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Article

The Unfinished Artification of Ceramics in France: Reversing Stigma and Creating a New Artistic Norm

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Abstract

Ceramic artists emerged as a professional group in France in the second half of the 20th century by shunning industrial standards and basing their practice on the notion of singularity. They also reappropriated the craft legacy of the small pottery companies that began disappearing in the 1940s, embracing principles such as seriality and functionality, and defining a specific bundle of tasks. Ceramicists underwent a partial artification process, rendering their practice discordant with what institutionally and legally constitutes art, as well as diverging from the standard definition of craft. Certain art ceramicists contest the cultural ranking that policymakers apply which excludes art-crafts from the purview of art. To claim recognition for the composite nature of their practice, they seek recourse to the courts to create new legal norms. They also strive to expand the definition of art. The article demonstrates how shifts in the balance of power both inside a professional group and between the group and government agencies can influence institutional definitions of art.

Keywords

Art ceramicists, artification, artist, ceramics, craft, cultural ranking, France, law, professions, stigma

The normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives. These are generated in social situations during mixed contacts ...

(Erving Goffman, 2009 [1963]: 137–138)

Until the mid-20th century, most ceramic artefacts were manufactured on a semi-industrial basis with the objective of producing a large quantity of goods. The activity of the

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art ceramicist was ‘invented’ in the mid-20th century when practitioners began working with clay in order to ‘make art’ while focusing on a process of artistic singularity (Heinich, 2005; Moulin, 1983). Currently, there are approximately 2000 art ceramicists (*céramistes d’art*) in France.¹ These individuals engage in various practices under a number of legal statuses. They produce utilitarian ceramics (jugs, plates, mugs, dishes, etc.), but also unique, sculptural pieces. They work under a variety of occupational statuses (artist, artisan, free-lance, self-employed) in a broad range of venues (galleries, home-based boutiques, potters’ markets, arts-and-craft shows). In spite of this diversity of practices and identities, art ceramicists share a corpus of common occupational norms. Beginning in the 1970s, a dense organizational, commercial and occupational network has gradually developed in the form of specialist journals, training courses, commercial venues, festivals, professional meetings, as well as representative and regulatory organizations, such as professional associations, many of which are members of the National Ceramicist Collective (*Collectif National des Céramistes*), and a trade association, the Art Workshops of France (*Ateliers d’art de France*).

Founded on the artification of practices linked to clay, or, in other words, on the transformation of those practices from ‘non-art to art’ (Shapiro and Heinich, 2012), the occupation gradually emerged over a 60-year period. However, this artification process remains incomplete. Art ceramics are usually associated with the notion of *métiers d’art*, or ‘art-crafts’, a range of activities located at the intersection between art and craft – *artisanat* (Melot, 2012). But the divide between the two spheres remains firmly established in France. For example, artists and artisans work under separate legal statuses and are governed by distinct ministries: the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Trade and Craft. Each category constitutes an ideal type structured by specific logics (Becker, 1982: 272–299; Heinich, 2005; Moulin, 1983). While ceramicists simultaneously accept and, indeed encourage approaches that partake of what officially constitutes art, agents in the artistic field have traditionally defined their identity in opposition to the principles underlying what ceramicists do. These fundamentals include: the importance of expertise and specialist techniques, the exteriority and objectivity of evaluation criteria, the functionality of the object and a response to external demand. Ceramics is not quite considered an art, and ceramicists are engaged in a struggle to obtain the status of artist and the subsidies that go with it. Consequently, they are rarely invited to art venues by public cultural institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture, or its regional outlets, the Directions Régionales des Affaires Culturelles (DRAC, Regional Directorates of Cultural Affairs).² Access to such benefits is dependent on precise, legally established criteria that exclude the artisanal approaches described earlier. Indeed, the factors characterizing ceramics do not correspond to the ‘normative expectations’ attached to art (Goffman, 2009: 2). In other words, at the level of collective action, the incomplete artification of ceramics acts as a ‘stigma’, making it difficult to incorporate art ceramics (understood as an occupation) into public art policy.

Thus, the incomplete process of artification raises two questions about the tensions between art ceramics and dominant cultural norms. Firstly, what insight does it provide into the conditions within which the artistic value of goods and individuals is constructed? What does it reveal about points of tension and rupture, or, on the contrary, about points of compatibility between art and craft? The second question is associated

with the multiple meanings of this phenomenon. If social actors hold a worldview based on concepts of deficiency, they desire the completion of artification, as they aspire to conform to the dominant cultural model. In contrast, those who adopt the perspective of critical advocacy promote an alternative approach to artification associated with attempts to redefine art. In this case, we are in a situation where people attempt to reverse the stigma attached to ceramics as craft.

In this article I demonstrate how the ‘invention’ of art ceramics as an occupation is based on multiple processes of artification. I then describe how, in a process that began in the 1970s, occupational norms and ‘good practices’ linked with art worlds were codified while several defining principles of the artisanal sphere were simultaneously conserved. Lastly, I explain how the process of incomplete artification, which was perceived and experienced as a stigma both by ceramicists and by their institutional interlocutors, became the focus of an attempt to turn the tables, by recourse to the law.

