

Expression in Ceramics since Post-Modernism

With a Focus on Two Exhibitions of Claywork Held in the 1980s and the Concept of Craftical Formation

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Introduction

Japan's ceramic industry is currently going through extremely difficult times. Large numbers of manufacturers have ceased operating and many ceramic wholesalers and related enterprises have gone out of business.

At the same time, the making of ceramics by individual artists of the kind that feature in museum exhibitions, open competitions and solo shows is stagnating. There is less edge to what is being made and a growing sense that much of it is irrelevant to today. It is telling that many open competitions have announced their closure, most notably the Asahi Ceramic Art Exhibition (*Asahi Tōgeiten*), which for many years was a key driving force behind the development of contemporary ceramics. The postwar infrastructure supporting activity in the field is crumbling, while in the rapidly changing conditions of the modern world the hitherto accepted forms of ceramic expression have passed their shelf life.

Contemporary ceramics are in the doldrums, unable to progress beyond modernism and post-modernism. But is it really the case that ceramics as a form of creative endeavour has no future? In recent years, much research has been conducted into art history of the early modern period, with increasing attention being paid to 'notions of art' and 'notions of craft' that developed in Japan from the Meiji period (1868-1912) onwards. 'Craft (*kōgei*)' in particular has been the focus of much discussion. Craft - or the crafts - is seen to occupy an intermediate position between art and industry, between art and life. In parallel with this, there has been extensive exploration of the concept of 'craft-like attributes (*kōgeiteki naru mono*)' separable from what has usually been understood by the term craft, the argument being that the heterogeneous nature of the crafts as opposed to fine art can contribute to a redefinition of 'art'. [note 1]

Against these attempts to relocate ceramics and the crafts by reviewing existing notions of art and craft, a counter proposition - that of 'craftical formation' or 'a new logic of creating form' - has been put forward that says ceramics and the crafts should be assessed from within and on their own terms rather than from without. This concept was developed in response to the growth of post-modernist expression in the 1980s and the increasing congruence between ceramics and contemporary art. The criticism was that as more and more ceramics crossed boundaries, there was an increasing tendency to regard them as contemporary art. The theory of craftical formation sought to redefine the crafts from the standpoint of modernism. [note 2] Much current discourse about ceramics and the crafts is conducted in terms of craftical formation on the one hand and craft-like attributes on the other.

While the two concepts differ, they both seek to address the question of ceramic expression beyond post-modernism in the context of the 'modern' in Japanese art. In this respect they can both be described as craft theories developed from a 'contemporary' standpoint. Of the two theories, craftical formation has played the greater role in discourses about contemporary ceramics.

This essay is an examination of Japanese ceramics during the 1980s, when they broke free from the constraints of the past and entered the realm of contemporary art. It thereby introduces the background out of which the theory of craftical formation emerged and the effect it has had on current ceramic practice. It also sheds light on the structural problems inherent in the world of contemporary Japanese ceramics, which, while witnessing many efforts to find new ways forward, has also seen the making of much work of a repetitive and formulaic nature.

1 The concept of claywork

During the 1980s and early 1990s the term claywork was widely used in connection with contemporary ceramics. Inui Yoshiaki, a leading art historian of the period, explained claywork as follows: 'When ceramics depart from their utilitarian purpose, they become something more like sculpture. These are often called claywork, the use of the pre-existing term ceramics being thereby avoided.' [note 3] In this statement Inui categorises as claywork the sculptural ceramic forms commonly called 'objets' produced in the postwar period. These sit in opposition to functional vessels. Inui's explanation of claywork was written shortly after the term was starting to take root in Japan. It is important to note that its meaning has gradually changed since then.

It is not certain when the term claywork was first used, but it is likely to have been in connection with the exhibition *Work in Clay by Six Artists* held at the San Francisco Art Institute in late 1962. [note 4] In Japan it was in the 1980s, when many claywork exhibitions were held, that the term and concept took root. The following are some of the more important exhibitions.

CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form, 1980, Seibu Department Store, Ōtsu; *Contemporary Ceramics I*, 1982, Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum; *Contemporary Ceramics II*, 1984, Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum; *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985*, 1986, Seibu Hall, Ōtsu; *Contemporary Ceramics III*, 1987, Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum; *Clay Work / The Re-pro-Action of Form*, 1988, Museum of Modern Art, Shiga; *Contemporary Clay Work*, 1989, Kanagawa Prefectural Hall Gallery; *One Aspect of Japanese Contemporary Arts and Crafts*, 1989, Azabu Museum of Arts and Crafts, Tokyo; *Japanese Clay Work Today*, 1990, Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts

In addition to these museum exhibitions, there were large numbers of joint and solo exhibitions featuring claywork held at commercial galleries and other venues. Furthermore, the well-known art journal *Bijutsu Techō* published several features about claywork. These included 'tsuchi to hi - tōgei (claywork)' (earth and fire - ceramics (claywork) (vol. 480, April 1981) and 'claywork o katarō' (let's discuss claywork) (vol. 575, February 1987). Unimaginable today, this reflects the huge amount of attention paid to claywork in the art world of that time. I wrote earlier that 'the term claywork was widely used in connection with contemporary ceramics' in the 1980s, which was when claywork was actively embraced by the contemporary art world. While I used the past tense, this was possibly too hasty, for only recently, in 2003, there was an exhibition at the National Museum of Art, Osaka, entitled *The Art of Earth - Clay Works of The New Century*. However, it is undoubtedly the case that in recent discussions of contemporary ceramics, the term claywork is used only occasionally.

