

LOCAL MATERIALS

Think Globally.....

For much of its history ceramics has been informed by two contradictory realities: the intractable weight of its raw materials, and the tantalizing mobility of its finished products. Trade and, more recently, museum collections have carried pottery forms and styles far from their birthplaces: Tang dynasty drips to northern Persia, Greek urns to Staffordshire, and Japanese teaware to Minnesota. This international flow of ceramic ideas has, until quite recently, been tempered by the local particularities of geology and technology, but modern mining and shipping have made our raw materials into consistent, refined, and widely available commodities. Ceramic technology and materials circulate ever more freely and broadly. Freed from dependence on our local terrain's texture, color, and firing temperature, we shop the world for the cheapest, most suitable, and most convenient materials.

Globalization, though, seems to create in some people a countervailing urge to probe the unprocessed and the near-at-hand. For almost as long as some people have been trying to escape the limitations of localness, others have been choosing to embrace the unique flavors and histories of food, plants, and clays from their immediate (defined somewhat loosely) region. Looking beyond the ceramic supply catalogue can lead in a variety of directions. One can explore and use the properties of local clay, or learn more about the history of mines, creeks, or industries in one's area. One can harness the unpredictability or the demands of unprocessed minerals for creative purposes. Clay is everywhere, and many industries are already at work digging, sorting, and processing materials that we use, perhaps in different forms, in clay bodies and glazes. Under our city streets and on the shelves of suburban superstores are familiar substances; the poetry of chemistry and geology can take us below the familiar brand names of materials to deeper structures and surprising possibilities.

Does any of this lead to better work, or truer? This is a question with no foothold for an answer in the diverse world of contemporary ceramics. But does it make the *process* better, or lead the maker to more interesting, challenging, or rewarding questions? Read on. Against the backdrop of global ceramic culture, the following writers probe what Lucy Lippard has called "the lure of the local."

— MB

EDITOR Mary Barringer; ART DIRECTOR Rostislav Eismont; PRODUCTION Jeani Eismont; CIRCULATION Sara Zela; FINANCIAL MANAGER Julie Blake Williams; COPYEDITORS Louise Chrysostom, Patricia Hill; PROOFREADER Karin Rothwell; CONTRIBUTING ADVISORS Linda Arbuckle, Frank Boyden, Michael Boylen, Cynthia Bringle, Louise Allison Cort, John Glick, Gary Hatcher, Nan McKinnell, Mark Shapiro, Forrest Snyder; FOUNDING EDITOR Gerry Williams.

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