The Survey

This research, which derives from a doctoral thesis, is largely based on an ethnographic immersion in the everyday life and work of art ceramicists in France between 2009 and 2014. As well as numerous direct and participant observations, I conducted 62 semi-structured interviews; most participants were interviewed individually, but a handful of interviews were conducted in pairs. Some of the interviews were conducted with managers from various associations and institutions. The other 46 interviews were conducted with ceramicists who live in various parts of France, notably the Midi-Pyrénées and Rhône-Alpes regions, as well as in central France near the ceramicist hamlet of La Borne. Among the interviewees were 30 men and 23 women, four of whom became ceramicists between 1950 and 1960, 23 between 1970 and 1989, and 22 since 1990. I also drew on professional documentation: trade association archives, reports published by associations, press releases and so on. My research included the results of a questionnaire I administered (218 respondents, which I estimate to be approximately 10% of ceramicists in France based on the register in the Guide of Ceramists and my own fieldwork observations.).

Over half of the ceramicists chose ceramics as a vocation, often choosing it after holding a highly qualified job. Generally speaking, they have a high degree of cultural and academic capital. The parents of a considerable percentage of the sample (35%) were art professionals therefore belonging to the official and statistical category of ‘executive and higher intellectual professions’. Most of them were based in rural areas (45% of those surveyed by questionnaire live in a village with less than 1000 inhabitants, while only 9% live in a town with over 100,000 inhabitants). However, they experience precarious economic conditions. Over three-quarters of the sample (152 out of 203 respondents) claimed to have earned around €1000 per month in 2010 from ceramics sales. Consequently, approximately 40% of respondents in the sample have another job, often linked to ceramics (courses and workshops).

Artifying Old Ways, Inventing a New Trade

Until the first half of the 20th century, pottery was a central part of everyday life; tile makers, manufacturers and small family ceramics companies were integral to the

economies of French towns and villages, with their products being used in homes as well as serving to transport, conserve, produce and consume food products. During this period, the production of ceramics was dominated by manufacturing industries and family firms. The entire sector was characterized by a pronounced division of labour, repetitive tasks, and a relatively high degree of mechanization designed to produce goods in large quantities. But in the 20th century, the industry collapsed for a number of economic, technological and demographic reasons.³ However, this type of production of ceramic artefacts left an important legacy in the form of a bundle of tasks (shaping, enamelling, firing) that were to be reappropriated by art ceramicists in the 1940s.

In that decade, a number of designers – who were sociologically very different from the old rural and working-class ceramicists – took an artistic and creative approach to clay. Their way of doing art ceramics was much more forthright than that of their rare predecessors active in the early part of the century, both in terms of production and conception. They created unique pieces and sought to artify what they made. These creative persons, who came from families with substantial cultural capital and who attended art schools, were ‘equipped with a cultivated disposition (that they doubtless owed, at least partially, to time spent at school) and potentially had the status of artists’ (Boltanski, 1975: 40). Unlike traditional ceramicists, who had been trained locally in family firms, they had an aesthetic sensibility and a knowledge of artistic currents and practices. For the latter, clay represented new opportunities for self-expression, enabling them – ideally – to experience an artistic activity, while for the former, it constituted the foundation of an economic enterprise based on family tradition in their area. These traditional potters perceived art ceramicists as ‘artists’, a term often used in a pejorative sense. While it would be inaccurate to speak of economic competition between the new art ceramicists and traditional potters, because their activities were entirely different there was nevertheless competition between two dissonant conceptions of ceramics: one supposedly serious, effective and masculine, the other, sometimes carried out by women, allegedly marginal and/or dilettante. As one of my respondents explained:

[Elizabeth Joulia] fired with the potters, who were somewhat surprised to see a female ceramicist who did things that weren’t traditional [laughter]. But, of course, there are times, there were people who were angry at seeing [that], and who were a bit mocking. Firstly, because they weren’t used to seeing a woman working with clay; in the ceramics business of the time women in workshops only made handles ... In other words, all these people who were turning up mostly came from the Fine Arts, from Art Déco, all that ... so they at least had an artistic education, they read, they weren’t common-or-garden types, they were more on the margins, all that, than the traditional potters in La Borne.

(Lisette, approx. 80 years old; she moved to La Borne around 1950, worked alongside her husband, one of the first art ceramicists in the village)

Well-known in the milieu of French art ceramicists, Jean and Jacqueline Lerat are a married couple who exemplify this phenomenon. Trained at the Fine Arts School (*l’Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts*) in Bourges and at the National School of Design (*l’Ecole nationale des Arts décoratifs*, or *Les Arts Déco*) in Paris, they decided in the 1950s to move to the hamlet of La Borne, where in addition to a large population of traditional

pottery, a number of art ceramicists were setting up shop. Jean and Jacqueline taught ceramics at the Fine Arts School in Bourges from the 1960s to the 1980s while displaying their creative work in art galleries up until the 2000s. Like other ceramicists of the time, they were part of the first generation of artist neo-artisans in France (Jourdain, 2014). Having benefited from an artistic education and drawing inspiration from movements such as Cubism, these creative people turned to traditional artisanal materials and popular aesthetic forms, while taking an interest in clay, which they intended to transform into a creative field in its own right.⁴