With the hindsight we now have, this is a good moment to review developments of that period with objectivity. It seems appropriate to revisit the conditions that prevailed in the art world of that time and what kinds of ceramics were made in the name of claywork. This type of retrospective review should not be limited to the 1980s but to subsequent decades as well. It is the case, however, that claywork as a concept continues to exert considerable influence on contemporary ceramic practice, not always in a positive sense. Because of this, contemporary makers seeking to justify their creative stance tend to take a negative view of the idea of claywork as an absolute given. As will become apparent in the following discussion of two major exhibitions of claywork, even in the 1980s there was no clear agreement on what constituted claywork and the meaning of the term was constantly changing.

Looking back now at what was thought of as claywork, one can say that it was an exploration of modernism and post-modernism through ceramic expression. This is evident if one compares two of the most important 1980s claywork exhibitions listed above, namely *CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form* (1980) and *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985* (1986). Both exhibitions were overseen by Inui Yoshiaki, who defined claywork in the way cited above at the time of the former. His definition six years later was rather different, reflecting the changes that had taken place in the art world during the intervening period.

Through analysing the conceptual change that took place, one can see the potential that the novel way of expression represented by claywork had at that time. Such an analysis usefully leads, furthermore, to debating the current state of contemporary Japanese ceramics.

The reason for focusing on these two exhibitions among the many others listed above is that *CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form* (1980) was staged in conjunction with the International Academy of Ceramics (IAC) conference in Kyoto that year. *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985* (1986) was organised as a sequel. The aim of these exhibitions was to introduce to the world at large the most cutting edge trends in Japanese ceramics. More important than this, though, is the fact that on both occasions, as mentioned above, the art journal *Bijutsu Techō* published issues with special features on claywork. This indicates that the art world was paying attention to the phenomenon of claywork. Of interest too is the change of perspective on the part of the organisers from one exhibition to the next. In 1980 there were differences of view between the ceramics and art worlds about how to interpret claywork. Between then and 1986 there was a gradual coming together of opinion. By discussing claywork in terms of its relative position with respect to ceramics and modern art, and to modern and post-modern, its importance as a subject to be reexamined – rather than accepted as a fixed abstraction – becomes apparent.

2 *CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form*, 1980

Thanks in part to the special feature published in the *Bijutsu Techō* after the *CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form* exhibition had opened, the term claywork and the range of work produced under its rubric became widely known about in the art world. For an exhibition that purported to be all about claywork, its structure was rather interesting. It was organised into the following sections: (1) the lineage of white porcelain and celadon, (2) the lineage of East Asian ceramics, (3) the lineage of blue-and-white wares, (4) the lineage of enamel-decorated wares, (5) the lineage of old Japanese kilns, and (6) the lineage of ceramic sculpture and sculptural ceramics. The works shown in these sections were masterpieces of modern Japanese ceramics from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Only then, in a final section entitled ‘from ceramics to sculptural ceramics’, was claywork introduced.

As to why the exhibition needed to be organised in this manner was explained in the catalogue by Inui Yoshiaki following his explanation cited earlier about claywork.

The coexistence today of sculptural claywork and functional ceramics reminds one of Japan’s prehistory when earthenware figurines were made alongside earthenware vessels. However, unlike prehistoric earthenware, there is no close connection between modern sculptural claywork and contemporary functional ceramics. Claywork and ceramic vessels are completely different from one another. It is not, however, as if claywork sprang out of nowhere. The emergence of claywork is the inevitable outcome of the ceramicist’s search for new forms.[note 5]

The thinking behind the structure of the exhibition was further elucidated in another essay in the catalogue, which argued that claywork was an aggregation and synthesis of earlier lineages of ceramics.

In presenting a visual overview of contemporary ceramics, the organisers wanted to make it clear that they cannot be treated independently of tradition and cultural heritage. It is for this reason that contemporary ceramics are shown in the same venue as modern masterpieces representative of earlier strands of ceramic practice.[note 6]

The 36 artists selected for the claywork section of the exhibition were makers active during the 1950s to 1970s. In order of appearance in the catalogue, they were Araki Takako, Hayami Shirō, Hayashi Hideyuki, Hoshino Satoru, Ishiyama Shun, Itō Kōshō, Kamoda Shōji, Kaneshige Michiaki, Katō Kiyoyuki, Koie Ryōji, Kondō Yutaka, Kumakura Junkichi, Kuriki Tatsusuke, Kuze Kenji, Matsui Kōsei, Mishima Kimiyo, Miwa

Ryūsaku, Miyanaga Rikichi, Miyashita Zenji, Morino Taimei, Nakamura Kinpei, Nishimura Yōhei, Sasayama Tadayasu, Satō Satoshi, Satonaka Hideto, Suzuki Osamu, Tsuboi Asuka, Tsuji Seimei, Tsuji Shindō, Yagi Kazuo, Yamada Hikaru, Yanagihara Mutsuo, Kaneko Jun, Nakamura Yutaka, Shigemori Yōko, and Kaji Nanako. The works of a number of these makers was no different from some of the works in the earlier, pre-claywork, part of the exhibition. This reflects the confusion that prevailed about the very recently introduced concept of claywork.

