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Indirect Measure

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Art and Design

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree:

Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art,

concentration in Ceramics

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by

Nicholas Boismenu

December 2017

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Keywords: (Art, Craft, Art vs. Craft, Pottery, Ceramics, Ceramic Art)

## ABSTRACT

Indirect Measure

by

Nicholas Boismenu

This paper is in support of my thesis exhibition “Indirect Measure” May 5<sup>th</sup> – June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017, at the Reece Museum, located on the campus of East Tennessee State University. This document is an account of my examination into what constitutes art and the change in my perception of the utilitarian ceramic vessel during my research into the perceived difference between craft and art. Using broad definitions, I define what I believe art to be and how it is different from, and the same as craft.

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Jeff and Cindy Damico, without whom none of this would have been possible, & Virginia Scotchie, a fantastic professor who was always there to advise me and offer an encouraging voice

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The origin and development of ceramics is inseparably linked to the human notion of food and drink. From its ancient, utilitarian, roots as almost sacred utensils designed to facilitate satiation of our most basic needs, handmade ceramics have now been displaced through a saturation of the marketplace with mass produced commodities.

My artwork explores the link between the wheel thrown, utilitarian, ceramic vessel and its position as art or craft, art object or non-art object. Appropriation of the ceramic vessel inherently carries reference to subjective associations through protracted social history. I try to minimize the associated symbolism with the functional vessel by removing the utility and stacking the vessels unglazed and mid-process.

My artwork shows that ceramic craft is art by using craft within assemblage, an established art paradigm prompting critical analysis. I further strengthen my reference to the craft process through the removal of the ceramic vessel's utility and stacked presentation. By removing the assumed connection between the ceramic vessel and its function, I create a new perspective for the interpretation of the ceramic vessel when viewed as a whole. My artwork also contains autobiographical content, observable within the assemblages' overall form through the undulating rows and columns as a result of the assembly process. These sculptures use the precedent set by art history through examination of assemblage and the art object, as well as, the social history associated with the utilitarian ceramic form in order to question the legitimacy to any argument that ceramic's clear position as craft excludes it from being art.

My artwork is a reflection of my relationship with clay, and my affair with ceramic materials began in 2011 during my junior year at the University of South Carolina. I soon began watching YouTube videos of people manipulating clay on the wheel at fantastic speeds, and shortly after that, achieving a similar skill set became my obsession. After seeing those videos, I was determined to throw as fast as the wheel would allow, and most of the time, what I was left with at the end of the day was a mess. For my first four years working with clay, I spent at least 300 days of the year throwing six to fourteen hours each day. More times than not, I would lose myself in the process, then, suddenly realizing it was dark out, I was left unable to account for the hours which had gone by. I was hooked on ceramics.

I did not begin using ceramics because I wanted to make mugs or casseroles. I started using ceramics in pursuit of a high level of proficiency throwing on the wheel at high speeds. I threw four to six hour sessions at least once each day in order to obtain a kinesthetic awareness and practical understanding of the forces governing a mass of clay rotating atop the wheel, in hope that I would gain insight into ceramic form and material characteristics rather than achieve a specific quantity of cylinders or bowls. I did this because I felt that to throw “free style” I could learn more about the material and its response to my input and the forces present at the wheel head. Throwing at high speeds required me to throw with structural symmetry and provided me a substantial volume of experiential reference points to predict material outcomes in the shortest amount of time.

I threw huge quantities of pots, most of which never made it off the wheel head before collapsing or flying off in one direction or another, until I accumulated enough experience to control the clay at full speed. Through focusing on the tactile experience of throwing rather than

the number of ceramic vessels thrown, I came to appreciate the ceramic vessel less as a product, object or commodity, and more as a way to contextualize the vessel as a marker of progression.

In trying to conceptualize the number of hours it took to throw the huge number of pots I had discarded over the years, I wondered what progression or change might be visible if all those pots were presented in temporally stratified layers. Initially, this idea was realized through piling the thrown pots I did not want to keep, due to defect, into unorganized slop piles. Finding their mass prohibitive to firing, these early vessel piles provided me a visual reference to the volume of clay I was throwing in a given week, and were reclaimed periodically. It wasn't until I started working as assistant to professor of ceramics at the University of South Carolina, Virginia Scotchie, that I began using the thrown vessels I had been reclaiming to, instead, fill ball molds and create sculpture.

