

## MUD COMPANY

### The 'Five by Five' Exhibition<sup>1</sup>

*Five by Five* was an exhibition held at the Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland, in June 1980, by five artists who at that time and throughout the 1970's were working with clay. They were Bronwynne Cornish, Peter Hawkesby, Denis O'Connor, John Parker and Warren Tippett.

What unified this exhibition was the singular focus on works that denied any reference to utilitarian traditions in preference to a commitment to ideas and methods plundered from other disciplines and sources. These were as diverse as architecture, industrial or product design, street fashion, contemporary painting and Arte Povera, carnival floats, psychological identikits, etc. The show took its title, and its iconoclastic stance, from the Rolling Stones' rock album of the same name released in 1974. The title declared its referential gaze to be outside of the Leachian<sup>2</sup> ceramic traditions so influential in this country's pioneer pottery movement and directed towards the popular cultural forms of the times.

Music, dance crazes, film, advertising and any low art source was the preferred focus of attention and appropriation, 'ideas' being the crucial component of these ceramic sculptures. Forget glaze fits, slumping, crazing and the worship of the transcendent glow of stoneware at 1300°C. Many of the pieces in *Five by Five* were low fired. Some were painted with Levenes'<sup>3</sup> housepaint acrylics or gritty slips. Many were constructed with a nasty red clay from a mangrove creek and were fired until the clay could endure no more.

Consider these titles:

- ◆ Incinerators (Hollow Burnt Men)
- ◆ U Vee
- ◆ Boat Load of Stones
- ◆ Fifth Penetration
- ◆ Wings of the Nation Fly Me South

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion was prompted by an unpublished paper entitled 'The Five by Five' Exhibition. Five essays in post-Leachian ceramic art by Design Historian Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Leach was an English Potter whose publication 'A Potters Book' became a workshop bible for the pioneer pottery movement in New Zealand

<sup>3</sup> Levenes is an Auckland based retailer of commercial acrylic paints for exterior and interior use.

These could have been the names of garage bands, modeled perhaps on examples from California or the UK, cultures featured as influences in the clay sculptures making up this exhibition. The Japanese inspired achievements that obsessed this country's ceramic circles at that time just did not feature. No Tenmokus, Celedons, or Shinos. No Anagama or the random flame markings of Naborigama styles. This was replaced by switch it on, switch it off, electric firings or crude and trouble-fraught salt kilns.

China Cabinet Ceramics had haunted the traditions in the U.S.A. (New Zealand had examples of souvenir genre ceramics too<sup>4</sup>). A strain of biographical narrative evolved alongside the slashing, tearing and distorting techniques of the gestural expressionist. A fondness for the hot hues of swimming pools, surfboards, convertibles, trailer homes and neon tinted skies. Even clay from across the border in Mexico featured. Day of the Dead effigies, ritual masks, throw-away tortilla plates and suchlike imposed an influence on West Coast U.S.A. perceptions. Warren Tippett's cubes and carnival tableaux, Bronwynne Cornish's early alertness to aspects of the American Funk tradition registered these during the 1970's, with influences as diverse as Robert Arneson's self parody and mocking humour and Clayton Bailey's deadpan rendering of paleontology and scientific methodology. (Bailey published 'texts' in a pseudo-scientific newspaper called *The Unnatural Enquirer* revealing startling uncoverings of the skeletal remains of unknown beasts, such as cyclops, in remote regions of California. Some of these porcellanous skeletal remains were monumental in scale and carefully photographed in situ attended to by Professor Bailey and his white-coated team of 'experts' - he was an avid collector of Studebaker automobiles, tattoos and robot toys. The scientific prankster and master craftsman had found a way of talking to one another in his art.)