It is notable that the cut off point for the selection of makers was those active since the 1950s. This indicates that claywork was considered to be in the same lineage as ceramic 'objets', in other words that it was the work of the highly regarded Yagi Kazuo, the pioneer of ceramic 'objets', that was thought to point to the future of claywork. This is clearly evidenced by the inclusion among the works by Yagi shown in the exhibition of his seminal *Mr Samsa's Walk* of 1954. The high esteem in which this work has been held derives from the fact that it is an 'objet' made up of parts thrown on the wheel. At the time Yagi made this work the use of the wheel was firmly associated with vessel-making, which was regarded as the ultimate purpose of ceramic production. Through *Mr Samsa's Walk* Yagi made the point that throwing on the wheel was no more than a tool and skill, thereby dismantling the authority and symbolic significance hitherto ascribed to the potter's wheel. This is the reason, which I will return to later, why this work is regarded as so epoch-making.

It is significant that Yagi (d.1979) was the only deceased artist represented in the final, claywork, section of the exhibition. His inclusion is a clear reflection of the message the organisers sought to convey. Tsuji Shindō, who was a sculptor and colleague of Yagi's at Kyoto City University of Art, was also included. One of them a maker of ceramic 'objets' and the other a sculptor working in clay, they stimulated each other towards new ways of expression. It is clear that the exhibition sought to explore the meeting point between ceramic 'objets' and sculptural ceramics, and to position them in the realm of claywork.

Thinking back to Inui's definition of claywork as being ceramics that have departed from their utilitarian purpose and resemble sculpture, we can see how ceramic 'objets' represented by Yagi's *Mr Samsa's Walk* were rethinking of the concept of utility whose sole purpose was the pursuit of form through the use of clay. As long as the modernist myth of purity of expression in the form of ceramic 'objets' is upheld, the esteem for Yagi and *Mr Samsa's Walk* will remain absolute in the history of contemporary ceramics. In 1980, the future potential of claywork was envisaged in these terms.

However, the development of ceramic 'objets' in Japan and the special place accorded to Yagi Kazuo and his use of the wheel to create *Mr Samsa's Walk* have to be understood in the context of Japanese ceramic history. The revolution in the value system in the world of Japanese ceramics marked by the mythification of Yagi's work as standing at the pinnacle of contemporary practice, is understandable only when you consider the hermetic environment in which ceramics were judged on the basis of technique and links to the past.

The special place accorded to Yagi as the leading light of his generation was the natural culmination of the trajectory of a history of ceramics that has never been subjected to examination in terms of the broader context of Japanese art and culture.

3 CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985, 1986

In the early 1980s, the thinking about claywork and the role of Yagi Kazuo in its development underwent a gradual change. This is reflected in the *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985* exhibition that was held in 1986 as a sequel to the *CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form* exhibition of 1980. The passage below, which is taken from Inui Yoshiaki's essay in the catalogue, makes this clear.

... This is just a summary of some of the trends from the second half of the 1960s onwards. When

looking at the development of claywork, the pioneering achievements of Yagi Kazuo cannot be understated. The different styles of his work, which followed one after another in an almost manic fashion, reflected with remarkable sensitivity developments unfolding in the realm of claywork. The way he explored so many new possibilities of 'clay' and expressed them in concrete form is a measure of his extraordinarily fertile creativity. ... Death caught up with Yagi all too suddenly. His demise, I think it can be said, also heralded the end of modernism in Japanese claywork. Or at least it marked the end of a key phase in its evolution.[note 7]

It is clear from this statement that the organisers had adopted a different position from the one prevailing when *CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form* was held. This stemmed from their awareness of the expansion of the types of expression found in claywork that had taken place in the six years since the earlier exhibition. These are summarized in the introduction of the catalogue to *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985*.

There has been a huge amount of activity in the world of claywork in recent years. This needs to be discussed not in the narrow terms of 'ceramics (*tōgei*)' but in the broader terms of contemporary art. The outcome of new approaches in claywork include 'unfired' objects, works made from 'mixed media', 'earthworks' whose subject is the landscape within which we live, and 'installation' art in which the surrounding space is incorporated as an integral element of the work. All of these can be referred to as claywork. There has been much overlapping with other artistic disciplines with the result that claywork has become part of contemporary three-dimensional visual culture as a whole.[note 8]

Claywork in its expanding form cannot be placed on the trajectory of modernism to which, as Inui stated in his earlier passage, Yagi belongs. The new types of expression seen in claywork should be regarded as post-modern, which is to say radically different from Yagi's modernism. In this way, *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985* located Yagi and ceramic 'objets' as belonging to a previous generation.

