

Evaluating Ceramic Art in Japan

Moeran, Brian

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Creativity at Work:

Evaluating Ceramic Art in Japan

By Brian Moeran

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Abstract

This paper describes and analyses preparations for the holding of an anthropologist potter's one-man show in a Japanese department store. Based on participant observation, it describes in detail the strategic planning of, and preparations for, the fieldworker's own pottery exhibition in a department store located in northern Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands and home to a long tradition of porcelain and stoneware production. The paper focuses on the main players in the ceramic art world; the social interaction underpinning an exhibition; the conflicting ideals of 'aesthetics', display and money (pricing); and the ways in which different sets of values, and evaluating processes, affected the reception of the author's work. It concludes by developing a theory of values in the light of recent writings in the field of cultural economics.

Keywords:

Aesthetics, art world, ceramics, cultural economics, display, exhibition, framing, pricing, values

Evaluating Ceramic Art in Japan

Brian Moeran

©reative Encounters, Copenhagen Business School

Introduction

The study of values and evaluative practices has been carried out across a number of humanities and social science disciplines, and applied to a wide range of cultural phenomena, particularly art. Although values in many ways constitute the core focus of anthropology and sociology (cf. Hitlin and Piliavin 2004), and although there are numerous references to 'values' and 'theories of value' (generally used in its singular form) in these disciplines' writings, it has been hard to find a systematic theory of value(s) (cf. Graeber 2001: 1).

Recent work by cultural economists, however, has been more adventurous. David Throsby (2001: 28-9), for example, has attempted to disaggregate 'cultural value' into aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic, and authenticity values, while Michael Hutter and Richard Shusterman (2006) have isolated ten different values – moral or religious, expressive, communicative, social/political, cognitive, experiential, formal/design/aesthetic, art-technical, art-historical, and artistic cult values – that they see as being nested within 'the vague concept of artistic value' (2006: 197).

There are, however, problems with these classificatory attempts, as Hutter and Shusterman implicitly recognize (2006: 199). For example, it can be argued that 'authenticity' is an integral part of 'aesthetic' value; that 'spiritual' and 'expressive' might be conflated with 'symbolic' and 'communicative' respectively; and that 'aesthetic', 'artistic cult', and '(art-)historical' values might all be subsumed under a less loaded term like 'appreciative' (or even 'ideological') values.

Nevertheless, in comparison with other approaches, these are to be commended. To take just two examples: in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard indiscriminately mentions absence, aesthetic, authentic, autonomous, commercial, critical, differential, economic, exchange, gestural, sign(-exchange), statutory, sumptuary, surplus, symbolic (exchange), tactical/strategic, and utility values, although he does also isolate a set of four inter-related variables (use, exchange, symbolic exchange and sign values) that he sees as constituting a 'logic of consumption' (Baudrillard 1981: 66). In *Beyond Price*, edited by Michael Hutter and David Throsby (2008), contributors – seemingly arbitrarily and without cross-referencing – refer to 32 different kinds of value all told: aesthetic, art-historical, artistic, bequest, cultural, durable,

economic, education, entertainment, exchange-, existence, existent, experiential, extrinsic, formative, insight/idea, instrumental, interaction, intrinsic, market, monetary, option, philosophical, political, pleasure-, prestige, religious, representation, social, transformatory, unlimited, and use-values. Many, but not all, of these reflect different disciplinary approaches, perhaps, but they do not lend themselves to clarity of argumentation.

This paper, then, is designed to come up with an alternative model of values, based on the results of participant observation over a period of a year in the art world of contemporary Japanese ceramics. It describes in detail the strategic planning of, and preparations for, the fieldworker's own pottery exhibition in a department store located in northern Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands and home to a long tradition of porcelain and stoneware production. The paper focuses on the main players in the ceramic art world, the social interaction underpinning the exhibition, the conflicting ideals of 'aesthetics' and money (pricing), and the ways in which different sets of values, and evaluating processes, affected the reception of the author's work.

Research Issues

Some years ago now, I conducted anthropological fieldwork on the production, marketing and aesthetic appraisal of contemporary ceramic art in Japan.¹ The research question asked was simple enough: how did a potter get selected as the holder of an important intangible cultural property (*jūyō mukei bunkazai*) – the highest honour awarded to a traditional artist-craftsman in Japan, and popularly referred to in the media as a 'national treasure' (*ningen kokuhō*)? The answer was also simple, on the surface at least: by exhibiting his or her (mainly his) work in department stores.