What clay artists such as these and the likes of Ken Price, Ron Nagel, Michael Frimkess, Robert Brady, Peter Voukos, James Melchert, Robert Hudson and Richard Shaw provided at that time, particularly for Bronwynne Cornish, Peter Hawkesby and myself, were examples of an alternative way of handling clay that had paid its dues to the great ceramic traditions from the Orient and moved on! A way too that embraced developments in twentieth century painting and sculpture acknowledging the surrealists, Dadists, constructivists and the New York dominated Abstract Expressionists. Peter Hawkesby's *Incinerators* and *Burnt Hollow Men* are pervaded by the presences of Franz Kline, Willhem De Kooning and Dubuffet<sup>5</sup>. They are totemic threatening louts with broad grins. The clay has been coaxed to its very limits. Seared with heat that has blistered, scoured and distorted the body surface. They are no longer functionless vessels, but metaphors *about* the body. This process of exploiting the natural limitations and extending the

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<sup>4</sup> Often revered classical Maori forms such as *Hei Tiki* were appropriated by our commercial souvenir ceramics producers, eg *Titanware*

<sup>5</sup> Jean Dubuffet championed what he termed 'Art Brut', the art of the mentally disturbed, self taught visionaries and the work of naive artists

plastic expressiveness of clay to its very limits could be observed on burnt-out kilns and melting kiln furniture. What was acceptable on saggars<sup>6</sup> however, was an unwelcome sight on the precious craft object. For remember, the Leachian perspective and Japanese inspired principles of Mingei Folkware came loaded with do's and don'ts, a codified language with rigidly defined dogmas. Potters here seemed bound and gagged by ceramic histories because of the pioneer nature of the movement that gathered momentum during the 1960's and 1970's. Pottery had suddenly assumed a central position in the culture. Painting and sculpture were almost runners up. This was reversed in the U.S.A. where the dominating images and personalities of Abstract Expressionism ensured the supremacy of painting. Clay artists such as Ron Nagel were able to absorb influences from Fine Art sources with Spanish painter Antonio Tapies and the Italian Giorgio Morandi cited as his major models. Nagel's early work mimicked the melting graphic profiles Morandi achieved in his luminous still life compositions of boxes, bottles, cans and jars (Morandi often painted and resurfaced the objects he collected; sometimes thickly crusted and crinkling, like clay).

European painters such as Lucio Fontana, Joan Miro and Pablo Picasso started collaborating with master potters: Picasso in the village of Vallauris in the South of France where traditional peasant-ware was still made, Joan Miro with Luis Artigas whose kilns and workshops were located in the heartland of Catalonia, a place that had always invested Miro's art with a tense fecundity. Lucio Fontana had produced highly expressionist clay pieces from the early 1930's onwards. These evolved into elegant *spaziale* experiments with ruptured skins that mirrored his canvas and cement works. In the late 1950's he collaborated with the renowned Sevrès Porcelain China Factory in France to produce sculptural pieces unprecedented in 20th century art for their inventiveness and technical mastery. In America in the late 50's some of these experimental works in clay by this century's foremost painters were finally seen by potters such as Peter Voulkos. A new way of handling clay opened before them, extending the expressive vocabularies of wheel-thrown pottery that had, like New Zealand, looked to Leach and the Orient for its guidance. Peter Hawkesby's five sculptural works, although vessel-like in concept, traced their clay lineage from Miro, Tapies, Voulkos and were then given a final psychological dimension that owed something to the more introspective proponents of the "funk" traditions of the Bay Area Art. Art with strong literary allusions were Robert Brady's ceramic sculptures from the 1970's, and Ron Nagel's exquisite miniatures imbued with resonances from the music world. His tiny cup-monuments, lusciously dripping glaze essences down rugged clay walls were the result, he said, of carrying lyric sheet and colour-sample chips around in the same bag.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lidded containers made from refractory clay in which pots are protected from the naked flame inside the kiln chamber

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Brown, catalogue essay, The Tough and Tender Look of Ron Nagel's New Wares, (San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, 1978)

Another whose influence pervades the air around the incinerators is Stephen De Staebler. His monumental religious pieces of solemn austerity and humanist ideas were appearing in commissioned architectural settings such as church sanctuaries and museum installations around the San Francisco Bay area during the 1970's.

These ghosts and antecedents that were converging in Peter Hawkesby's work at this time were lost on an audience only familiar with the gospel of studio pottery traditions. They were however, enthusiastically received by a new generation of painters and sculptors emerging from Art Schools in New Zealand. Modernism was foundering, art-making was turning a corner and broadening its field of reference again.

