

## **Slow ceramics - The art and success of decelerating**

This paper considers how contemporary ceramic practice might align with values supported by the Slow Movement. It was delivered on the 28 September 2012 at the Australian Ceramic Biennale, Subversive Clay, held in Adelaide, Australia.

### **1.0 Fast**

#### **The digital and information age**

We live and make ceramics in the digital and information age. Rapid developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have provided us with access to some very powerful tools offering seemingly limitless opportunities to express and share our creativity.

#### **Culture-on-demand**

Permanently connected to events around the globe our culture is now available on demand. Growth in consumerism and consumption has resulted in shorter life spans for products but ever increasing markets. Innovations in global communication and retail mean consumers are more informed and powerful. Society as a whole has accepted the notion that time-is money, collectively striving for greater efficiencies and speed.

The art world and ceramics have not been immune to this acceleration. Ceramic education is now less about learning the traditions of the past and more about preparing for the future. The hand, once a powerful tool in ceramics is now just as likely to be in contact with the hard, plastic surface of a screen as it is with the cool, earthy, receptivity of clay.

#### **Fast is contemporary**

Turner prize-winning ceramicist Grayson Perry noted back in 2005 that it is hard as an artist not to be sucked into the idea that fast has somehow become central to being contemporary. The savvy artist learns there can be huge financial success in pitching an accessible message to this global audience. But what happens when artists aspire to have universal appeal and be fast? One outcome has been the proliferation of ‘one liner’ art. Art that is simple, quick to comprehend, but has little substance. The cost of going too fast is often quality.

#### **17 seconds**

The blame for this ‘dumbing’ down of art does not lie solely with career seeking artist and curators. Art audiences - well they’re also in a rush. According to one study the average time spent viewing a piece of art in a gallery is now 17 seconds.<sup>1</sup> But don’t panic, this audience might not be looking at your artwork for long, but they do want more of you....just new fresh ‘stuff’. Best not to stop and think....just keep making....find more ways to go faster.

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<sup>1</sup> Trent Morse, ‘Slow Down, You Look to Fast’, [www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art\\_id=3277](http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=3277), accessed 5 August 2011.

## 2.0 Technology

### Subversive clay

Technology equals fast, doesn't it? Access to developments in manufacturing and equipment provide clay workers with exciting opportunities for innovation and increased productivity. However due to its very materiality, creating with clay is inherently slow. In our current cultural paradigm that makes clay and ceramicists subversive.

Despite the fact that clay as a material stubbornly sets its own tempo, we have been able to speed-up by taking advantage of technological advances. Digital manufacturing, access to mass production and research and development in new clay bodies and materials mean that we can choose to completely redesign and reengage with clay outside of its traditional time properties. Even for those brave souls still committed to the slow and steady pace of the hand-made, technology means we can order our clay materials online or outsource our firing freeing up time to work that little bit longer in our studios. We can market our product through a myriad of digital forms. Best of all we can do it at any time of the day and night, from just about anywhere. It's an exciting and stimulating time.....as long as we keep up.

### Multi-tasking

But it's not really working out for us like we imagined is it? The problem is that the faster we go with all this new technology, the faster the pace of life seems to be getting. Technology is not enough, we must also multi-task. You know what I'm talking about –

*Transfer the funds to pay for the clay on the smart phone, while checking the clays firmness on the piece drying out beside you. At the same time take a quick call from the gallery about your next show while watching the five and nine years olds out in the yard from the corner of your eye, simultaneously having the spare ear out for the timer sitting on top of the kiln.*

While it seems more efficient to do multiple things at once current neuro-scientific research tell us the reality is that once an activity needs our full attention the human brain is highly inefficient at multi-tasking. Concern had been growing around anecdotal evidence that digital overload was reducing the attention spans of our children for some time. However, alarm bells didn't started ringing in the business world until researchers found that after a normal morning in front of their computers 'multi-tasking', workers we less effective than if they had been smoking marijuana.<sup>2</sup>

It turns out decreased productivity is another cost of going too fast.

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<sup>2</sup> Author Carl Honore (2007:114-116) makes this link between multi-tasking and efficiency and explains further, 'The bottom line... is that much of what we pass for multi-tasking is nothing of the sort: it sequential.... When people flit back and forth between a task, they make more mistakes and take much longer – sometimes double the time or more – than if they had performed each task from start to finish before moving on to the next one.'

## 3.0 Flow

### Stressed out

As we all know from personal experience all this technology and multi-tasking has not freed-up our time but made us more stressed. Stressed out and under pressure, human brains opt for one of two modes of thought – they think fast<sup>3</sup>. Fast thinking helps us find solution to well-defined problems - it's an invaluable skill in our modern fast paced life. Slow thinking on the other hand is what we do when we are relaxed, when we have time to incubate ideas in our unconscious. We think slow when we are 'in the flow'.