This first generation of art ceramicists continued to apply traditional techniques: fashioning untreated clay, creating slipware and/or enamelling pieces and firing them. However, they also implemented a veritable axiological and technical shift in regard to traditional and industrial ceramics. First, the founders of art ceramics attached new meanings to the old professional practices. Objects were no longer conceived as ordinary goods for everyday use, but as unique artefacts that could be judged aesthetically (even if they could also serve quotidian needs). On the technical and aesthetic side, organizational change (abandoning parcellization, creating unique pieces), and the invention of new textures, shapes and colours, became the signifiers of a new concern: the uniqueness of the work. Traces of firing, irregular surfaces, unexpected enamel runs, combinations of enamels and glazes, an expressive brushstroke that would previously have disqualified a vessel became indicators of an experimental manner foregrounding originality. Modifications to kilns were emblematic of this turn of events; they became substantially smaller, marking a transition from the mass production of utilitarian objects to small series or even unique pieces. This was, for example, the case at La Borne, when Paul Beyer built the first Sèvres-style 'small kiln' in the 1940s. A respondent recalled the reactions this produced:

[Traditional potters] who had always basically pumped out pots, really found it hard to understand what we had come here to do, what we wanted to achieve ... I think it was difficult to understand; they made as many pots as they could for as many people as they could, while what we wanted was one piece for one person, just one individual!

(Célestine, 62, who came to live and work in La Borne in 1959)

These techniques were, therefore, at once the consequence and the concrete expression of the axiological shift in that they served as the pivot for technique and aesthetic conceptions, tools and ideologies as well as work and identity. In fact, the ceramicists of the 1940s accomplished not only a socio-demographic break in educational and cultural capital, gender and in the logics of entry into the craft, they also founded a new kind of professionalism. A transmutation of the bundle of tasks that had defined ceramics took place in the 1940s and 1950s. This confirms that professional practices are not imbued with meaning per se: a relational approach to objects and professional contents is required to understand the shift in values that led to the emergence of a new occupation.

The dynamic underpinning art ceramics developed in villages like La Borne, in ceramics courses in Fine Arts schools,⁵ and in the Art and Craft Fair (*Salon des artisans d'art*) held in Paris from 1949 by the Trade Association of Art Workshops of France (*Chambre syndicale des métiers d'art de France* or AAF). The fact that the first wave of

art ceramicists lived in the same area and shared commercial venues sustained the shift from what Nathalie Heinich calls an ‘order of community’ to an ‘order of singularity’ (Heinich, 1997b). However, this was only the beginning of the process; artification continued throughout the 1970s, during which time a major phenomenon occurred, namely, the codification of the new professional norms.

The 1970s and After: Codification and Autonomization of an Occupation Between Art and Craft

In the 1970s, ceramicists focused increasingly on making their own tools with a view to creating unique, personalized pieces. They were open to experimentation and the unexpected. Traces of various technical contingencies previously regarded as aesthetic faults became the markers of artification. This process was made possible by the importation into France of foreign, particularly American and Japanese, conceptions of what ceramics design could be.

Initially, important artistic approaches to ceramics that had developed in the USA in the period after the Second World War made their appearance in France with the work of leading figures in contemporary American ceramics such as Voukos, Arneson and Soldner. Practitioners of Abstract Expressionist Ceramics, a new ceramics movement that emerged in California, attempted to extend the possibilities of the use of clay. Clay was considered in the same light as any other medium worthy of the Fine Arts, whether used two-dimensionally like paint, or in a more sculptural, three-dimensional manner:

The task these ceramicists set themselves was to rediscover the essential characteristics of the medium ... These ceramicists began to exploit shape and surface for its expressive potential. (Coplans 1978: 158–159).

Another movement characteristic of the humour and subversion of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s – the Funk Ceramic Movement, represented by the works of Arneson – also made an impact.

In the USA, ceramic art was also influenced by an Asian conception of design which, when it was introduced into France, proved highly influential. Eschewing the principle of a separation between art and craft, it combined functionality with aesthetics and usefulness with artistic value. The importation of traditional wood fire *anagama* and *noborigama* kilns, and of techniques from Korea and Japan, enabled ceramicists to use wood rather than gas to fire clay for long periods of time, thus allowing them to obtain ‘effects’ that would not otherwise have been possible. For example, the traditional Japanese *raku* technique can be used to transform materials randomly, making it possible to act directly on them while they are being fired. North American approaches, coupled with wood-fired *raku* techniques, attracted the attention of students in French Fine Arts schools. The following extract from an interview is highly significant in terms of the traces left by this episode on the ceramicists of the time. Régis, who became a ceramicist in 1977, discusses the emotional shock of discovering American *raku* techniques and the ‘effects’ that it was possible to achieve with wood-fired kilns:

The 1970s and 1980s was the time when people ... when people were kind of looking for effects, new effects, you know. Above all, we read American ceramics journals, and then, all of a sudden, we started looking at *raku*, which had just arrived ... We really had the impression of ... of discovering a *new light*, a new ... As far as I'm concerned, it's when I saw pieces coming out of a large [wooden] kiln in La Borne that had been fired in 1978, seeing it in an American journal ... I discovered *effects*, you know! (Régis, 53)

Paradoxically, *raku* and wood-firing techniques, which are supposedly 'ancestral', were symptoms of the craft's contemporaneity, bearing witness as they did to the reinvention (Hobsbawm, 1983) of a supposedly original and timeless 'pottery tradition' into which French ceramicists of the second half of the 20th century delved with a view to forging a new occupational identity. In other words, ceramicists who started working in the 1970s 'made a connection' (Amselle, 2001) with older or foreign techniques in order to develop a new system of occupational values.