The 34 artists represented in *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985* were Akiyama Yō, Itō Kōshō, Inoue Masayuki, Uematsu Eiji, Ogura Tōru, Kaneko Jun, Kuriki Tatsusuke, Koie Ryōji, Sasayama Tadayasu, Satō Satoshi, Sugiura Yasuyoshi, Suzuki Osamu, Takano Motoo, Tsutsumi Nobuko, Domon Kunikatsu, Nakamura Kinpei, Nakamura Kōhei, Nishimura Yōhei, Hayashi Hideyuki, Hayashi Yasuo, Fukami Sueharu, Hoshino Satoru, Matsui Shirō, Matsuda Yuriko, Mishima Kimiyo, Miyashita Zenji, Miyanaga Rikichi, Miwa Ryūsaku, Morino Taimei, Yanagihara Mutsuo, Yamada Shūsaku, Yamada Hikaru, Yoshitake Hiroshi, and Wada Morihiro. 18 of these artists had also been represented in the 1980 exhibition. They were included in the 1986 exhibition because their work had a contemporaneity that cannot be perceived if seen through the filter of Yagi Kazuo, whose position had been reassessed, and also out of consideration for the overall balance of the works displayed.

If one analyses the second passage by Inui cited above, there is the suggestion that the new developments in claywork could threaten the conventional narrative of 'ceramics (*tōgei*)' upon which the modernism of 'objets' was premised. Inui does not, however, view this negatively but, rather, as suggestive of possible new areas still yet to be explored. He positively advocates the potential for 'contemporary' ceramics to develop through the further exploration of claywork into a new field of post-modern expression within contemporary art. He goes on to summarise, for example, the position taken by ceramic practitioners in regard to clay as a material.

With claywork made until the end of the 1970s, the materiality and unique characteristics of clay were always the starting point and fundamental basis for their creation. ... For Yagi and other early members of the Sōdeisha (working through mud association; established in 1948), working with clay was their inescapable destiny. This awareness gradually weakened over time, but for claywork modernists, clay remained the indispensable medium for their work. In the case of a number of

makers who appeared in the 1980s, clay was no longer so critically important. For them clay was just one of many materials available to work with. ... In this respect their attitude towards clay was similar to that of sculptors. They freely combined clay with other materials and ready made products, and at times they abandoned clay altogether and switched to working solely with other media. The firing of clay was not necessarily an absolute requirement, and whether or not to fire was up to individual makers to decide.[note 9]

The examples given by Inui cited here are just some of the ways in which the doors were thrown open for modernist claywork to evolve into its post-modernist incarnation. While claywork thus began to be placed on the same footing as contemporary art, it is important to note, as explained so succinctly by Inui, that by the mid-1980s ceramics were being produced in forms that could no longer be defined as claywork in the sense of the 'objets' that had been made by Yagi and his contemporaries. The special features in art journals that appeared at this time diluted the hitherto accepted understanding of claywork as 'ceramics (*yakimono*)', thereby resulting in claywork being conceptualised as a form of contemporary art. Another consideration is that there were very few museums devoted to ceramics at that period and exhibitions of claywork were held in art museums. Creative activity took place on a level playing field where attention was not paid to the hierarchical demarcation between 'art' and 'craft' institutionalised in Japan from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards.

An example of this is how the Suntory Museum Art, which is famous for its collection of historical Japanese art, organised *The Suntory Prize Exhibition* on eight occasions between 1988 and 1998. The exhibition included not only the work of claywork artists but also that of makers exploring contemporary forms of expression through the use of many other kinds of media. Another event, particularly important for artists working in the Kansai area during the 1980s, was the annual *Art Now* exhibition held at the Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of Art from 1973 to 1988. This was open to all contemporary practitioners regardless of genre.

In this way, the 1980s and early 1990s were a period of particular openness in the art world. Claywork flourished in the dynamic environment of the time, when boundaries between genres were freely crossed. This was not the first occasion that the art world had been as open as it was then. While the different strands of artistic practice in Japan had their respective histories and technologies, there did not exist the demarcation between genres as institutionalised from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. This means that when you look at a piece of art, you can detect influences from all the genres that were current at the same period.

The cross-fertilisation across genres was especially marked during the immediate postwar years, when not only ceramics but the art world as a whole underwent major changes. These came about because of the collapse of the value system that had prevailed before the war and the life or death experiences that many artists had undergone as conscripts during the war. This period of turmoil witnessed the launch of the Shikōkai, an avant-garde ceramics group founded in 1947, one year earlier than Yagi Kazuo's Sōdeisha. It had as its advisers Mushanokōji Saneatsu and Sudo Kunitarō, and from early on, as a result of its links with the avant-garde *ikebana* movement, started exploring the possibilities of 'objets'. Efforts to formulate new values for postwar Japanese society also saw in the Kansai area the establishment of the Gendai Bijutsu Kondankai (contemporary art discussion group; usually abbreviated to Genbi), whose members came from multiple artistic disciplines and included members of the Shikōkai.