Bronwynne Cornish's terracotta contribution to *Five by Five* now appears as an uncharacteristic abstract pause in an evolution of composite tableaux and room-size figurative installations that have their origins back in the narrative traditions of china-cabinet ceramics and mantelpiece figurines, and has now broadened to embrace pre-history and tribal belief systems and mythologies. Her sensitivity to clay can be as forthright and direct as Iga or Shigaraki Tea Ware, as delicate as Chinese I-hsing decorative traditions, or overglazed with the lustrousness of Malibu tiles. Bronwynne Cornish arranges and stage-manages her installations with the fastidiousness that shares something with the sense of theatre that John Parker also places considerable emphasis on. Her works in *Five by Five* grouped themselves across a corner of the gallery and could almost be interpreted as one work with five voices due to their close proximity to one another. The space surrounding her sculptures is considered and meditated on as thoroughly as the objects themselves. This preoccupation with the conversations and relationships between each form had its beginnings here and in an earlier exhibition where porcelain household items were displayed underwater in large aquariums where exotic fish drifted in and around the magnified seabed booty. Subsequent installations during the 1980's and 1990's have ranged from environments that owe their drama to the reverential hush of an archaeological treasure (Dedicated to the Kindness of Mothers, Auckland City Art Gallery) to roadside tableaux vivants celebrating fertility and earth energies (Homage to Potatoes, Wellington City Gallery). Always the eye of the window-dresser directs how the ideas conceptually occupy the space, how the cadences and hushes of the voice spaces surrounding each element relate to the whole, not unlike the sentence of shapes that run along the line of a mantelpiece. This concern for presentation owes its development to performance and installation art or practices such as anthropological documentary photography rather than any reference within ceramic traditions (mantelpieces and china-cabinets accepted). Judy Chicago's Dinner Party installation is one of the few exceptions and Robert Arneson's multi component, floor-based satirical narratives another. Robert Arneson was one of the first on the California West Coast to undermine the devotion to Leachian aesthetics with his early 60's six-pack

bottles, elegantly wheel-thrown classics but capped and stamped no return, aligning themselves defiantly in the Pop-art camp. The juxtaposition of found object (fragmented shards) and made object (sometimes unfired or wet clay) is also a recent feature adding density and resonance to the concepts her work explores. The objects she grouped together in *Five by Five* were barely fired, more a group photo than individual portraits, distinguished by their brittle clayiness of surface, were shapes that had an angular formal quality and structure that suggested *proper* sculpture (almost in the Modernist sense). They were not infused with the ironic intent and wicked humour her preceding representational household objects had displayed. From the perspective of the work that was to follow they were a dress-rehearsal that heralded a shift to making art with a more serious intention.

Warren Tippett's appearance in this exhibition represented a frustration with the smugly defined boundaries that the pottery movement in this country had created. Firmly established as one of our most assured craftsmen with workshop experience alongside masters from the East like Takeichi Kawai and Shoji Hamada, his presence may have looked a mismatch in the show. Classically formal though his work appeared, it was in a period of transition. Surface and skin were reinventing themselves. His image-bank of brush painted motifs where the changes were happening most dramatically. The carnival was coming to town. The discreet touch that Leach and his followers had preached had outlived its relevance. The street life of Grey Lynn, where Warren Tippett transferred his workshop after years of the rural pioneer approach, was nudging in Polynesian textiles and lavalava, souvenir shops on Karangahape Road wallpapered with tapa cloth and garlanded with vivid plastic leis. Exotic fruit and vegetables from the Pacific Islands commandeered footpath space alongside spectacular bouquets and hothouse cacti. Rows of enigmatic labels lined tins at the delicatessens. The streets were paraded by crested punks, Samoan choirs and camp theatrics. This feast of local visual inspiration began to inform the painted surfaces of his ceramics. Contemporary painting was an influence too, not what was happening internationally, but again, locally from the likes of Frizzell, Hanly, McWhannell, all just around the corner and in particular, anonymous naive paintings found in Ponsonby junk shops. Folk traditions were what Warren Tippett considered authentic and true, and his art never strayed far from their strictures. Even when his pattern making was at its most feverish the objects always retained something of the modesty and certitude of market-town trading wares; ceramics with an identifiable local character. His guiding mentor was Kanchiro Kawai, Takeichi's uncle and one of Japan's pre-eminent maverick artist-potters. Warren's approach shared something with the restrained formal concerns of Kanchiro but it was the element of reinvention within a tradition where they aligned closest. Kanchiro's work outraged his followers by reinventing itself at distinct junctures through his career. So did Warren Tippett's. In fact his life itself underwent reinventions. These declarations and transitions in his personal lifestyle affirmed the developments in his art and much of this evolution took place on the surfaces of his