Régis's remarks in the foregoing quotation, include mention of the existence of another important factor, namely, the centrality of publications in the diffusion of these creative Asian and American techniques and practices. Ceramicist and writer Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*, published in Britain in 1940 and translated into French in 1973, played a significant role in importing these approaches and techniques into France. *A Potter's Book* provided new practitioners with the opportunity to exchange enamel techniques, plans for kilns and firing, and approaches to preparation. To borrow the expression commonly used in the community, it became the 'Bible' of young ceramicists:

Leach was really obligatory reading for everyone, you know ... I've still got a copy ... It must be the first edition [1973] that I've got ... And that really made a mark. At the Fine Arts we used Japanese enamels, you see?

(Paulin, 57, Fine Arts School from 1970 to 1975)

The book describes a period when the new aesthetic rules were codified, and the number of journals in the field increased dramatically. A year after the first French edition of *A Potter's Book* appeared, *Clay and Glazes*, a veritable encyclopedia on enamels by the American author Daniel Rhodes, was translated into French (Rhodes, 1957). These English-language works provided valuable additions to the French corpus, which, in 1964, already included books by Daniel de Montmollin, who combined technical and philosophical considerations in his writings on the subject of working with clay. New journals also emerged, for example *Céramique moderne*, founded in 1959, and *La revue de la Céramique et du Verre* in 1981. This was an international dynamic: the first major journal appeared in the USA in 1941, followed by similar periodicals in Britain in 1971, Spain in 1978, Greece in 1987 and Australia in 1990. These publications campaigned for a new occupational model and facilitated the popularization of artification processes (Shapiro and Heinich, 2012). The content of these processes was both *semantic* (manifestos, articles, debates and opinions) and *discursive* (specific notions and vocabulary around which actors in the field gradually positioned themselves). The publications also provided, by their very nature, a valuable *iconographic* aid in that they published colour reproductions of photographs showing pieces presented as they would be in art galleries.

Furthermore, they provided a medium for artification processes to be effective in a variety of ways: *socially* (advertisements for exhibitions and events dedicated to art ceramics); *legally* (laws and regulations applicable to the occupation); and *via associations* (initiatives aimed at strengthening the art ceramics community).

In this regard, another aspect should be addressed: organization. While occupational norms were beginning to be codified in various publications, they were truly established as institutions in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of ceramicist associations, trade associations, and commercial venues. This type of codification was implemented by individuals belonging to the second generation of art ceramicists who were largely inspired by ‘Neo-Ruralists’ (Hervieu and Hervieu-Léger, 2005). Like many others in this ‘second wave of art artisans’ (Jourdain, 2014), a large proportion were motivated by the utopian ideals of the times, rejecting the city with its logic of capitalism and the salary system. This generation would play an even more important role in the professionalization of art ceramics, and this is why its members are described as the real ‘makers’ of the craft, or, to be more precise, the occupation. These individuals made their art the basis for their livelihood while working with their peers, sharing current techniques and innovations, and developing venues that made it economically viable to pursue the craft. Through these and other actions, they became an occupational group (Bajard, 2015).

A substantial number of collectives emerged in the late 1970s. Their common denominator was providing peers with the space and time to compare and evaluate their work, as well as to codify and impose ‘good practices’. Some of these groups were small and informal, gathering on the odd occasion, spending days and nights using wood kilns. However, other, larger groups assembled in a more formal and established way. In 1966 the Biennale of Vallauris was set up, followed in 1979 by the Châteauroux Biennale of Contemporary Ceramics. In 1976, ‘potter’s markets’ were introduced. These commercial events are now widespread; the National Collective of Ceramicists listed 146 of them in 2015. Ceramicists also organize ‘professional meetings’ including workshops, collective firing sessions, demonstrations, exhibitions and conferences all over France; notable amongst these are the International Ceramics Symposium at La Borne (1977), the *Printemps des Potiers* (‘Potters’ Spring’, established in 1988), and the International Festival of Arthous (founded in 1998). These events helped to build a universe of talents, conventions and reputations in the milieu and to create an autonomous sphere of aesthetic judgement. Lastly, ceramicist associations were set up at the beginning in the 1980s. In 1999, they merged to form the *Collectif National des Céramistes*, which, in 2015, included 20 associations and approximately 750 workshops. These organizational elements helped provide occupational autonomy for ceramicists, similar to that enjoyed by writers (Lahire, 2006) and comic-book authors in the 1970s (Boltanski, 1975).