The founding members of the Genbi were Yoshihara Jirō of Gutai fame, Ueki Shigeru, Nakamura Makoto, Yamazaki Takao, Suda Kokuta and Tanaka Kenzō. Other members included Morita Shiryū and Inoue Yūichi of the Bokujinkai, an association that sought to merge calligraphy with painting, the avant-garde *ikebana* practitioner Ohara Hōun, and ceramicists of the Shikōkai including Uno Sango and Hayashi Yasuo. The

Genbi provided a space where artists could experiment with new forms of expression without regard to genre. Increasing attention has recently been paid to the pioneering achievements of the Shikōkai in the realm of ceramic 'objets', which owed much to the sharing of ideas with makers working in other media. The situation with claywork in the 1980s and its synchronicity with developments in the contemporary art world echo what had taken place in the postwar period. Makers rejected the safety of their chosen discipline and looked to other genres for new ideas. One must not forget, however, that each maker had their own philosophical stance and that it is wrong to indiscriminately categorise their work under the simple rubric of claywork. What is needed is to look carefully at each of their works and assess their individual qualities. One must be wary of the danger of viewing claywork as, by definition, a form of contemporary art. By using the term claywork, there is the danger that ceramics as a whole become subsumed into contemporary art. In such a situation it is essential to find values inherent to the process of making ceramics and the import they carry in terms of their distinct history and philosophy along with their relationship with society and the individual.

4 Craftical Formation

At the beginning of the 1990s, by when the concept of claywork had become widespread, the tendency for the genre of ceramics to be appropriated into the realm of contemporary art reached saturation point. Because of claywork's constant exploration of post-modern expression within the context of contemporary art, ceramics was in danger of losing its existential basis. This was countered by an observable change of perception triggered by the espousal of a new craft theory formulated by Kaneko Kenji (currently Director of the Ibaragi Ceramic Art Museum), who was at that time Chief Curator of the Crafts Gallery of the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. Kaneko christened his new theory 'craftical formation (*kōgeiteki zōkeiron*)'.

The concept of craftical formation has been influential not only in the field of ceramics but in the craft world as a whole. The theory has undergone minor modifications since it was first proposed, but it has remained central to critical discourse about the crafts up to the present day. It is explained in detail in Kaneko's *Gendai tōgei no zōkei shikō* (formative theories of contemporary ceramics) published in 2001 by Abe Shuppan. In essence, craftical formation is 'a means of self-expression intimately related to how particular materials are manipulated'. In the case of ceramics, 'it is not the use of ceramic processes to make pre-conceived vessel forms or to explore pre-conceived notions about ceramics or crafts; it is the realisation of a desired or intended form through total immersion in and fusion with the clay-working process.' Kaneko claims craftical formation is a new way of looking at craft that has no precedent in fine art or the crafts as hitherto conceived.[note 10]

The concept of craftical formation is an encapsulation of the intuitive approach to making inherent to the activities of craft practitioners. It is often cited as the theoretical underpinning of contemporary ceramic practice and has had major leverage on the way in which exhibitions have been organised in different parts of Japan. A recent example is the *Alternative Paradise* exhibition shown at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa in 2005. This was a direct attempt to explore the potential of crafts that could be seen as manifestations of the concept of craftical formation. It thereby pointed to a new future for the crafts.

What precisely constitutes this future requires further elaboration. If one goes back to Kaneko's theory, it is clear, as Kaneko himself has often said, that its central premise is the approach to making conceptualised by Yagi Kazuo and adhered to by many of the members of the Sōdeisha. The following is a much cited statement by Yagi.

Our work did not begin so much from the consideration of form but was led by the nature of clay

and the processes used to fashion it. This was rather different from what happened in fine art. ... It was more a question of integrating the ceramic making process with one's own artistic impulses.[note 11]

That this thinking was shared by other members of the Sōdeisha is evidenced by the following statement by Suzuki Osamu.

This was the most difficult part, in other words that our ceramics might no longer be ceramics. Yamada-san went further than the rest of us. If you went down that path, you would end up doing what Tsuji Shindō was doing. The reason for using ceramic processes then lost its meaning. That was the line we did not want to cross.[note 12]

These statements by Yagi and Suzuki relate to the period when they were exploring new directions in ceramics, and the making of 'objets' - referred to by Inui as manifestations of the modernist phase - was considered very much cutting edge. They tell us much about postwar avant-garde ceramics and their development. They also make it clear that Kaneko's theory of craftical formation is derived from the importance placed by Yagi and his circle on the materiality of clay and the processes involved in manipulating it. Kaneko also provides a historical perspective to the development of contemporary ceramics by linking Yagi's thinking with ideas expressed earlier by Tomimoto Kenkichi. Here again we see how Yagi's philosophy has shaped Kaneko's thinking. Yagi spoke about Tomimoto as follows.