CHAPTER 2  
INFLUENCES  
David Mach

As I interpret and refer; commodity assemblage art uses commodities, or mass-produced objects used to assemble a three dimensional sculpture. Assemblage art is often produced to imply relationships between the objects from which the sculptural composition is assembled and their overall sculptural form. A good example of effective commodity assemblage art is that of David Mach. His sculptures are composed of various things like the thousands of matchsticks seen in figure 1, hundreds of coat hangers, thousands of scrabble tiles, and even creating large-scale installations from hundreds of thousands of magazines in Figure 2. Assemblage using mass produced objects provide both visual and conceptual intrigue between layers of meaning, when evaluated in concert with the object as a whole.



Figure 1. David Mach, *Marilyn*, matchstick head, 2011

Mach's assemblages often use mass produced commodities to comprise their overall structure, or composition, of the sculpture. My assemblages use ceramic vessels, made specifically for assemblage rather than consumption as a mass produced commodity. As seen in

Mach's assemblages, he often uses utilitarian commodities that are mass produced and have a generally indifferent aesthetic. The basic ceramic vessels I use reference the production of ceramic vessels which are supposed to be analyzed very similarly to the commodities seen in Mach's assemblage sculptures with reference to their relationship to the sculptural whole. The vessels I use are kept unfinished and frozen within the production process in order to directly reference back to the craft from which it was created.



Figure 2. David Mach, *fuel for the fire* magazines and furniture, riverside 1986

Peter Voulkos

I am of the opinion that Abstract Expressionism examines, in part, the autobiographical record of material handling during creation of a composition and as a result of a material process. When handled, clay has a material tendency to freeze or trap gestural handling marks made during the production process. I believe that autobiographical maker's marks on utilitarian ceramics may reveal insight into the behavior of the material and/or artist. Abstract Expressionism is an accumulation of maker's marks, which leave autobiographical record upon a material as a consequence of the production process.

This type of gestural record is especially evident in the work of ceramic artists like Peter Voulkos. Voulkos abstracted the ceramic vessel using large thrown sections of clay and slabs, stacked one on top of another which, upon close examination of the object's surface, it visibly maintains the rhythm of the production process (Figure 3). Based on this observation, I believe that any traditionally thrown ceramic work also carries this type autobiographical content within the material of their creation.

Autobiographical content within my sculptures can be observed within the slight variation in size and shape of each individual vessel and the cumulative gesture resulting in undulating patterns which emerge from the repetition of form and process. This content is wide ranging and includes things like the level at which I throw, the speed at which I make my pulls when throwing, and my throwing style. I consider these to be examples of gestural process marks and the most basic and esoteric type of design element prompting critical analysis of a functional ceramic object's composition, or physical attributes.



Figure 3. Peter Voulkos, *Pinatubo*, Stoneware, 1994

## Marcel Duchamp

My interpretation of Duchamp's artwork is based on his assertion that art is defined through an artist's selection of material presented within a formal context (Interview with Marcel Duchamp 1968). I believe that Duchamp's idea's pertaining to art being defined through formal presentation in order to prompt critical analysis by the viewer can also be applied to the culinary arts, language arts, and all instances within art history of which I am aware. I believe that Duchamp's method of displaying found objects after removal of their assumed function prompts critical analysis of the object outside their function as a consumer object

I am of the opinion that Marcel Duchamp's work *Bicycle Wheel, 1913*, (fig. 4) shows that the presentation of an object within appropriate context, is the only point of separation between the art object and a non-art object. The work demonstrates that any object, given appropriate presentation, even a mass-produced, aesthetically indifferent, pair of commodities like a bicycle wheel and wooden stool, can be elevated to the status of art through appropriate presentation and act of selection by the artist.



.Figure 4. Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913



## CHAPTER 3

### ART VS CRAFT

Craft is defined as: “an activity involving skill in making things by hand” (Craft). I will use a broader definition derived from the former by defining craft as: the application of force resulting in alteration of a material. This way the term craft can be applied to more than things made by hand. For instance, solar systems are crafted by supernova, gravity, and other physical forces. Mountain ranges are crafted by geologic forces, paperclips are crafted by industrial machines, and industrial machines are crafted by human intellect, a mess is crafted if I push a glass of milk off the table and it breaks, etc. The purpose for my broadening of craft’s definition is to suggest that all objects, black holes, solar systems, and mountain ranges are crafted unintentionally, and do not require intent for their conception as art does, and I believe it is a misconception that art and craft are somehow separate when considering the equivalent processes which produce them.

So, if you accept this definition of craft, and all art is crafted, then what separates art from craft? I believe that the answer is: display prompting critical analysis. The idea that any object is capable of being art, so long as it is presented as such, is supported many times throughout art history, my favorite example being Duchamp and his ready-mades. It would stand to reason then, that a Styrofoam cup on display within your local museum would be considered art, because the setting in which it is displayed prompts the viewer to consider the Styrofoam cup critically.