But while this process enhanced the artification of the craft, it also confirmed its incompleteness. The technical, aesthetic and ethical occupational norms that were stabilized during this period remained deeply marked by the old artisanal approaches. Even today, it is impossible for art ceramicists to dispense with the notion of the singularity of their work, to express ideas that are neither vocational nor disinterested, to ignore themes of interiority, and to eschew an *auteur*-based outlook without being marginalized or excluded from exhibitions and associations, or, at an informal level, enduring harsh criticism from their peers. In spite of this, it is essential for ceramicists to master the

techniques of shaping, enamelling and firing. If they fail to do so, they will be seen as amateurs and dilettantes, or 'naïve' individuals suffering from illusions of adequacy in a technically demanding occupation. In fact, artisanal approaches are accepted as legitimate (at least publicly) by ceramicists who focus exclusively on producing unique or sculptural pieces. Of course, there are, roughly speaking, two occupational segments: one basically founded on the characteristics of art, the other based on artisanal approaches. Consequently, some ceramicists do not make any functional objects at all, working exclusively on unique, non-utilitarian pieces. However, in an occupational context, it is not possible to criticize the functional nature of objects, at least in public. While industrial ceramics and practices such as plagiarism are castigated, I did not find any examples, either formal or informal, of ceramicists openly challenging the idea of functional ceramics. Furthermore, the internal documents of associations (board meeting reports, press kits, etc.), and the organizational rules governing potter markets demonstrate that a hybridity between art and craft is now the professional norm. Associations accept ceramicists as members regardless of whether they are artists or artisans. Similarly, they claim to promote a broad range of techniques and practices, both utilitarian and sculptural. Lastly, many of my interviewees highlighted expertise and the usefulness of objects, while simultaneously focusing on the importance of design and aesthetics.

Reversing the Stigma through Recourse to the Law. Incomplete Artification as a Virtue

In France, the dichotomy between art and craft is based on precise criteria established by the French Tax Code, the French Social Security Code, and the French Intellectual Property Code. These criteria are based, firstly, on the notion of the *non-utility* of the work of art (which 'contains its own finality', or, in other words, has no purpose other than itself), and, secondly, on its *originality* (French Code of Social Security).⁶ Furthermore, the unique nature of a work and the fact that it has been entirely produced by an individual are also essential factors of 'originality' (French Tax Code).⁷ Consequently, ceramic pieces in the shape of a container (vases, trays, etc.) are, according to these criteria, considered to be functional – and thus non-artistic – objects, even when their size or price suggests that they are purely decorative. In fact, these criteria are used by certain institutions to allocate subsidies or attribute the status of 'artist', with the social protection it affords, to specific individuals. Concretely, difficulties arising from the attempt to include the field of ceramics in public arts policy take several different forms. Primary amongst them is the lack of money and personnel allocated to art crafts in the institutions responsible for such policies (the DRAC, the French Ministry of Culture). In such cases, ceramics accounts for only a tiny fraction of the time and effort these institutions dedicate to art crafts. These activities are so restricted that ceramicists view them as merely symbolic. Indeed, many ceramicists in my sample were not even aware of their existence.⁸ In 2012, an adviser to the Plastic Arts Department and previous director of the Art Crafts division at a DRAC unit showed me the annual budget of her institution. The report included the entry '€0' for 'Art Crafts.' The relatively marginal place occupied by ceramics in public policy is mirrored by the difficulty of obtaining (and retaining) the status of artist and acquiring individual subsidies from the DRAC.

In these last two situations, ceramics is, again, sometimes described as an art craft, sometimes as a craft by agents in these administrations. Consequently, the practice is excluded from their general field of action. Requests for financial aid are a case in point. Sylvie, a ceramicist with the status of artist, mentioned an exchange she had after a DRAC refused to give her a grant:

Because he [my correspondent at the DRAC] told me ‘yes, well, you potters, you know, we can’t support potters, it’s not art, it’s craft ... you fiddle around in your workshops’, all that ... And so I quoted him the names of ceramicists that he’d heard of. For example, I told him that people like Claudi Casanova [an internationally renowned ceramicist] are proud to tell anyone who’ll listen that they’re ceramicists! And he says, ‘No, he’s not a ceramicist, he’s an artist! He’s a sculptor, he’s an artist!’ And I tell him: ‘No, he claims he’s a ceramicist! Because he belongs to the clay people [*famille de la terre*]!’⁹ (Sylvie, 57, artist since 1998)

Sylvie finally obtained a contribution of €5000 to replace her kiln. However, in the memo of the meeting where this decision was sanctioned, she was described as a ‘sculptor’ rather than as a ‘ceramicist’. At stake here are the criteria used in various legal texts and the questions of categorization they raise. Take for example the ‘Reports of the Consultative Commission’ of a DRAC that allocates financial aid to artists. The reports in question covered the period 2002–2012. The various criteria established did not, a priori, exclude ceramicists from this support. However, the criterion for including an artist’s work in a ‘contemporary’ conception of creation implied an individual appreciation of art, which, for the assessors, meant going beyond notions of ‘vessels’ and ‘utility.’ The adviser we interviewed explained that she based her views on the French Tax Code and on Social Security legislation, claiming that ‘the object should not contain any idea of utility!’ These factors demonstrate the centrality of the usefulness criterion in aesthetic judgements in France. But it also indicates the personal nature of judgements and, as a result, the lack of a stabilized ‘criteriology’ (Heinich 1997a: 113). Ceramicists therefore focus on the malleability of the definition of art in an attempt to alter that definition.

