration for ceramic artists. In the first quotation below, Brian describes a moment of tension between his graduate instructors and himself over the question of the role of functionality in art pottery. In both, he opens the definition of “functional” to encompass pots’ function as markers of taste and style.

I went into a critique once and I was really angry. We weren’t there for our midterm critique, so I went into my critique afterward and I had all these . . . pouring vessels that I had made. And I went to pick them up to put them away, and they were filled with water. So my faculty came in, and one of the questions they asked was, “how well do they work?” And I was a little bit put off by that because, not that I didn’t want them to see if they worked or not, that’s fine, but just that [getting] past that idea of ‘how well did something work’ really [part of my] goal here . . . how well does that something work as an object of home decoration, you know, and how well does that thing work . . . in terms of status symbol. You know, we didn’t talk about that, yet we talked about how well it poured.

There’s a difference between sort of utility, something being able to be utilized as a tool, to complete a task, and then also a function – that’s how something functions in the home or operates as a marker of status or a marker of decorum or whatever that might be. Those are two very different things, but all objects for the most part carry both sides.

Art potters conceive the functionality of their wares more broadly than their serviceability and reliability as vessels. Many functional potters have had to come to terms with the fact that much of the functional work they produce is not used by its

purchaser for its stated purpose. Collectors often store or display expensive handmade pots, and use cheaper, mass-produced wares for food service in their daily lives. Some potters resist this tendency, while others, like Brian, have embraced display and taste/class-marker as part of their wares' functionality. Helena identifies this latter reaction as a product of the formal education system for ceramic artists.

The work you're encouraged to make in school . . . you're encouraged to make a certain kind of work that's show work, right? It's about the ideas, it's about the concepts, it's about its place within the lineage of pots that have been made before it, it's about all these kinds of things, but it's not . . . really about function, even though people claim it is, even though it has a functional form. Because there's so much going into it formally, and context-wise, and all this stuff, [so] in the end, the pots that are being made are really not functional at all (laughs) because they're too precious, they're too expensive. . . . Oftentimes they do work just fine, but you know, they got like big old goofy handles and, as charming and . . . exciting as those handles are, they're just [not ideal for use].

While art pottery is about more than function, ideally a quality handmade pot succeeds on all grounds. While some artisans bridle at the idea of their work being reduced to pure function, as I will explain below, many potters appreciate knowing that their work is being used as a functional item by another person. Such use implies success on both fronts. However, it is the fusion of these two qualities, and the ability to “read” their presence in an object, that determines the value, or cultural capital, possessed by a pot.

### **Potter as Prosumer: The Most Committed Collector**

This chapter has examined the role of authenticity in the life and self-presentation of the potter, and its role in the formation of the object. Here I examine the role of authenticity in forming the ceramics consumer. In order to continue to

follow the transfer of authenticity from producer to consumer by way of the pot, I look at a specific category of ceramics collector: the potters themselves.

Every potter I've encountered could agree to some degree with this statement from Helena: "we have pots all around. So we have pots of mine and other people's, and they're sort of all around the house." All professional potters enjoy pots; all professional potters maintain a pottery collection of their own. For some, this collection contains a substantial portion of their own pots; others keep next to nothing of their own work. Some potters freely give work away to friends and colleagues; as such, some collections consist largely of pots gained in trade with other potters. Other potters invest a substantial outlay of their own cash to purchase pieces by other potters. Most collections contain a substantial quantity of pots acquired through each means. These pot collections extend the romantic perception of the potter's authenticity: by using these pots in their daily lives, potters incorporate pottery as part of their own consumer lifestyles. Furthermore, by using pots in barter or trade for other pots, or other goods and services, potters contribute to the perception of functional pottery as part of a pre-modern, pre-capitalist (or extra-capitalist) pastoral tradition.

From this perspective, potters emerge as not just producers, but also among the most voracious consumers of handmade pottery. Helena noted this tendency among potters associated with NCC: "Is the ceramic field hitting that market, the high-end market? Have we permeated that at all? And I don't know, I feel like the Northern Clay

Center and the majority of it [is] us! We're selling to ourself." To understand populations in economic positions like this, George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson (2010) proposed the popularization of the notion of the prosumer. The term *presumption* attempts to erase the division between the concepts of production and consumption, and the tendency to focus on one category at the expense of the other in economic discourse (14). Ritzer and Jurgenson argue that prosumption was the dominant model in pre-industrial culture, and that reintegration of the two concepts more accurately describes present activity. While Ritzer and Jurgenson focus on digital prosumption in contexts like websites based on user-generated content, the concept effectively captures the analog habits of the potter. In particular, the romantic pre-modern *Mingei*-sota clay culture is compatible with the notion of prosumption as a pre-industrial model.