I therefore spent a large proportion of my early fieldwork attending the one-man gallery shows and group exhibitions that were held on a regular basis in Japanese department stores – located in various cities in the southern island of Kyushu, where I was plugged into a network of ceramic artists (some of whom were happy to call themselves simply 'potters'), as well as in the capital, Tokyo, where they all ultimately aspired to hold an exhibition. As I delved deeper into the working of the ceramic art world and into the different sales and media fields in which it operated, I learned a number of things. One was a classic 'collective misrecognition' or 'disavowal' (Bourdieu 1993: 74-6) of the importance of commerce in art: critics denied that aesthetic value had anything to do with economic exchange, even though potters themselves used sales to judge 'success' and assert the 'quality' of their work. Another was that there was a mutual playing off of status – what Bourdieu (1993: 67-9) refers to as social and cultural capital – among potters, critics, department stores and the occasional media organization publicizing a ceramic art exhibition. On the one

¹ The research in question was funded by the School of Oriental & African Studies, University of London, and the Economic and Science Research Council, UK, in 1981-82.

hand, the ranking of potters to a large extent reflected the ranking of department stores, and vice versa; on the other, potters approached well-known critics to endorse their work and give it a 'provenance'; critics happily did so because they received from potters in 'payment' examples of their work, whose value then increased because of the endorsement that they had given it. In general, as I soon learned, the ceramic art world was made up of a tight-knit network of critics, department store representatives, media journalists and eminent named potters (cf. Becker 1982). The difficulty, so far as my fieldwork was concerned, lay in how best to break open the black box that constituted the art world of contemporary Japanese ceramics.

The – or one – resolution of my difficulty emerged in the form of Miyamoto Reisuke, a gallery owner in Fukuoka City, who was buying and selling contemporary ceramics from his gallery, as well as arranging shows of potters' work for various department stores located in Kyushu, but also further afield in Hiroshima and Kobe. For no other reason than that he was tired of the wheeling and dealing of those involved in the ceramic art world, he decided to take me under his wing as his unpaid assistant and tell me all he knew.² During the course of the next six months, therefore, I accompanied Miyamoto around the potteries of northern Kyushu, collecting pots for exhibition; being introduced to potters to whom I could then talk at my leisure and follow up the various issues that came up during the course of my research; and going into department stores by the back entrance on their weekly holiday and meeting gallery managers who, in their shirt sleeves and jeans, happily told me all the 'back stage' stories that in their official 'front stage' capacity (replete with suit and tie) they never referred to when we met at other times during the week (cf. Goffman 1959: 109-140).

During our travels, Miyamoto and I discussed pottery and the ceramic art world at considerable length, and he gave me his dealer's eye view of what was going on, of who was taking advantage of whom and for what purpose, and of the obvious difficulty that young and talented potters had in making their way to the top of the ceramic art world. Unless they conformed to the demands and expectations of those whom these potters themselves called 'the mafia', unless they tailored their work to suit the *status quo* of accepted standards of taste, they had little hope of introducing acceptable innovations. In this respect, their work seemed doomed to stylization. Moreover, if they really wished to advance their careers, they had to be prepared to 'play the game' and enter into a world characterized, it seemed, by bribery and corruption. By participating in the game played by others, they became 'adversaries in collusion' upholding the 'social alchemy' of the ceramic art world (Bourdieu 1993: 81).

The suggestion that I should hold my own pottery exhibition emerged during one of our lengthy talks as we drove around the kilns of northern Kyushu. After I had concluded that there was a lot that was unsatisfactory

² In this respect, as an outsider to the ceramic art world, I was deemed to be 'safe'.

about the quality of contemporary ceramics, Miyamoto advised me to be more objective. Did I really appreciate the potters' problems?

"It's easy to criticize from the outside, but what you really need to do as a researcher is experience what it's like being a potter yourself. I'm not saying you're wrong in your conclusions. But you need to understand things down here," he pointed to his solar plexus, "And not up here," he tapped his head. "Why don't you hold your own exhibition? That way you'd really begin to appreciate some of the paradoxes potters find themselves caught up in."³

I was intrigued by the idea. After all, I had learned the rudiments of pottery when studying a folk art pottery community for my Ph.D. (Moeran 1997) and had continued to make pots during my current research fieldwork. In some respects, it would be fun to see whether I could sell my work. At the same time, as I realized from the apprehension that immediately gripped me, holding my own exhibition would be a challenge, and in all likelihood a nerve-wracking experience. In this respect, Miyamoto had given me good fieldwork advice. Learn through my body, not my head.