The same differentiation can be applied to the “art object” and “non-art object.” The art object is an object which includes cues, or signals, within its design which prompt critical

analysis by the viewer. The art object, in being crafted by the artist to include these cues, implies, that the artist intends for the object to be presented for critical analysis.

So an art object as I define it: an object which contains cues which prompt critical analysis. Because of the subjectivity inherent within art, cues which prompt critical analysis can be extremely diverse. For example, If you are an electrician and you see a neighbors shed that has all its wires amazingly tied in to code, organized, and has a gestural confidence left by the person who tied those wires into the shed...I believe that given his 20 years experience putting electrical lines through buildings has shaped what cues prompt critical analysis of what is presented or presumed to be art, but if you could somehow present the wiring inside of that shed within a gallery space, I believe it would be analyzed critically and by a larger segment of the audience than just the electricians.

So, art objects do not require display within a gallery to be evaluated critically, because they contain cues which prompt critical analysis incorporated into their design. The cues I am referring to are entirely subjective and based on your experience with the material presented as art. Many of the cues I am referring to are commonly employed to prompt analysis and are communally understood to do so, such as prose in poetry, the frame of a painting, the bronze of a statue, an artist's signature, or a title on an artwork.

Conversely, the non-art object is an object where design considerations are not selected with the intention of prompting critical analysis of the object through inclusion of the aforementioned cues. So, if the Styrofoam cup is art, based on its display within a museum gallery, its display within your cupboard would alter your analysis of the Styrofoam cup. Thus, the Styrofoam cup is a non-art object because it is not designed to prompt critical analysis of its

composition; it is designed simply to communicate its function as a container for volume. Given the subjective nature of art and human perception, the argument can be made that a drawing of a flower on the surface of the Styrofoam cup can be considered a design cue which prompts critical analysis.

If an object has an associated function, at some point within its evaluation, it will be analyzed according to that function. I believe that because of the eventual evaluation of a utilitarian object according to its ability to perform an associated function, that function can distort or “give a misleading account or impression (“Distortion”)", to the viewer’s appraisal of an object’s composition when observed outside appropriate presentation prompting critical analysis. This distortion is subjective and largely depends on the strength of experiential association between form and function held by the viewer.

Poor craftsmanship is visually evident when formal examination of an object based on its associated function occurs. Within this basic appraisal of a functional object, poor craftsmanship poorly communicates the object’s function. A learner’s hump, for example, is a tendency within beginning throwers to leave a hump that is not consistent with the rest of the bowl’s form and is a craftsmanship issue because it is the result of material handling.

I believe that design uses aesthetic prompting to help designate function and aid the user in the operation of the object. That function is interpreted by the viewer according to an object’s composition. The word design implies intention is required to be craft, and as I believe it to be and previously defined it, craft does not require intent to take place. This is one of the reasons I expanded the definition of craft to include more than objects made by a person’s hand. Forces of

nature don't intentionally craft solar systems, tornados, etc. Yet unintentionally crafted objects are captured as the subject in countless works of art.

Composition is defined as “the act of putting together or making up by combining parts or ingredients” (Composition). Composition is commonly used to describe the thing presented within various arts like that of a musical composition, theatrical composition, culinary composition, etc. This leads me to believe that a “non-art object” is one which is crafted without the intention of it being critically analyzed according to its composition.

When examining a non-art object such as a typical tea pot, its design elements conspicuously convey its utility through design. The tea pot's bulbous form and lid allude to its function as a container, while its handle and spout offer reference to its function as a levered vessel for pouring a volume of hot liquid. In the same way that design elements inform the viewer of a non-art object's function, the design elements within an art object function as prompts and indicators for interpreting its meaning.

Just as a pedestal is used, within a gallery or museum setting, to prompt critical analysis of an object's composition, the plate, bowl, and other wares act as pedestals prompting critical analysis within the culinary arts. That is to say, that appropriate plating and presentation of food atop a plate prompts the diner to more critically analyze the composition of the dish. I believe it is due to the expectation of foods presentation, with functional ceramics in particular, which most strongly dissociates functional ceramic forms from critical analysis outside a gallery setting. Piero Manzoni demonstrates in his piece: *Base of the World*, 1961, that even a pedestal can be art when presented as such.