Flow<sup>4</sup> is almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness, often accompanied by intense feelings of satisfaction. It's a state artist's drop into when they are at their most creative.<sup>5</sup> I experience Flow when I hand-build my large ceramics sculptures using tiny coils of clay. For me it's a deeply meditative, highly creative problem solving time. I'm challenged, I'm stretched in terms of my skills, I have real time feedback on how I'm going and the main pleasure is not in the final result but in the actual process of creating. It's critical I am free of distractions in Flow because any interruption can make that train of thought disappear in an instant. It can take hours to get it back.<sup>6</sup>

### Quality of life

Social scientists have found that Flow is closely linked to a meaningful and fulfilling life. Once the domain of artists and high performers it's a concept that is now highly fashionable in the fields of business performance, leadership<sup>7</sup> and personal development. Unfortunately, the speed of our lives and the way we use ICT has brought the world to us but at the cost of making us permanently available, less discriminatory, less likely to get into a state of Flow and as a result less productive. Ironically, at a time when everyone else is discovering Flow, we, as creative workers are finding Flow more and more elusive.

Keeping up with the speed of life, however, is having a far bigger toll on the quality of our lives than reduced productivity. A fast life leaves less time to invest in the quality of our relationships and health and can be arguably linked to personal and planetary burnout<sup>8</sup>. Not everyone is accepting the cultural paradigm to do everything faster and the Slow Movement has grown in opposition to this speeding up of our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Guy Claxton (1997) in his book, *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind – Why intelligence increases when you think less* describes Fast Thinking as rational, analytical, linear and logical – Slow Thinking as intuitive, woolly and creative.

<sup>4</sup> See Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1997 book, *Finding Flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. Csikszentmihalyi's lifelong research shows that true happiness comes from learning and developing our skills to overcome meaningful challenges. When we are fully absorbed in doing this, we experience what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'Flow'.

<sup>5</sup> See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*.

<sup>6</sup> Disruption that takes our attention for even longer periods like ill health, family or financial concerns can be far more disabling resulting in long periods of 'dry spells' Csikszentmihalyi (1996:120).

<sup>7</sup> See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, *Good Business; Leadership, Flow and the making of meaning*.

<sup>8</sup> Moderate United Nations estimates based on current population and consumption trends, predicted that the equivalent of two earths will be required to support the human population by the 2030s. Global Footprint Network, 2010 [http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world\\_footprint/](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/), accessed 6 September 2011.

## 4.0 Slow

### Resistance

People have been challenging the accelerating pace of life throughout history. Not surprisingly, artists and craftspeople have been at the forefront of some of the most well documented cases of resistance. In the early 1800's the Luddites fought against production changes in the textile industry.<sup>9</sup> Soon after, the Arts and Craft Movement grew out of a reaction to the growth of mass production and the loss of carefully made handcrafts. While the response has been different over time the common thread has always been concern over the decline of quality.

### Slow Food

The current interest in Slow began in 1986, when culinary writer Carlo Petrini took a very public stance against the opening of a McDonalds fast food store beside the Spanish Steps in Rome. He launched Slow Food - a movement that stands for fresh, local seasonal produce, the passing on of traditional recipes, sustainable farming, artisanal production and leisurely dining.

Slow Food has many parallels with the goals of the anti-globalisation movement but at its core it pushes pleasure, spruiking the message *eat well and still save the planet*. Slow Food activist organise dinners, workshops and other events to promote the benefits of taking time over eating and caring about the source of food. Slow Food promotes foods and handmade produce that are on the way to extinction.

### Slow Everything

Slow is not about always being slow, rather about being in control of time in your own life. This simple philosophy has been applied by individuals all over the world to just about everything. Ironically, through the digital and information highway the ideas of Slow have reached and resonated with people all over the world - fast. Slow does not have a single leader, mandate or physical centre of activity. Carl Honore's, widely read book, *In praise of Slow: How the worldwide movement is challenging the cult of speed* did much to establish Slow as a global movement in its own right. But before this, many people were independently deciding to slow down without identifying with a broader cultural trend. It just seems the right response to a world that is going too fast.

### Balance

Honore (2004) argues that unlike resistance in the past the current desire to decelerate is not anti-technology or anti-speed - it is about balance and quality, about deciding when it's best to go fast or best to go slow – with the primary goal being to get the best quality product or quality of life. To me, who sometimes thrives under time pressure, this idea of balance makes Slow a very attractive proposition.

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<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia, Luddite, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luddite>, accessed 20 January 2012.

## Pro-slow groups

Pro-Slow groups have formed that focus on the quality of an aspect of life highlighting the benefits and pleasures of savouring and enjoying the journey, for example Slow Art, Slow Parenting<sup>10</sup>, Slow Schooling, Slow Travel, Slow Art Day, Slow Exercise and one that really captures my imagination, Slow Sex. Others group like Japan's Sloth Club, the US-based Long Now Foundation and Europe's Society for the Deceleration of Time advocate Slow as a more encompassing philosophy of life.