Establishing a Frame

In order to enable my exhibition to get off the ground, Miyamoto and I needed to establish a frame. Our first concern was access to materials and the means to make pots. I therefore approached a pottery household that I knew well in Koishiwara, two hours from the city of Fukuoka where Miyamoto had his gallery, and asked Kajiwara Jirō if he would provide me with access to clay, glazes and a kiln in which to fire my stoneware 'craft pottery'. Permission was willingly given. Our second concern was to frame the exhibition appropriately by persuading a department store to provide a venue, and a national newspaper the cultural backing and PR, necessary for the show. This pairing was necessary because stores needed newspapers to 'consecrate' (Bourdieu 1993: 120-5) them with a cultural aura and newspapers needed stores to legitimize their taken position as cultural consecrators. The aim, then, was to find out if either of these organizations thought that there might be some business mileage in my holding a one-man exhibition and, if so, whether they would commit themselves to getting involved.

Miyamoto decided to approach the Mainichi Newspaper, because the Enterprise and Promotions Manager there already knew me and would therefore be likely to be well disposed towards the idea. This was sound judgement. Later, the manager concerned explained why.

³ That Miyamoto should have even considered allowing an amateur like myself to hold his own one-man exhibition revealed, even though it was closed in, the fluid nature of the contemporary ceramic art world in Japan at that time (cf. Rosenberg 1970: 388).

“For a start, we know Miyamoto. He’s been doing business with us for several years now, putting on shows in our art gallery and acting as our agent in dealing with potters around Kyushu. We trust him. But there’s something else. A department store spends most of its time and energy trying to find some means of making money, and only money. So when an idea like this comes along, we tend to jump at it. After all, it’s nice to enjoy ourselves occasionally. As far as we’re concerned, it doesn’t really matter whether your pots sell or not. The important thing is that people will come along and enjoy themselves and that’ll be good for the store’s reputation.”

This initial discussion reinforced the importance of trust among people working in the creative industries (as well as in Japanese business more generally). It also neatly illustrated Howard Becker’s point (1982: 24) that an art world consists of ‘networks of people cooperating’, and Bourdieu’s emphasis (1993) on the disavowal of the commercial that frequently takes place in art worlds. Here the newspaper-department store relationship was critical to the functioning of the ceramic art world. A newspaper provided its readers with ‘cultural commentary’, which a department store needed in support of for its commercial activities (thereby transforming economic capital into cultural capital). My own exhibition was from the start designed to make it *appear* that a department store was putting on a fun show; it was to be used towards building a store’s cultural capital. This would encourage people to visit the store and indirectly persuade them to spend their money there, either on pots or on other things for sale, both then and in the future, thereby contributing to the store’s economic capital.

At this stage, Miyamoto himself played a double game with the Mainichi Newspaper and Tamaya, the store that he approached about holding my show:

“With all shows, you have to have a framework in which to work, and it is this frame that’s the most difficult thing of all to establish. So when I visited the Enterprise and Promotions Manager at Mainichi, I told him that Tamaya had agreed to hold the show in their Fukuoka store, even though that wasn’t actually the case. And then, when I visited the Publicity Manager at Tamaya, I told him that the Mainichi Newspaper was going to be the official sponsor of your show, even though that wasn’t true either. The thing is that neither of the two men concerned knew this.

“Of course, in your case, things are comparatively simple. Both men have known you for some months now and want to help you out. Even so, *officially*, things aren’t fixed yet. We’re still working at the level of informal contacts. It’s this, of course, that is the vital aspect of Japanese business. Formalities come much, much later, once the frame has been securely established.”

The relation between informal contacts and formal endorsement was, however, not *that* simple. When I met the Enterprise and Promotions Manager the following week, he said:

“I haven’t officially committed the Mainichi Newspaper to sponsoring your exhibition for two reasons. One is that I don’t at the moment want personal connections to dictate a newspaper company project, without first checking up on one or two alternatives. More importantly, if the Mainichi Newspaper were to decide officially to back your show, it would mean that we could rely on the RKB Broadcasting and TV station to help out, because they’re part of the Mainichi media network. But then there would be a good chance that none of the other media organizations would pay any attention to your show. What I mean is, jealousy would prevent the Nishi Nihon, Asahi or Yomiuri Newspapers from writing about your exhibition, and that would, of course, ultimately be detrimental to publicity both for Tamaya and for yourself.