Because the prosumer potter population constitutes a solid group of ceramic consumers in their own right, certain characteristics of the ceramic consumer can be observed through potter-collectors. First, ceramics, like other costly consumer items, are means by which potters communicate their class position and taste to others. Brian states, "I still think about like what it means for me to consume, and what it means for me to display. . . . Like I'm not going to go out and buy a Mercedes, you know to make that [part of] my self-image, but I'll go buy a Josh D\_\_\_\_ pot. Oh hell yeah, I'll go do that."

### **External Consumers: The Reinvestment of Authenticity Through the Work**

Potters who sell their work spend time thinking about the population to whom their work appeals, and the uses to which their work gets put. While potters have little control over consumer use, it is often meaningful to potters to know that their pots get used as pots rather than as decoration. I assert that the practical use of their work reflects a form of authenticity back from the consumer into the pot. As noted earlier, potters are aware that many of their functional pots do not see much utilitarian use in the homes of their purchasers. During my joint interview with Finn and Gwen, Gwen turned to Finn to ask him about this second issue.

Gwen (to Finn): Are you one of those people who gets the warm fuzzies inside when someone tells you that they use your work all the time? Or does it not really matter?

Finn: Mmm, no it's nice to know.

Gwen: Just because there's so many things that can go wrong, with like a piece breaking or a handle not being comfortable or something like that, that even though I know full well that not everybody's going to use everything I make, it's nice to know that sometimes it works out that way.

Because of the time and energy potters spend developing their work, many potters prefer that their consumers use their work in a utilitarian fashion. At the same time, potters are often aware that their work comes to serve a primarily decorative purpose for consumers.

Do I end up making stuff that's—I've made this stuff . . . I know it [is] displayware, which I think I've known for a while but I don't think I understood quite . . . how displayware it was, I think I was still holding on to the illusion that [it] could move from the mantle to the table and back again . . . and now I realize like, no, it's going to sit on that shelf, and it has a purpose on that shelf. Because, you know, it's pretty. . . . It's a piece of artwork on the shelf. It's a 3-D piece of artwork, as opposed to a functional piece. And so then I need to think . . . do they need to be pots anymore? Can they be something else. Can

they be tiles? . . . Can they be gigantic pots where obviously you're not going to use it.  
(Helena)

Helena noticed this propensity to protect, rather than use, fine art pottery in her own life, despite her best intentions, particularly as the parent of small children. “I have some precious stuff, but the precious stuff comes out, when we're having. . . it sits in the back of the cupboard, and I pull it out when I'm trying to like impress someone. When potters come over, then I pull it out. (laughs)”

### **The Successful Pot**

If consumers are not using the pots they buy, then they are using them as “displayware,” or aesthetic art objects. Functionality for these consumers is beside the point. The modes of authenticity that are important to this type of consumer, then, are those modes that apply to art objects. I assert that signature authenticity best applies here, since the works are valued as autonomous objects that are consumed through visual enjoyment, rather than as tokens of celebrated origin (idiosyncratic authenticity), items of ethical consumption (moral authenticity), or their adherence to a particular form (type authenticity) or technique (craft authenticity). Objects valued and consumed for their signature authenticity become external signifiers of cultural capital. These objectified forms of cultural capital must be purchased from the potter, who imparts value to the object which is in turn derived from the potter’s lifestyle and education. In

this way, authenticity becomes a mode through which cultural capital passes from potter to pot to consumer.

The available ways of evaluating a successful pot, or a “good” potter, are actually means of measuring the cultural capital of the object or person in question. The means of evaluating pots and potters’ success both require cultural capital on the part of the reader as well.

## Conclusion

In 2011 I returned to NCC for the annual fundraiser sale. I asked an old co-worker to indicate to me the displays of the artists whose work he had purchased. He pointed out three who shared a similar aesthetic, as well as one who did not. The fourth potter, he explained, he had met the year before, and his warm feelings toward her had colored his feelings about her work. That same artist, whose work I had been anxious to see, disappointed me this year. The staff member told me that several people felt that the work seemed “lazy,” and informed me that the artist said she would be changing her method because labor invested in her work had begun outstripping her price point.