quietly distilled utilitarian forms. The temperature dropped to earthenware, cheap cousin of the very superior, aristocratic stoneware, but the vividness of tones soared. So did the theatrics and high jinks. Fat, creamy hot colour was a palette more associated with trashy commercial souvenir ware. The seriously restrained harmonies of stoneware pottery were under threat. Lines drawn with an effortless fluid brush-hand thronged up the walls of his pots in mesmerizing rhythms and profusions. A flawless, black-stroked outline became his signature touch. It unified complex and dizzying compositions with an ease that never announced itself. Warren Tippett had trained earlier as a signwriter (art in New Zealand owes many of its inspirational moments to signwriting and much could be written about the influence on the visual arts of this hidden profession, consider McCahon, Killeen, Billy Apple for example).

The confidence of his hand distinguishes Tippett's decorating skills. The *Five by Five* works luxuriated in this aspect of his oeuvre, and to make matters worse the forms he chose to exhibit were not the beloved classical vessels, but more like toys or building cubes, and stand-up cut-outs from pop-up children's books. These sculptural experiments determined where his work was to turn a decade later when this preoccupation led to more architecturally conceived modules. These interests first surfaced in his contribution to *Five by Five* and signaled his abdication from the throne that was being prepared for him as the heir-apparent to the Leach/Castle/Brickell tradition. The works signalled some of the possible moves ceramics might make into other design disciplines. Studio pottery here at that time considered itself morally superior to such concepts. The implication was that reproduction by the handmade wheel-thrown method conferred on the clay a signature of authenticity that could not be transmitted by mechanical procedures like casting. The American master-ceramist Ken Price could be cited as influential at this point. His masterful homage to Mexican Folk Pottery traditions was a project Warren Tippett was aware of.<sup>8</sup> This ceramic installation (*Happy's Curios*), seven years in the making, has been described as a work of art *about* pottery, a description that could apply to Warren Tippett's output from the 1980's till his death in 1994. Price had been deeply influenced by folk traditions, particularly the Mexican factories in border towns like Tijuana which produced an over-decorated fusion of Mexican, Spanish, Indian and other European imagery with an unselfconscious deftness. Consider Price's 'statement' on the installation *Happy's Curios*, "it's about growing up in Los Angeles, involved with Mexican pottery, southwestern images, and Oriental ideas". (California faces Japan and China and registers the influence). This fusion of classical Golden section symmetries evolved by the Chinese, married to low art predilections for plundering motifs from any source available could well define Warren Tippett's method. His tightly thrown shapes had a quality of erasing themselves beneath a riot of patterns pirated from the multi-cultural environment of inner city contemporary Auckland that parallels Ken Price's reinvention and homage to Central American ceramic traditions.

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<sup>8</sup> I purchased the lavishly illustrated catalogue *Happy's Curios* from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1978 for Warren.