I have come to believe that art is the result of an artist's conscious selection of material, and is a reflection of human consciousness, shaped by prior experience. For example, if one does not have any experience with which they associate the earth as a sphere, floating in space, then the concept of Manzoni's *Base of the World* will not make sense to that person.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHOD/PROCEDURE

When I first began assembling ceramic vessels into sculptural forms, I attempted to use compression alone to achieve adhesion between assemblage components, I found that the bond between parts was often not strong enough to survive the stresses placed upon their points of attachment and ran into numerous problems during their physical handling. I used geometric wooden forms as molds, to create polyhedral cuboids. The geometric shape was intended to be a physical reference to a group of similar, individual, experiences and memories in the form of a “block of time” and specific effort. The patterns and repetition of form created by stacking pots within the composition of these initial works reflected development of habits and rituals that accompanied the evolution of my throwing technique over time.

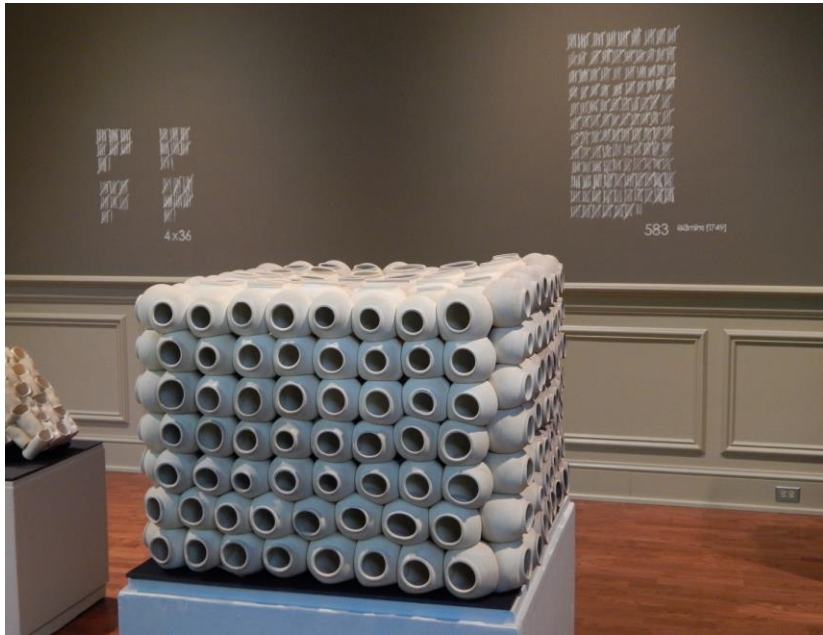
My first pieces were often glaze fired, but I discontinued the practice because I found that the glazed surfaces altered their overall appearance, unified the individual parts comprising the assemblage, and removed reference to the production of the individual vessels within the sculptural composition. During my initial investigations into assemblage, I used ceramic vessels oriented in various configurations. Their general orientations reflected the routine with which that assemblage was constructed and the incremental effort put forth during its production.

In order to maintain contrast between the sculptural form and its component parts, the overall form remained unglazed to visually maintain the individual vessels within the sculpture. The vessels face outward in order to reference the regular duration required to throw a vessel. The repetition of form refers to the production process and the repeated incremental steps which yield each vessel.

Each of my pieces built upon the material trials and tribulations of the last. Beginning with rectangular compositions composed of approximately one hundred fifty vessels each and standing approximately two feet tall and ten inches wide, my sculptures have grown into assemblages of about 3 feet high and two feet wide, composed of up to seven hundred sixty three vessels. My goals from one sculpture to the next are rooted in the desire to find material limits and to surpass the scale and technical complexity of the last work I created.

The ceramic vessels comprising my sculptures each take roughly three minutes to produce on the potter's wheel. After they are thrown, the pots are allowed to dry to almost leather hard and then each one is meticulously stacked and connected to the adjacent vessel.