In practice, ceramicists acknowledge that they are partially anchored in the craft tradition, but they refuse to be excluded from the field of art. In this regard, they developed two critiques of the division between art and craft. Some attempt to demonstrate the artistic character of certain works and practices judged to be artisanal. Others question the cultural hierarchy in which art is considered more important than craft, by defending the cultural value of their artisanal work and the validity of its inclusion in public policy on artists and artworks. These two forms of critique, often confused by my interviewees, illustrate an important aspect of the dispute. What is sought is ‘some kind of separateness [*vis-à-vis* dominant cultural norms], not assimilation’ (Goffman, 2009: 114). In other words, instead of attempting, either individually or via their representative organizations, to dissimulate occupational norms that could stigmatize them, some ceramicists appropriate those norms and use them critically to modify the criteria applied to define art. Both critiques are mostly limited to discursive postures, and to formal and informal exchanges with particular institutions. But occasionally they are manifested through recourse to the law. Legal recourse takes two forms: judicialization of the cause (resolving disputes via court cases), and juridification (resorting to existing legal norms, or

seeking to create new ones for more extensive regulation of social actions and interactions) (Pélisse, 2009).¹⁰

Judicialization: The Case for Obtaining (or Retaining) the Status of Artist

In an attempt to gain membership in the *Maison des Artistes* – the body responsible for managing visual artists' work insurance and providing various types of assistance and thereby work under the legal status of artist, some ceramicists have claimed that their work conforms to the criterion of non-utility. Some accomplished this by presenting sculptures in their applications but made sure not to include photos of their utilitarian work; others included close-up photographs, thus modifying the nature of the object in question (a functional tray could be presented as a non-functional 'mural panel'). Another strategy was to present drawings and paintings so that they were officially registered as 'painters'. 'Cheating' of this kind is common amongst ceramicists joining the *Maison des Artistes* and is an example of submitting to artistic criteria that R Moulin and HS Becker claim are a requirement for those wanting entry into the art world (Moulin, 1992: 267). From Goffman's perspective, this 'monitoring of information' by potentially discreditable individuals applying for membership is an attempt to conform to established social norms. Without correcting it, they attempt to hide the stigma (Goffman, 2009: 9 and Chapter 2).

Other approaches employed by ceramicists attempting to become members are characterized by conflict or, to use a term indigenous to the milieu, *forcing* ('pressure'). This involves bringing individual court cases against the *Maison des Artistes*. The first case brought to court by a ceramicist in 1974 lasted four years from the ruling given by the French Social Security's Commission of First Instance and including various actions taken at an Appeal Court and at the Court of Cassation. This case brought to the fore the differences concerning the correct definition of the originality of works adjudged to be functional, since originality is a prime factor in terms of determining whether they were artistic or artisanal. For the ceramicist taking legal action, this concerned their trays, vases and so forth. Further legal actions ensued. In some cases, the notion of originality was defined by the judge on the basis of aesthetic appreciation; in others, the notion was measured objectively against previously established criteria, including uniqueness and the fact of being handmade and signed by a specific author. In the 1974 case, the court ruled in favour of the ceramicist, stating that the *Maison des Artistes*' Professional Commission had gone beyond its remit by basing its evaluation of the relevant objects on their shape (they were containers).

However, these legal decisions did not result in a stable set of ground rules for ceramicists wanting to join the *Maison des Artistes*. This was why in 2006, a ceramicist brought another case against the organization.¹¹ A year-and-a-half after joining, his membership was rescinded on the grounds that he practised an 'art craft', a definition based on the 'purpose' for which the objects he made were designed. In their closing statements,¹² the *Maison d'Artistes* commented: 'the fact that the ceramics of Mr X are entirely hand-crafted by him as unique pieces and signed by him does not mean that they are not utilitarian in nature'; '[therefore] his activity cannot be categorized with the graphic or plastic arts'. In 2009, the court ruled in favour of the ceramicist, emphasizing the criterion of

originality over that of non-usefulness. The creations of the ceramicist, the court ruled, 'are unique works and there is no question that they have been made by him. The fact that they take the form of utilitarian objects does not necessarily deprive them of the character of original, unique, works, entirely executed by the hand of the artist and signed by him.'¹³ In effect, the court highlighted that the current articles of law to which the *Maison des Artistes* should refer 'do not make any reference to whether or not works of art are utilitarian'. In the end, the court ruled that the individual should be readmitted to the agency with immediate effect.

The struggle over criteria of originality and usefulness is of fundamental importance in that it allows the recognition of ceramicists who make useful objects as artists, or, to quote a trade journal of the time, that they are able to 'exercise their art on a pot', (*La revue de la Céramique et du Verre*, 1984). Several of my interviewees mentioned other non-judicial actions taken at an individual level. Some involved letters, many of which circulated in the professional milieu. These personal initiatives are symptomatic of a desire to appropriate different aspects of the notion of utility. Expressions of this desire range from 'the useful can be art', upheld by the occupational segment closest to art, to 'art must be useful', upheld by the segment closest to craft, including ceramicists who actually broadcast their intention to create a 'functional aesthetic' and 'everyday art objects,' like Pascal, quoted in the appendix. Others mentioned the names of 20th-century artists recognized for their utilitarian works, presenting them as authoritative arguments. Lastly, many considered that utilitarian containers are not, or not only, vehicles of artistic creation, but that they are also artistic creations in and of themselves. (One ceramicist drily explained that she was 'working on a "hollow revolving object which is truncated and open on the upper part", also called: a "bowl"').¹⁴ Here she is applying the first type of critique (demonstrating the artistic nature of specific works).