John Parker's work in *Five by Five* really complicated the issue of the uniqueness of the wheel-thrown one-of-a-kind handmade item with malicious and wicked intent. His five penetrations had the distinct 'look' of commercially produced mechanical slipcast methods. They could very well have been stamped out or made in moulds like the electrical insulators they resembled. They were ironically, wheel-thrown, with a meticulous hard edge normally linked with fettled mouldings. Even the titles were provocative considering procedures and traditions established for ceramic exhibitions here in New Zealand. John Parker's career had not followed the usual course of master-disciple. He had taken himself off to the Royal College of Art in London and had been exposed to different influences. These included the work of the Jewish émigrés Lucie Rie and Hans Coper from Vienna and Germany who had settled in England after the war and established potteries there. Their forms and surfaces drew from European sensitivities and preoccupations although there were artist-potters like William Staite-Murray whose approach was closer to theirs than the rural country-pottery tradition of Michael Cardew and Bernard Leach. Commercially produced ceramics had a noble pedigree throughout Europe rivalling the couturier fashion houses. John Parker was an early collector and enthusiast for our local Crown Lynn cast ware, and like Bronwynne Cornish, obsessed about presentation, lighting, etc. (This subsequently lead to his second career as a theatre set-designer). His *Five by Five* sculptures in fact resembled miniature architectural models for a stage production - black glazed arena-seating encircled vivid red diva's on centre-stage masquerading as imposing conical forms. The surfaces he favoured for both these composite sculptural pieces and production ware at this time ranged from highly glossed glaze coatings, to flat metallic skins, patinated, burnished or bubbling nastily and thoroughly unsympathetic to touch. A certain subversion of tableware manners and decorum was going on. These sculptures appeared to be assembled from upturned or fragmented design objects that had been stripped of, or denied their original function, if they ever had one, and stacked cunningly to enhance any metaphor or symbolism that might be drawn off, particularly the provocative sexual allusion in the title. There was something of the preoccupations of 1970's metal sculpture in John Parker's clay pieces reminiscent of London-based sculptors such as Anthony Caro and Stephen King, again, with the subversive dimension of scale. They were not striving for heroic status but parodying the proportions of domestic pottery. Hand sized, without the declaration of being handmade, and no confusion or apologies about their uselessness. If Warren Tippett's pieces could be said to refer to the circus of modern mores and manners, John Parker's suggested the imagined props from a television sci-fi drama extravaganza like *Thunderbirds*. They now appear very composed and at ease alongside product design and industrial fittings for mid-1990's bathroom hardware.

My contribution to *Five by Five* included clay that was low-fired and painted with latex paint alongside swamp clay and porcelain fired to its very maximum tolerance. My reference points

were as diverse as the American sculptor/seers H.C. Westerman and Joseph Cornell,<sup>9</sup> to vernacular architecture (indigenous African mud houses or the do-it-yourself bach traditions). The imagery ranged from fiesta floats and dry docks to voodoo boxes and scale model buildings. Conceptual ideas and philosophical dualities were the core to each piece. A form called *the Twins* resembled binoculars that might be used to survey the Cape of Good Hope or the Tropic of Bad Dreams. A barge that transported greywacke road-chip to my coastal home was the model for *Boatload of Stones*. Each porcelain stone of its cargo imprinted with the lines of my palm. *Stone Float* had its origins in the illusion of levitation that off-shore islands give in shimmering summer heat but also touched on small-town anniversary parades or processions, in this case celebrating the Patron Saint of Paradox.

What interested me about the influences from Japan, was the Momoyama period (17th Century) when tea ceremony connoisseurs chose their utensils from regions where strong, natural and unselfconscious styles had developed. Bowls and Jars from Iga, Shigiraki, Tokoname or Bizen were said to manifest the presence of such concepts as paradox and dualism. The works from *Five by Five* mentioned above were attempts to rephrase the question "if philosophical ideas can be applied to simple clay wares made from a rural environment with local materials and knowledge, what would clay objects look like if these concepts were foregrounded with more emphasis, and borrowed their narrative forms from the traditions of *my* local regional life?"

The contemporary ceramics movement, *Sodeisha* (The Running Mud Company) provided the example I used as a touchstone. *Sodeisha* was founded in 1948 by Kazuo Yagi and Osamu Suzuki in Kyoto. It reflected a rebellion against the social order of the existing craft world in Japan and an awareness of trends in art and design that were flowing into Japan from the West. When I met members of this group in the early 1980's influences such as Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Arte Povera sculptors from Italy, Robert Smithson the land art pioneer, were discussed avidly. Performance rituals involving clay and sound were taking place. Large touring exhibitions of contemporary avant-garde art from Europe were doing the rounds of the Department Store Museums. Seibu Bookstores stocked all the current catalogues from around the world. After the devastation of World War II the apprentice master/disciple system and national Living Treasure hierarchies were openly condemned. Many 'Sodeisha' artists were from University art schools. Some were hostile to the previous connoisseurship that had developed. The leader Yagi admired the internationally acclaimed work of sculptor Isamu Noguchi, back from the U.S.A. where he had designed for theatre and experimental dance companies. But it needs to be stressed that these diverse influences on members of Sodeisha

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Cornell frequently used ceramic objects in his boxed tableaux, for example, clay pipes, spheres, dolls etc. He often used sand in these miniature theatres as well.



existed within a masterly understanding of the tradition of making, glazing and firing utilitarian clay wares.