More recently, spin-off groups like Slow Cities, Slow Architecture, Slow Design, Slow Craft, and Slow Fashion are looking to improve the quality of our cultural artefacts based on Slow principles. Initially about savouring, more recent manifestations of the movement stress the win-win benefits of Slow and link it to the notion of success and fulfilment. Slow is counterculture. Like choosing to do ceramics, in our current culture of speed, choosing to do Slow is subversive. More than ever before the time is right for Slow Ceramics.

## 5.0 Slow Ceramics

So how can we apply the best of Slow to our ceramic practice to be more successful? Well we could adopt or adapt the Slow principles of other pro-slow groups or simply just decide to slow down.

*Slow production* - Having a more sustainable ceramics practice might include a focus on **slow production** by developing an ethical position on the social, environmental and economic costs of clay work. Selecting clay materials and processes based on issue of stewardship and sustainability is Slow Ceramics.

But how does a person who thrives on complexity and is quite driven apply the best of Slow to her arts practice to be more successful? I haven't joined a group or tattooed a mandate to my left breast but I am experimenting with the following.

*Slow Life*- **I am slowing down the pace of my life and spending more time in my garden or in wild and natural environments.** One of the key skills of working with clay is learning to work with its tempo, of learning its properties of hardening and shrinking, of learning how the elements, climate and season impact on its built-in lifecycle. Applying this same respect for tempo to one's life would mean consciously deciding when to go fast and when to go slow. It means consciously nurturing a Slow Life.

*Simplicity* - **I am simplifying by literally doing less.** Ceramicists are under increasing pressure to diversify and to produce multiple bodies of work in tight timeframes. Simplifying and concentrating on doing less really well builds competency and is more likely to result in critical success and recognition.

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<sup>10</sup> See Carl Honore's 2007 book, *Under Pressure: How the epidemic of hyper-parenting is endangering childhood.*

*Slow Thinking* - **I am relaxing more and planning in more time for slow thinking (this means time out without TV, radio, phone,ect.)** Making time to relax is likely to result in deeper more critical and creative thinking. Research is now supporting what we already know as practicing artists –that to be creative we need to be calm and unstressed.

*Flow* - **I fiercely protect my creative life by minimising distractions so I can be in the flow more often.** Protecting a ceramics practice by minimising distractions so you can more frequently be in Flow is not only going to make you more creative its likely to result in crafting a life that is meaningful, happy and personally fulfilling. I'm not sure you can find a better set of criteria for success than that.

*Focus* - **I am focusing and avoiding the temptation to multi-task. This means not being constantly accessible to others and choosing to access emails and calls at concentrated periods of my day.** - Galleries, curators and craft outlets invite back art producers with clever, saleable ceramics that promise a quick turn-over. We need to be efficient if we are to keep up with demand. The contemporary solution to too much work and too little time is the notion of multi-tasking. However we're now being shown that multi-tasking makes us unproductive. Avoiding the temptation to multi-task, I am instead focusing on doing one thing at a time really well.

*Longevity* - **I am aiming to make less works but objects that have longevity and are intellectually and visually slow to consume.** Ceramics resists decay and the push for disposability but what about the meaning of objects? Consumers are questioning the value of art that is quick to comprehend, but has little substance. I consciously layer up the level of memory, meaning and complexity in my works (metaphorically and physically) to encourage reflection and sustain attention over time. I do this to create ceramics that are slow to consume.

*Slow making* - **Finally I continue to explore aspects of slow production which respect the speed of the hand in making.** Slow Ceramics respects the speed of the hand in making and just might be the right banner under which to gain a strong financial foothold in the global market. Slowness has always been associated with crafted skills. Learned through practice and experience over time, they are drawn from, and feed back into, local traditions and resources. Advances in technology make many of the traditional ways of working with clay seemingly redundant against the demand for inexpensive and mass produced ceramics. There are many forms of ceramics practice that are no longer taught in our institutions. Protecting, preserving, recording and passing on these artisan traditions and their relationship to place is Slow Ceramics.

## Conclusion

Rapid change and the need for speed is part of our daily lives. A counter response to this acceleration has been the Slow Movement which advocates a cultural shift toward slowing down the pace of life. This paper has been concerned with the relevance of Slow to ceramic practice and argued that the idea of Slow Ceramics is attractive because it offers an approach that can be both subversive and balanced at the same time.

Applying the principles of Slow to an individual's ceramic practice might focus on the conditions of a creative life and include slowing down, simplifying, relaxing more, avoiding the temptation to multi-task and optimising opportunities to think slowly or be in Flow. Alternatively, Slow Ceramics may be more about developing a critical position on the social, environmental and economic costs of going too fast. Slow Ceramics from this angle would be concerned with how ceramics are produced and consumed.

Consciously trying to slow down and do everything as well as possible, instead of as fast as possible has resulted in behaviours which some people in my social and professional network find perplexing – being able to function without a mobile phone or a facebook page apparently being the most baffling. But if history has taught me anything it's that I am at my absolute creative best when I care not what others think but get on and do my own thing.

Regardless of how we might want to engage with the idea of Slow as ceramicists the key message of deceleration is simple, subversive and positive. *Slow down and do everything as well as possible, instead of as fast as possible. You'll be happier and more successful if you do.*

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