Thus, judicialization of the cause contributes to the artification of ceramics. Meanwhile, the process of juridification incorporates the second kind of critique by challenging the exclusion of art craft activities from the field of arts policy.

Juridification: Creating Legal Norms and Extending the Boundaries of Art

Since the 1970s, several actors in art crafts, particularly the Trade Association of Art Workshops of France (AAF), have attempted to introduce the legal status of art artisan. This status would allow ceramicists to join the insurance and pension scheme for artist-authors and would pave the way for a fifth college – art crafts – within the Chamber of Trades,¹⁵ alongside the four existing regulatory categories (food, construction, production and services). In 2013, the AAF hired a legal team to examine the question. The team's findings were presented to the cabinet of the French Prime Minister of the time, Jean-Marc Ayrault.

In this text, AAF experts describe the creative dimension of artisanal activities, defending the idea that 'the art artisan is a creator of original works "carrying a trace of the personality of their author"' (Audugé et al., 2013: 2), and thereby foregrounding the central criterion of originality. This requires appealing to the French Code of Intellectual Property, which, as we have seen earlier, makes no mention of the notion of utility. Thus, without disavowing or renouncing the notion of crafts, the approach is based on

demonstrating creative and artistic value with a view to securing the inclusion of art crafts (and artisans) in public arts policy. One of the main recommendations outlined in the concluding statements was to establish a 'straightforward presumption of eligibility for art artisans to the social scheme of author-artists' (Audugé et al., 2013: 11). Lastly, the AAF demanded that the French Tax Code be amended to abolish the distinction between 'pure' art and 'applied' art.

In 2013, a parliamentary amendment intended to bestow legal recognition to the art crafts sector was drawn up on the initiative of the AAF in collaboration with the APCMA (*Assemblée Permanente des Chambres de Métiers et de l'Artisanat*, or Permanent Assembly of Chambers of Trades and Crafts), and the UNMA (*Union Nationale des Métiers d'Art*, or National Union of Art Crafts). Incorporating this amendment, the law, already deemed 'historic' by the trade association, was examined and ratified by the French National Assembly and then by the French Senate on 16 April 2014.¹⁶ The law is composed of two essential elements: it recognizes art crafts as an economic sector, and art artisans as 'creators', distinctive from other artisans by the artistic quality of their work. This suggests that the boundary between art and crafts is gradually being questioned in the legal sphere, eroding the distinction between the two major categories of art and crafts.

Conclusion

The two forms of criticism that ceramicists level against current definitions of art are based on a contestation of its existing criteria and its boundaries. First, advocates of ceramics as an art argue that useful objects can be considered as art; and, secondly, they maintain that there is a distinct and specific domain – art crafts – which should be considered as an artistic activity. However, the artification of art ceramics, although partially recognized, remains incomplete. While the court cases mentioned in this article can be understood as victories, they are only the most institutionalized part of the struggle, the judicial part. The symbolic and economic aspects of the dispute (that is, the difficulties encountered in obtaining subsidies from the DRAC) have not disappeared. Furthermore, the incompleteness of the artification process is coupled with the relational quality of certain practices with respect to the boundaries and definitions that apply to the field of art. In other words, the degree of artification of ceramics varies, depending on whether or not art crafts are included in the artistic field. The question is partially resolved by the fact that, at the conclusion of a long legal process, the gap between art and art crafts was reduced. However, the very definition of art crafts has recently been called into question. Since the spring of 2015, the institutions representing the trade associations (i.e. the artisanship sector), wanted to include florists and photographers in the list of art crafts. The Trade Association of Art Workshops of France (AAF) was strongly opposed, arguing that art crafts are defined, amongst other cumulative criteria, by the 'transformation of matter' (something that florists and photographers do not do). This renewal of discussions about the boundaries between the categories of crafts, art crafts and art reveals how the definition of art – and therefore, artification – is always open to negotiation and subject to change. This variability suggests that caution should be applied to the notion of artification, which in fact covers a multiplicity of phenomena. On the one hand, artification is a theoretical tool that throws light on the power relations at play

in the transformation of activities and objects into art. On the other, it is an empirical process, an indigenous enterprise whose mechanisms and conditions of possibility social scientists endeavour to explain.

Lastly, my conclusion provides an opportunity to reappraise the question of how people relate to dominant norms. This article demonstrates that ceramicists partially resist the imposition of a separation of art and craft, a division that structures French government policy on the arts. Indeed, among these norms, ceramicists focus on those with which they agree unequivocally (for example, originality), or those that they contest (for example, the criterion of usefulness). In this regard, they express their feeling of legitimately belonging to an institutionally consecrated culture, even though their practices are partially disconnected from it. At the same time, their relationship with official bodies and definitions of art is ambiguous; it can even be described as anything but indifferent, as it combines outright rejection with a quest for recognition. Furthermore, ceramicists pursue their struggle in the legal sphere, presenting their arguments before the courts about the content of the two instituted and dominant categories of art and crafts. In other words, their refusal to ‘assimilate’ to dominant cultural norms, and the reversal of the stigma to which they are subject, are both couched in ‘the language and style of the adversary’ (Goffman, 2009: 114). This manner is linked to the social profile of ceramicists, who are willing and able to challenge the rules established by institutions that they believe legitimate and relevant.