CHAPTER 5  
CATALOGUE OF WORK



583@3mins[1749], Stoneware, 2017

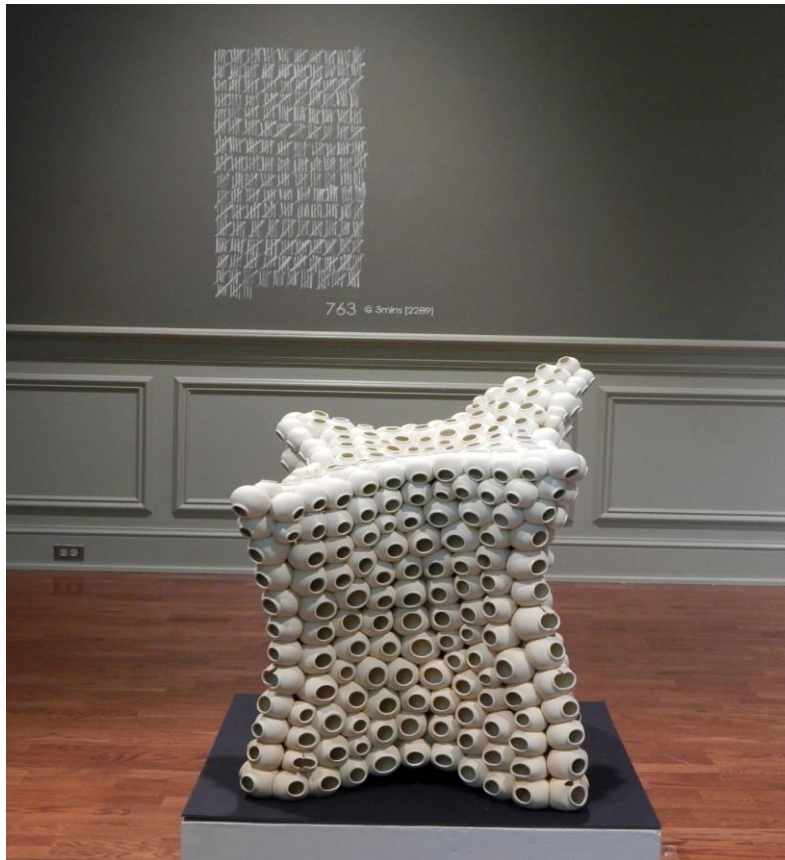
This piece contains 583 unglazed and interconnected ceramic vessels, all oriented with their openings facing outward. It measures approximately 24inches wide x 24inches long x 17 inches tall, and consists of seven rows and eight columns of vertically arranged pots. This piece represents the accrual of material understanding through monotonous repetition of process, or practice. It is the first piece presented within the gallery space and represents the basic understanding and skill set I entered the MFA program with. The title of this piece 583@3mins[1749] informs the viewer that the sculpture is the accumulation of effort in the crafting of the 583 vessels, taking roughly 3 minutes each vessel, and totaling 1749 minutes. A series of 583 tic-marks are painted on the wall adjacent to the sculpture. I use tic-marks based on their consensus meaning, as a mechanism to account for the passing of time. The overall form represents my perception of art and craft, forming the foundation of my material and conceptual understanding.





4x36 Stoneware, 2017

My second piece is a series of rectangular assemblages arranged to resemble fallen dominoes. I reference falling dominoes in order to allude to a cause and effect relationship. Each rectangular assemblage measures approximately 18 inches tall 11 inches wide and 6 inches deep. The assemblages are composed of cylinders, the most fundamental thrown form, symbolizing material trial and error. Temporal direction is referenced by the four tumbled stacks and the direction they fall implies a transition from the first to the third piece in the exhibition. The title of this piece does not mention a specific unit of time like the other two pieces, because it is meant to reference the general effort and labor involved in my pursuit of material proficiency and understanding of art and craft.



763@3min[2289] Stoneware, 2017

This piece contains 763 unglazed and interconnected ceramic vessels. This assemblage represents the accrual of experience over time in pursuit of material understanding and its overall form references the change in my perception of art and craft over the last three years emerging from the basic understanding represented by 583@3mins[1749]. This piece is adjacent to a large series of tic-marks used to reference the process of accumulation which produced the 763 pot assemblage and the corresponding 2289 minutes the throwing process took.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

My work is a commentary on the perceived difference between art and craft. It takes the position that all art is the result of craft. I define Art as the selection and presentation of a material or object within any setting or context which prompts critical analysis of that material or object's composition for meaning.

After realizing that objects are the result of craft and that art is communicated through design prompts, I used this understanding to create "art-object" or objects which prompt critical analysis. To accomplish this, my work exhibits non-art objects (the ceramic vessel) intentionally crafted to lack any surface design which might prompt the viewer to analyze the vessels individually, within the sculptural assemblage. The purpose of the ceramic vessel's presentation within the assemblage paradigm is to encourage critical analysis and inform the viewer that the sculpture as a whole is meant to be analyzed critically as art. That is to say, my work is intended to be analyzed based on the correlation between its component parts and the sculpture as a whole.

Assemblage allowed me to present the craft of ceramics, referenced within my work through repeated use of the ceramic vessel before it was frozen within the crafting process. The vessel's reference to craft is maintained through use of an unfinished aesthetic and inserted into a style of art already established within history. The overall forms of my assemblages are not as important as the viewer's ability to understand that they should be analyzed in the same way as traditional assemblages composed of mass-produced commodities.

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