Tomimoto's jars, even those he made in white porcelain, have the moist freshness of clay that has just come off the wheel. There is no sense of the hesitancy of something thrown and then labouriously trimmed to shape. He never erred from the vision of what he was seeking to make. He did not work like a professional potter who uses a fixed sequence of processes to achieve a predetermined outcome. Rather, he welcomed uncertainty in the belief that inspiration would come to him. Tomimoto waited for the moment to arrive, at which point he stopped the wheel.[note 13]

Kaneko's theory of craftical formation and its attempt to reinstate contemporary ceramics as an autonomous genre through the invocation of Yagi Kazuo's philosophy of making, could be said to be a turning back of the clock to counter the post-modern mutation of claywork into a form of contemporary art. One should note by way of background that by the early 1990s claywork was losing its experimental edge. It was inevitable that once claywork had started to be discussed in terms of contemporary art, ceramics as a genre was seen to be losing its *raison d'être*. At the same time, however, there were many craft practitioners whose philosophy of making continued to be rooted in the intuitive understanding of materials. It was to this contrast that Kaneko sought to draw attention - by invoking Yagi's words as an underlying principle that sat above the judgement of quality - with his concept of craftical formation. It has often been said that the significance of the theory of craftical formation is how it has reinstated the territory belonging to the crafts in the face of uncertainty as to whether something constitutes a piece of craft or contemporary art, or a piece of ceramics as opposed to sculpture. The formulation of Kaneko's theory is premised on the incorporation into the abstract notion of claywork as contemporary art all endeavours to give contemporary expression in the form of claywork.

At this point I would like to return to Yagi Kazuo's *Mr Samsa's Walk* and the status it has enjoyed as the ultimate example of a ceramic 'objet'. As mentioned before, the fact that it was an assemblage of wheel-thrown components is considered to be one of its most significant features. At the same time as making *Mr Samsa's Walk* Yagi produced a number of similar-looking ring-shaped vases consisting of components thrown on the wheel and covered with the same variety of ash glaze (*irabo* or *jōkon* glaze). These were exhibited flat rather than upright. It is possible that Yagi was inspired by Marcel Duchamp's exhibiting in a

museum his 1917 *Fountain*, a so-called 'readymade' consisting of a urinal lying on its back and autographed by the artist. In an opposite way to Duchamp's *Fountain*, Yagi's pieces functioned as vases (functional) if shown lying down but as 'objets' (non-functional) if shown standing up. The art world from 1917 onwards developed with Duchamp's example always in mind, and Yagi was constantly on the lookout for the new, which he devoured hungrily. Similarly to how Duchamp used the space of a museum to give his work meaning, Yagi reverse-engineered the authority symbolised by the ceramic feel of objects made on the wheel and covered in glaze in his presentation of ceramic 'objets'. Having opened the way for ceramic 'objets' with *Mr Samsa's Walk*, Yagi went on to make 'objets' of unglazed stoneware and so-called *kokutō* (carbon-impregnated black earthenware).

Among the members of the Sōdeisha, Yagi was notably prescient of the need to assert a logic of making unique to ceramics. As a ceramicist he consciously explored those aspects of ceramics that made them different from anything else, for example the physiology of clay, the distinctive characteristics of ceramic materials, the containment of inner space, and preconceptions about what all of these implied. One should not forget, however, that the extreme regard in which Yagi's *Mr Samsa's Walk* was held resulted in the mythification of Yagi. This is one of the reasons why the history of contemporary Japanese ceramics has been constructed around the making by Yagi and his Sōdeisha colleagues of 'objets' or so-called 'avant-garde ceramics'.

Yagi was clearly conscious of the special place ceramics held in Japan. He intentionally exploited the emotional attachment people had to ceramics in terms of their 'taste and feel (*aji*)'. This is evidenced by the fact that he referred to himself as a 'maker of tea bowls (*chawanya*)'. By proclaiming this, he placed himself in the unique position of not being a sculptor in the classic sense of someone in search of pure form, but rather a maker working within the realm of ceramics who made avant-garde 'objets'. As seen in the passages by Yagi and Suzuki cited above, there was the quandary of the negation of function as rendering a ceramic object no different from a sculpture. The methodology they arrived at was the key to their justification of being ceramicists rather than sculptors.

The philosophy of Yagi and his peers elevated ceramics as a relevant form of expression in the postwar period, when modernism was at its height. It should be noted, however, that their understanding of sculpture was a very classic one - a rather nostalgic one from today's perspective - of being the creation of a form shaped from a solid mass of one kind or another. This is what lies behind the Sōdeisha's argument that one of the distinguishing attributes of a ceramic object is that it contains a 'void'. [note 14] The application of Yagi's philosophy to contemporary ceramic practice as a dogma abstracted and purified of recognition of the historical context in which it was formulated, can lead to a lack of attention to the conditions that prevail today. The danger of this is that exploratory endeavours are conducted within the safely demarcated arena of 'ceramics (*tōgei*)'.

There is a resonance with how the theory of formalism was established in support of modernist painting, notably abstract expressionism. Formalism stressed the flatness of paintings as the essential and defining characteristic that connected works of the past to those of the present. It is well known that the transition from modernism to post-modernism involved the critiquing of the framework upon which formalism was premised and the establishment of a new set of principles that prioritised a more open connection with social and cultural conditions.