“As a result, I’ve another idea which I think would work very well, and which would allow us more freedom when it comes to media publicity. There’s an organization known as the Anglo-Japanese Association (*Nichi-ei Kyōkai*), which is based in Kyushu University and whose members are primarily industrialists and intellectuals. What I’d like to do is get *it* to sponsor your show – in name only, of course. Then the Mainichi can take a back seat, while at the same time doing all the real promotion. In the meantime, Miyamoto can get in touch with his friends at the Nishi Nihon Newspaper and ask them to write about your show, and they’ll have no objections because we won’t be acting as front-running sponsors.”

While illustrating the difficulty of determining who in fact ‘creates the creator’ (Bourdieu 1993: 76-7), the Enterprise and Promotion Manager’s plan revealed a very delicate juggling act, in which a number of institutions were keen to get in on an exhibition, but not willing to accept responsibility for anything should the act misfire. If the show was a failure, the only people to blame would be the official sponsors – an amorphous body that hardly ever met. If, on the other hand, the show was a success, both Tamaya and the Mainichi Newspaper would certainly claim the credit. In other words, the criteria to be used for evaluation of my work were not simply aesthetic, but extended to both financial and social considerations.

Having realized this, I decided to obtain additional sponsorship from another organization: the British Council. By chance, I knew the current Director of this organization in Tokyo, since he had provided me with a job when I first went to Japan in 1967. Making use of this tenuous connection, I quickly persuaded him to bestow the British Council’s name on my show, “as long as we don’t have to finance you or anything like that, old man.” The Anglo-Japanese Association also agreed to act as official sponsor of the show, so gradually the framework began to come together. In this way, all those concerned – potter, gallery owner, store manager, newspaper journalist and cultural sponsors – carefully evaluated various means by which a ‘rub off’ effect would be generated among themselves, as well as on the show, and thus on the perceived quality of the ceramic ‘art’ on display.

Strategic Packaging

Venue and sponsorship were not the only elements in establishing a frame, however. The timing of the show and the product to be exhibited were also crucial aspects of what might be termed 'strategic packaging'.

First, let us consider timing. One question that remained unresolved for some weeks was *when* to hold the exhibition. One-man shows in department stores usually lasted for six days and Tamaya, of course, had a schedule that had to be filled for its gallery. Some weeks were already reserved for shows, but a few others were open. Miyamoto, however, needed a reason to hold the show in one week rather than another - a 'big idea' that would entice the business side of the ceramic art world to support my exhibition wholeheartedly. This 'big idea' remained elusive until one evening when Miyamoto's wife suddenly suggested over dinner:

"What we really ought to do is hold your show at the same time as the *Dentō Kōgeiten*, the annual Traditional Crafts Exhibition, which is put on at Iwataya, Tamaya's rival department store down the road. *Everybody* goes to that - potters, patrons, collectors, critics, as well as the general public. Holding your show then would really appeal to the Publicity Manager, if we had the proper media backing, because that's the one week in the year when *nobody* visits Tamaya. If your show were to be properly advertised, *all* the potters visiting the Traditional Crafts Exhibition would drop by to see your pots. Just for the fun of it."

In spite of my protestations and embarrassment, Miyamoto quickly arranged with Tamaya for my show to be held in the second week in March. This was the hook that bated the octopus that he had been coaxing into his basket frame. By putting on my show during the same week as the national traditional crafts exhibition, Tamaya was overtly declaring that it, too, was rising above commerce as it engaged with 'spectacle' and the 'carnavalesque' (Bakhtin 1984: 4-12) aspect of the ceramic art market. As for myself, as a potter I now had a deadline to meet and a whole range of pots to be made.

Which brings us, secondly, to the product. As mentioned above, I had access to a household making stoneware pottery, and it was stoneware that I had always made. However, much of my research had focused on potters who made porcelain wares, since the town of Arita in northern Kyushu was famous for its kaolin deposits, which had been discovered at the turn of the 17th century, and enabled porcelain to be made and fired to a much higher temperature than the more common stoneware. Generally speaking, potters specialized in either stoneware or porcelain, since each was evaluated according to different sets of aesthetic standards: stoneware was 'rough', 'muddy' (*dorokusai*), and 'folksy', while porcelain (which is perhaps technically more difficult to make, glaze and fire satisfactorily) was 'fine', 'clean looking', and close to the Japanese concept of 'art'. For the most part, therefore, ceramic 'artists' (*tōgei sakka*) worked with porcelain clay, although it was also possible for stoneware potters who worked in particular areas of Japan noted for their

traditional wares (Bizen, Minō, Tokoname, and so on), or who devoted themselves to making tea bowls and other pots for use in the Japanese tea ceremony, to be recognized as 'artists'.