Whatever the case may be, attempts to reverse the stigma, which can be traced back to the 1980s, recall the variability of meanings attributed to specific positions on the continuum of cultural legitimacy. While incomplete artification can be read as a success that has not yet happened, it can also provide alternatives to the dominant model. Put differently, this case serves as a warning against the temptation to attribute systematically, in a teleological manner, a valorizing and valorized meaning to the process of artification.

Translator

This article was translated from French by Michael Lavin.[†]

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Notes

1. There is no official census figure for art ceramicists because they work under a variety of legal statuses. However, the most exhaustive list is the ‘directory’ produced every four years by the company that publishes the trade journal *La revue de la céramique et du verre*.
2. These decentralized agencies are responsible for implementing the policy of the French Ministry of Culture at the regional level.
3. For further details, see Bajard, 2015.
4. In this article, the term ‘field’ has been chosen because it is the most straightforward option for discussing the occupation of ceramicists. However, elsewhere I have analyzed why this Bourdieuan concept might not capture all of the characteristics of ceramics in France. (See Bajard 2019)

5. Among the best-known courses were those given by the Lerats at the Bourges School of Fine Arts.
6. Appendix to the memorandum of 16 February 2011 on income from artistic activities in regard to Article L. 382–383 of the French Social Security Code.
7. ‘Unique examples of ceramics, entirely executed and signed by the artist’: French General Tax Code, Appendix 3 – Article 98 A.
8. See also the role of the long invisible and rather theoretical ‘Art Crafts Mission’ at the French Ministry of Culture, as well as of the Art Crafts Council (Jourdain, 2014).
9. Translator’s note: like Pascal (see Note 5), Sylvie uses the polysemic word *terre*.
10. Translator’s note: many thanks to Jérôme Pélisse for providing the English equivalent of the two key concepts used here – in French: *judiciarisation* and *juridicisation* – on which he based his seminal article on the appropriation of law in labour conflicts, quoted here.
11. For an overview of various cases brought before the law in the early 1980s, see *La revue de la céramique et du verre*, 1984.
12. Extract from the decision rendered on 15 May 2009, by the Court of Social Security Affairs of [the City of] Melun. My thanks to the ceramicist involved for providing us with evidence and arguments used in the case.
13. Extract from the decision rendered on 15 May 2009, by the Court of Social Security Affairs of [the City of] Melun. My thanks to the ceramicist involved for providing us with evidence and arguments used in the case.
14. Letter written in 2010 by a ceramicist. The letter can be consulted at: <http://christina.guwang.over-blog.fr/article-courriers-48766544.html> (accessed 18 August 2013).
15. These bodies (*Chambres des métiers*) organize the economic sector of artisanship at the departmental and regional levels under the aegis of both the Prefecture and the French Ministry of Trade and Crafts.
16. Article 20, Paragraph II, Law on Handicrafts, Trade and Very Small Businesses.

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Flora Bajard works as a sociologist at the French National Center for Scientific Research, and is a member of the LEST (Institute of Labour Economics and Industrial relations, UMR 7317, Aix-Marseille Université/CNRS, France). She completed a PhD in social science in 2014 at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland). Her dissertation examined the creation of the profession of art ceramicists in France in the 20th and 21st centuries, drawing from the sociology of work, the sociology of professions, the sociology of art and culture, and political science. This work explored the issues of artistic work and lifestyles, and the construction of a socio-professional community; it was published as a book, *Les céramistes d'art en France. Sens du travail et styles de vie*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2018. Since 2016, she has led research on cooperatives of freelance workers in France and elsewhere from a political perspective, within a context of increasing 'grey zones' of employment between wage-earning status and self-employment. She is also secretary of the RC30 Sociology of work of the International Sociological Association.

Appendix

Pascal: A Maker of the Craft

Pascal was born in 1950, the son of industrial workers. He graduated with a Brevet de Technicien Supérieur (BTS, i.e. technical) diploma in Design before enrolling in the School of Fine Arts. For seven years, he ‘built highways’. In 1978, he became a ceramicist in the south of France after being laid off from his job. He experienced his new trade not only as a lifestyle, but also as a form of ‘commitment’. A self-described ‘very militant trade unionist’ in his old job, he declared that: ‘that [commitment], the clay, that’s all part of my everyday life; for me it’s all connected’ [Translator’s note: Pascal uses the word *terre*, a word that means clay, earth, land and soil.]. In 1986, he helped set up one of the first regional associations for professional ceramicists (taking the position of president), and organized contacts between colleagues at potters’ markets, involving friends and acquaintances in the process, and displaying a ‘potter spirit’ and ‘a craving to eat the world’. Later, in 1999, he was a founder of the *Collectif National des Céramistes*. Like his companions in the associations, he deplored the ‘breach’ between major and minor arts in France and the lack of recognition for art ceramicists on the part of public cultural institutions. He also defended the everyday use of fine ceramics (‘making beautiful things for people’s everyday lives’). This is one of the reasons he works with clay and uses a number of specific techniques (wood-firing, the transformation of materials). He and his partner make utilitarian products in sandstone at very affordable prices (some of the objects they create are sold for less than €10). They live near an important heritage site in Provence that attracts many tourists, and are present at most markets and events recognized by the trade. They also display their wares at art craft shows and at home.