The background to Kaneko's proposing of his theory of craftical formation was the ever increasing heterogeneity of claywork. One cannot stress enough the importance of this theory - which relies on the essentialisation of craft making processes - and the role it has played in marking out a territory for the activities of ceramic and other craft practitioners. However, because Kaneko's views have been so dependent on the modernist philosophy of Yagi Kazuo and his Sōdeisha peers, it has belittled the

achievements - on the grounds of their being riddled with contradictions - of the aforementioned Shikōkai, another postwar avant-garde ceramic group characterised, like the Sōdeisha, by its cross-genre activities. In this respect one can see that the theory of craftical formation has both merits and demerits. One of the not unproblematic outcomes of it being so dominant a theory is that it has resulted in the re-mythification of Yagi and his philosophy of making. This makes it necessary to look again at the phenomenon of claywork in the 1980s. It is a mistake to take Yagi's philosophy and extract from it an absolute set of parameters by which to judge ceramic expression. Rather, one must constantly revise one's understanding of the past from the present day.

5 'Japanese Contemporary Ceramics' as a framework

It is necessary for the reasons stated above to reexamine what is meant by the term 'contemporary ceramics'. This question has never been asked because the meaning of the term has always been considered self-evident. But if contemporary ceramics are to explore possibilities beyond post-modernism, it is essential to reassess the structure of the system that has sustained 'contemporary ceramics' in the postwar period. Contemporary ceramics have not developed in a linear fashion from the past, nor can they be explained in terms of one particular aspect of Japan's ceramic heritage. The important point is to be constantly alert to the relationship between contemporary ceramics and the history of ceramics.

There is a useful guide to the history of Japanese ceramics from earliest times to the present day published in 1998 by Bijutsu Shuppan. Entitled *Nihon Yakimono Shi* (history of Japanese ceramics), it is divided into the following chapters: (1) Jōmon period (10,000 years of earthenware); (2) Yayoi and Kofun periods (from earthenware to Sueki ware); (3) Nara to early Heian periods (development of glazed wares); (4) Late Heian, Kamakura and Muromachi periods (blossoming of regional kilns); (5) Momoyama period (tea ceramics and the creation of a new aesthetic); (6) Edo period I (Imari ware and the birth of porcelain); (7) Edo period II (development of Kyoto ware); (8) Meiji period (lavish decoration); (9) Taishō and early Shōwa periods (pursuit of artistry and spirituality); (10) Contemporary (Late Shōwa and Heisei periods) (individualism - tradition and the avant-garde). The chronological structure of the book and the way it presents ceramics as evolving over time are not to do with this particular publication or the contributing authors, but simply reflect the generally accepted view of history. One must be mindful, however, that history is a construct ordered by particular understandings of the past and by specific agendas.

Things and events are the outcome of a complicated interweaving of time and place. The history of ceramics can be looked at from many points of view. Some of the relevant fields of research are archaeology, philology, art history, aesthetics, ethnology, history of tea drinking, folk craft theory, sociology, and economics. There is the illusion, however, that ceramics constitute a self-evident genre. This is partly due to the systemisation of 'art' from the late nineteenth century onwards but more importantly because of the identification of ceramics as a separate entity comprising any kind of production in which the firing of clay is involved, and of the resultant unquestioning acceptance of the linear trajectory of ceramic history from the Jōmon period up to the present day. This has meant that many of the factors that have influenced how ceramics have evolved are unwittingly not taken into account. Such a myopic view results in a much narrower and less rich account of ceramic history than its true complexity merits. In reality the technologies, philosophies and ways of consuming ceramics are constantly changing. Nothing is static or fixed.

One is reminded of how the approach to making conceptualised by Yagi was a way of solving the dilemma presented by ceramic 'objets' and the need to distinguish them from sculpture. The attention paid to ceramics by the art world in the 1960s stimulated ceramicists to explore clay in increasingly innovative ways. One can think of Yagi's pioneering of the *shiwayose-de* (gathered wrinkles) technique and *kokutō*

(carbon-impregnated black earthenware), and the Seto-based Kawamoto Gorō's distinctive Gorō-style (*Gorō-chō*) way of hand-building. While these might have been influenced by the rise of *Art Informel* and Abstract Expression, there were other factors at play. There was the crisis triggered by the appearance of plastics, from which light and unbreakable tableware and other everyday vessels could be produced, and the adoption of all kinds of new materials in the rapidly expanding arena of contemporary art. It was in response to these kinds of changes in circumstances taking place all around them that ceramicists sought to establish new ways of relating to society and to find new forms of ceramic expression in keeping with the age. One can see that 'contemporary ceramics' cannot simply be pinned to the end of a ceramic timeline stretching back thousands of years, and that as a category of practice they are not founded on an immutable bedrock.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the two exhibitions *CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form* (1980) and *CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985* (1986), this essay has introduced the development of Japanese claywork during the transition from modernism to post-modernism. It has then explored the theory of craftical formation that arose following the spread of the concept of claywork and the subsuming of ceramics as a genre into contemporary art. It becomes apparent that the framework for 'contemporary Japanese ceramics' implicit in the theory of craftical formation is inherently limiting of the range of activities in which ceramicists might engage.

Contemporary ceramics do not belong to the genre of 'ceramics' simply because they are made in familiar formats, but because they are syntheses of everything that makers bring to their work, whether materials, techniques, sense of history, links with tradition, or contemporaneity. Contemporaneity comes from the structuring of a maker's vision, and inevitably includes memory and history. In this sense, the materiality of clay, the colours of glazes, decoration, and the use of kilns all play a role in guiding the maker and the viewer to a common ground linking the present to tradition and the past. What is required is interpretation and independence of stance that go beyond self-serving expression. Rather than superficial stylistic and technical resemblance, memory and historicity latent in objects are what constitute art and ceramic history.