The village of Koishiwara where I was working was not one of the famed six traditional kilns of Japan. Consequently, there was little chance of my work coming to be seen as 'art' (*bijutsuhin*), however proficient or skilled I might have been at making pots. The best I could hope for was that people recognized it as 'art-craft' (*bijutsu kōgeihin*); the real test was whether they would categorize what I exhibited as mere 'pottery' (*yakimono*) or as 'ceramic art' (*tōgei*).

It was in order to help people elevate my pots from mere 'pottery' to 'ceramic art', as well as to differentiate my exhibition from the one-man shows held by other potters in Kyushu's department stores, that Miyamoto came up with the idea that I should make and exhibit *both* stoneware *and* porcelain:

"Nobody's done that before. Look at all the famous potters around today. People like Imaemon, Kakiemon and Kondō Yūzō," he said, naming three nationally famous potters living in and around Arita, "all make porcelain. None of them ever makes stoneware. On the other hand, Miwa Kyūsetsu, Sakada Deika, and other tea ceremony potters make only stoneware. They never touch porcelain. So you'll be the only person in Japan essentially who dares to try his hand at both. That'll get people talking all right. And its talk - word of mouth - that we need to set this show alight."

Miyamoto therefore arranged for me to make some porcelain pots with a potter working out of Ureshino, Tanaka Hajime, whom I had met several times and with whom I got on well during the course of my research.

Although the combination of stoneware and porcelain in a one-man show was a good marketing strategy, it was not sufficient in itself to ensure success. After all, what if people decided that both the porcelain and stoneware pots that I showed were of poor quality - which was likely if they bothered to compare my work with that of professional Japanese potters?

The way out of this conundrum lay in the custom of 'recommendations' (*suisenbun*) that usually accompanied gallery exhibitions. One of the things that had to be prepared well in advance was the announcement of any show. In this, potters (and artists more generally) introduce themselves, or have themselves introduced, to the general public. The simplest way is for them to write up a kind of 'potted history' (*tōreki*) of their career, in which they cite where they studied pottery, to whom they were apprenticed, what exhibitions they have contributed to, and what prizes they have won. Alternatively, they can write up some sort of introductory note and talk about their work - about the traditions and history of their kiln, for example, or about the techniques they use and their origins.

A third way to establish this sort of social and cultural capital is by persuading someone to write a recommendation on their behalf - their teacher, for example, if famous, or a well-known critic, or (lower down the symbolic

capital scale) a member of the department store's art gallery staff. Miyamoto, however, decided to approach a *potter* to write a recommendation on my behalf. The potter he chose was Imaizumi Imaemon, thirteenth generation Nabeshima overglaze enamelware artist (and several years later designated the holder of an important intangible cultural property). Miyamoto rationalized his decision this way:

“Imaemon is totally unusual in the world of contemporary Japanese ceramics. *Everybody* respects him. You never hear anybody criticizing him or telling tales behind his back. He's a one off. With Imaemon's name signed at the bottom of the recommendation printed on the announcements of your show, I can send them off to every potter in Kyushu and *know* that a lot of them will come simply out of curiosity because Imaemon has chosen to write about your work.”

This decision coincided with Miyamoto's aim to sell my pots to potters, rather than simply to casual passers-by who might drop in to see my show. This strategy was rational in that, like artists elsewhere (cf. Vollard 1978: 62), Japanese potters did, and still do, tend to buy one another's work – partly out of personal acquaintanceship (known as *tsukiai* in Japanese), partly as a way of congratulating the potter holding a show (cf. Moeran 1985: 84-5). By so doing, potters know that the favour will be returned when it is their turn to hold a one-man show. In my own case, I happened to have translated a Japanese book about the history of overglaze enamel porcelain and Imaemon pottery into English, and had been introduced to the potter when he had visited England a few months before the start of my research. In Japan, this meant, crudely speaking, that Imaemon 'owed me one'. Because he knew very well the rules of social interaction, he readily acceded to Miyamoto's request that he write a 'recommendation' on my behalf. This reveals once again the social evaluation that accompanies the evaluation of cultural products.