Like the sculptural work of Sodeisha artists, the Americans Cornell and Westerman made assemblages that were tailored down to table scale, small enough to hold in the hands (like pottery). Their images however had a visionary dimension that undermined the determinedly miniature, delicacy of scale. The crafting of each piece was always subordinate to the idea and at times the vision subverted the craftsmanship. This approach seemed entirely absent from ceramic traditions (the exception being children's claywork). The *Funk* experiment had freed ceramics to engage major issues being addressed by artists in other media. But its obsession with irreverent humour, punning and mock self-parody, only underlined its minor-league status. It was still threaded down a line that stretched from 'Masterpieces of the Tang Dynasty' to *The World's Most Fascinating Hobby*. Clay needed to get tough, get dirty, and get down off its high horse. It needed some foreboding and plangency that only artists unshackled by the restraints of craft histories could provide. Art of the Twentieth Century does have a tradition of claywork that embraces these freedoms, but it has been marginalised in favour of these artists' achievements as painters or sculptors - starting with the ceramics of Paul Gauguin to the mid-century experiments of the Australian visionary Arthur Boyd to contemporary artists such as Richard Long, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marina Abramovic and Anthony Gormley, clayiness has figured prominently. Richard Long throws buckets of clay slip at gallery and museum walls and lets it drip, run and puddle. He stamps out huge circles and rings with muddied hands that resonate like mandalas. Often the location where the slip-thickened water originates will determine the title or text. Jannis Kounellis, the great *povera* sculptor fills ancient terracotta amphorae with seawater and blood then stacks them in the holds of a cargo vessel to make narratives that track the migratory and trading traditions of once expansive European cultures. Mario Merz just flattens and 'pancakes' lumps of clay over igloo forms left to dry and crack. Sometimes he'll just leave it in the plastic bag and thread neon lighting through to create metaphors about nature, continuity and systems of proliferation. The British sculptor Antony Gormley fills museum rooms with thousands upon thousand of dumpy, shapeless, schematic clay figurines for a generic installation he calls *Field*. Armies of untrained volunteer workers drawn from local communities labour to a basic prescribed formula. Elongated standing tube shapes capped with two glaring eyesockets in a rudimentary head. Each is unique. But any individuality lost in a thronging mass of gaping forms that are only visible from doorways or peepholes. No nationality, no identity, just a harvest of human clay and human consciousness. The performance artist Marina Abramovic makes clay mirrors imprinted with facial features that summon both fragmentary actions in time and their conjunction with the transforming alchemy of the earth-body.

These examples from contemporary installation art represent clay at its wettest, slipperiest and thickest. Clay in its most primal, alchemical and essential condition, speaking in its purest tones. Formless, but teeming with symbolic content. The High Art end of the line. A line that is anchored by objects still invested with some residual phantom of containerhood. Vessels made by *artists* in clay like Ron Nagel, Ken Price, Peter Voulkos, Liz Fritsch or Andrew Lord have advanced ceramics in the late 20th Century by broadening the terms of reference.

The strength of the *Five by Five* exhibition was to add significantly to the vocabulary of references while accepting the limitations of scale. Each piece was essentially kiln-shelf sized and not rehearsing statements that suggested clay could be made to perform *monumental* tasks like big brother bronze. The work celebrated clayness and displayed a devotion to its expressive language and lineage. In fact, there were pieces that renewed the possibilities for domestic ceramics which were foundering on overworked borrowings and slavish obsession with technical triumphs. The show did however direct its gaze towards another tradition. It was that tradition of using clay to which some of the most innovative painters and sculptors of the twentieth century contributed, but had remained unseen (especially in New Zealand) due to the conspiracy that developed between those who believe Craft will never be Art, and those who believe Art will never be Craft.

Denis O'Connor  
September 1995