Instead of buying from this artist, I came home with a piece by a woman I met at the show, whose work referenced her daily life and environment (such as her vegetable garden and her husband’s chickens), and toward whom I began to feel fond, as our conversation progressed. She mentioned to me her difficulty making a living in her home state, where consumers expected low prices, and her difficulty making money through galleries and third parties, since her retail prices had to remain the same regardless of the 50% commission these organizations retained. Like the other potter, she decided to change her method: she stopped using luster (gold or silver finishes)

several years ago in order to reduce costs while maintaining her price point. When I looked up her web site later, she had a page dedicated to her “best trades” of pottery for other items, such as jewelry, haircuts, and furniture. On the way out of the building, I saw by the door a display of small pieces made by a student of Earl’s who had died about a year ago. The work was of the *mingei* tradition, and accordingly, priced quite low—lower than Earl’s work—as it had been during her lifetime. On eBay later, I found a tea bowl made by this artist listed for \$189 by a vendor who noted in the listing her pedigree and the fact that she had been ill. The vendor however was apparently as yet unaware that the artist had passed away (and thus had not raised the price still higher accordingly).

For William Morris in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, a movement toward skilled artisan labor and craft production contained the potential for liberating people from unfulfilling work and an unsatisfying life. Morris imagined this transition taking place through a socialist governance model. Creative labor today is increasingly taking place through a neoliberal governance model: craft workers are responsible for their own economic survival, means of production, and business promotion, as well as the pecuniary needs of daily life, such as securing housing, health care, and education. Potters still join the profession seeking more rewarding forms of labor and lifestyle, which they struggle to generate.

Because the romantic Myth of the Artisan retains currency in the current capitalist context, craft consumers continue to buy into the myth, literally and figuratively. Consumers purchase a piece of the artisan's lifestyle and persona through purchasing a piece of their labor; consumers derive cultural capital from having skilled artisans make the objects in their environment. For potters, the advantage is getting to live a life unfettered by a career in the traditional economy. This peasant lifestyle is itself a form of labor invested in the pot: they are providing a service by lending part of the back story to these pots through their own enactment of a romantic ideal, and consumers live vicariously through the potter by way of the pot. This process becomes problematic in that the population of potters remains economically restricted. In practice, many potters take on additional, often traditional, jobs in order to support themselves and their craft practice.

Capitalist market logic, of course, explains handmade pottery only partially. J. K. Gibson-Graham note the way capitalism has become naturalized as both ubiquitous and coextensive with the market, despite the fact that "so many economic transactions are nonmarket transactions, so many goods and services are not produced as commodities," and much economic activity happens outside of capitalism (1996, p. 261). The solution to denaturalizing capitalism in our economy, they conclude, is to uncover the ways in which it is complicated, incomplete, and perforated by other economic models. Pottery as an economic site is nothing if not complicated,

incomplete, and perforated. Exchange and value depend on class relations; pottery funding cannot be comprehensive through one system of financial exchange alone; capitalist exchange in pottery coexists with patronage, socialism, barter. Much of what gets exchanged in the process is not material, but rather a reinforcement and “legitimat[ion of] social differences” (Bourdieu, Introduction, 1984, p. 7), which do not unilaterally benefit the purchaser. Pottery possesses potential as an anticapitalist form of resistance, but not because it forms a coherent alternative system. Rather, precisely because of their inconsistency, handicraft economies present a challenge to capitalist hegemony, provided their contingencies remain visible.

The field of ceramics is a laboratory for these tensions, a case study for their negotiation. Art ceramics always contain the conventional alongside the excessive: craft or art; use value or exchange value; function or form; mass production or craft production. The surplus always remains to be accounted for. Brian articulates some of these tensions in his own work:

I don't think about myself as making functional pots and I don't think about functional pots in the same way I think as that sort of, that sort of definition implies. . . . I think it's part of sort of mass production and I think it's part of sort of modernist production that we think about things as being either useful, or decorative. And that clean-cut separation between the two, I think it just comes from sort of the modern world, and modernism and . . . modern making. . . . I think about all these [silver] soup tureens [from] the 18<sup>th</sup> century . . . they still have an accessible volume, they still have ladles, and they were still *used*. Yet they're so opulent and they're so ridiculous and they're so over the top that I think that . . . there must have been a time when this thing was made where people didn't have a problem with something being both very decorative and also potentially useful.

Through his pots, Brian attempts to reconcile the expectations that work be either functional or decorative. Like these pots, handicraft already emerges as a site for rebuking genre divisions and functional distinctions. Could handicraft also represent a site for contesting boundaries of economic activity? Market capitalism reserves space for handicraft, but market transactions are not sufficient to describe the entirety of exchange and economic activity taking place around the category. Handicraft's inability—and refusal—to mimic the conditions of mass production, distribution, consumption, and standardized exchange might also represent the circumstances of its greatest social potential.

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