It is still unclear at this time what ceramic expression beyond post-modernism will be. What great ceramicists of the past have achieved in their various quests cannot be, as argued above, codified or manualised according to a particular methodology.

Creativity in ceramics is about constantly questioning established ways of making, existing modes of expression, and received methodologies. It is to establish new ways of making that organically incorporate imagination and technical innovation with alternative visions of the past. Through reflecting on the complex interrelationships between these multiple focuses of concern, artists with their unique points of view are one manifestation of contemporary society. It is expression elicited in this way that impacts so powerfully on the viewer and forges new kinds of relationship between ceramics objects and the public.

[note 1]

For research into art history of the early modern period and 'craft-like attributes (*kōgeiteki naru mono*)', see the writings of Kitazawa Noriaki. His main publications are *Kyōkai no Bijutsushi: 'Bijutsu' keiseishi notes* [The art history of boundaries], Tokyo: Brücke, 2000 and *Avant-garde ikō no kōgei* [Craft since the avant-garde], Tokyo: Bigaku Shuppan, 2002. The ideas explored in these titles are further discussed in the proceedings of a conference of which Kitazawa was one of the main organisers: *Kōgei symposium kirokushū henshū iinkai, ed., Bijutsushi no yohaku ni: kōgei-ars- bijutsu* [At the margins of art history: craft, ars, and contemporary art], Tokyo: Bigaku Shuppan, 2008.

[note 2]

For a discussion of craftical formation, see Kaneko Kenji, *Gendai tōgei shikō* [Formative theories of contemporary ceramics], Tokyo: Abe Shuppan, 2001.

[note 3]

Inui Yoshiaki, 'Yakimono to zōkei – clay work no keifu no tsuite' [Ceramics and form: on the lineage of clay work], in *CLAY WORK: Yakimono kara zōkei e* [CLAY WORK: From Pottery to Form] (exhibition catalogue), Tokyo: Seibu Department Store, 1980.

[note 4]

Inui Yoshiaki, 'Claywork – sono modern to post-modern' [Claywork: from modern to post-modern], in *Tsuchi-image to keitai 1981-1985* [CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985] (exhibition catalogue), Tokyo: Seibu Department Store, 1986.

[note 5]

See note 3.

[note 6]

Fukunaga Shigeki and Nakanodō Kazunobu, 'CLAY WORK ten no kōsei ni tsuite' [On the structure of the CLAY WORK exhibition], in *CLAY WORK: Yakimono kara zōkei e* [CLAY WORK: from Pottery to Form] (exhibition catalogue), Tokyo: Seibu Department Store, 1980.

[note 7]

See note 4.

[note 8]

See 'Aisatsu' [Introduction], in *Tsuchi-image to keitai 1981-1985* [CLAY: Image and Form 1981-1985] (exhibition catalogue), Tokyo: Seibu Department Store, 1986.

[note 9]

See note 4.

[note 10]

Kaneko Kenji, 'Nihon no kingendai kōgei no rekishi to gendai kōgeiron' [The history of modern and contemporary Japanese craft and theories on contemporary craft], in *Kaikan 30 shūnenten: Kōgei no chikara - 21 seiki no tenbō* [30th anniversary exhibition: the power of craft - survey of the 21st century] (exhibition catalogue), Tokyo: National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 2007.

[note 11]

Yagi Kazuo, '(zadankai) bōkōki no zen'ei tōgei - Sōdeisha kessei no shisōteki kyoten' [(round table discussion) The rise of avant-garde ceramics - the philosophical basis for the formation of the Sōdeisha], in *Gendai no tōgei 12 kan, geppō* [Contemporary ceramics vol. 12, supplement], Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1975.

[note 12]

From an interview with Suzuki Osamu by Kaneko Kenji conducted on 18 January 1999 in Kaneko Kenji, 'Suzuki Osamu no zōkei shikō – gendai kōgei no kokusaiteki dōkō no naka de' [Suzuki Osamu's philosophy of making - within the context of international trends in contemporary crafts], in *Shijō no objets, Suzuki Osamu no tōgei* [Poetry of 'objets': the ceramics of Suzuki Osamu] (exhibition catalogue), Tokyo: Nihon Keizai Shinbun, 1991.

[note 13]

Yagi Kazuo, 'Tomimoto-san no koto' [About Mr Tomimoto], in Yagi Kazuo, *Kaichū no fūkei* [Landscapes of my pocket] (essay collection), Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1976.

[note 14]

See note 12.

This article was originally published in *Aichi-ken tōji bijutsukan kenkyū kiyō 15* [Aichi Prefectural Ceramic Museum research bulletin no. 15] (31 March 2010). In the ten years since it was published, there have been numerous developments in the Japanese ceramics world. Due to the further research carried out during this period, I could have made various revisions to the text, but in order to convey the atmosphere of the situation as it was in 2010, I have limited myself to correcting only typographical errors.