Pricing and Display

Another aspect of packaging was to be found in the felt necessity to box my larger pots, once they were ready for the exhibition. The Japanese have been boxing pots (and some other crafts) for centuries as a means of first initiating, and then safeguarding, the provenance of a work. Traditionally, each box has the name or type of pot inscribed in calligraphic handwriting by the potter who has made the pot concerned, or by someone recognized as having the power to 'consecrate' an art work in this way. Tea masters, for instance, regularly sign boxes for tea bowls (to which they give such poetic names as 'autumn moon' or 'spring breeze'). Depending on the status of the school of tea concerned,⁴ as well as on his (or possibly her) own status within its hierarchical organization, a tea master's calligraphy on a box could raise the price of the pot by between five and twenty times. In my own case, Miyamoto felt that it was enough for

⁴ The *Ura-Senke* school of tea was the most prominent at the time of my research.

me to inscribe my boxed pots myself, since my (left-handed) Japanese 'calligraphy' was distinct enough to give each pot an immediate, and obviously distinct (!), 'provenance'.

Having done this, however, we next had to price the pots. This was extremely difficult because Miyamoto knew from experience that pricing was often an arbitrary act that had little, if anything, to do with 'intrinsic' aesthetic qualities. Usually it was potters themselves who set their own prices, on the basis of comparison with other potters' work, as well as of previous experience of 'what the market would bear'. In such cases, all Miyamoto had to do was add on his commission and the retail price was set. This, however, was not the situation that we faced.

"The trouble is, in your case your pots are 'priceless'. I mean, there's no standard against which we can measure them. And yet we have to take into account your production expenses; my commission - which, admittedly, I can always wave; the store's commission - which we can't; and the number of pots that we can realistically show in a gallery with a limited display area. Somehow we have to break even.

"Given all these factors, the temptation is to price on the high side. But if you charge high prices for your stoneware, it'll almost certainly upset other potters working in the same village of Koishiwara. After all, your pots aren't that different from theirs. What I mean is, we need to price in such a way that people won't object to what we charge."

For Miyamoto, then, as for art dealers elsewhere in the world (Thompson 2008: 210-1), prices had to be 'justifiable' - not just to clients, but to other potters exhibiting similar work. However, there was an underlying implication that the *artist* - as opposed to craftsman - potter was someone who ignored the tried and tested market value of work similar to his own and created an arbitrary pricing scale. Somehow, therefore, we had to arrive at a price level that signaled not just my anticipated reputation, but the status of Miyamoto as a dealer and of the intended purchasers of my work (Thompson 2008: 209).

There was another issue, though, that had to be dealt with when setting prices. In Miyamoto's words:

"You've suggested that we're pricing pots by size, rather than by quality, and that in this respect we're not that different from painters who charge so much per square centimeter of canvas. You're right, of course. But at the same time, if you start suggesting that one pot is better than another, then you're setting a standard. A standard of quality. But, as I've said, in your case there's *no* objectively reliable standard to go by - only your own. So, if you start pricing one pot higher than another one similar in size, and possibly design, then you're going to have to do the same right down the line for all your pots - even the small tea and *sake* cups.

"So what I suggest instead is that we stick to the idea of pricing by size. In other words, we decide what price is likely to attract a buyer for a

particular size of pot and then leave the public to decide which pots they like at that particular price. That way, you'll learn which designs are popular and which aren't. Let the public set the standard for any future exhibition you may hold."

And so, having agreed on a maximum price of ¥100,000 (or \$400)⁵ each for a set of dishes and a large wood-framed tray, we went about our work.⁶ In the end, the 294 pots on sale (many of them forming sets of plates, dishes, cups and saucers) yielded a total sales potential of a little over \$10,000 (¥2.5 million). The aim was to sell 70 per cent of this total in order to break even. Even if we achieved this sales figure, however, I would not be deemed to have broken into the lowest rung on the ceramic art ladder which started at about ¥2 million for a week's show (cf. Moeran 1997: 237-8).

A further issue surrounding the evaluation of the quality of a cultural product emerged the following morning when we went to Tamaya to arrange my pots in the gallery space. My initial reaction was that the space was too cluttered, and that the gallery looked more like a bargain sale counter than an 'artistic exhibition'. However, I quickly learned that there were two logics at work in the display.

One was a logic of separating genres. The department store's gallery personnel had arranged all my stoneware along one, and my porcelain along the other, side of the gallery. Surely, I said to Miyamoto, we should be mixing up the two sets of wares, matching similar forms and designs on stoneware and porcelain. The answer I got was straight to the point:

"The trouble with your idea is that it's typically 'artistic'. If you mix up pots too much, the porcelain will reflect back on the stoneware, and the stoneware will reflect back on the porcelain. People will no doubt enjoy *looking* at the subtle differences between the two, but they'd end up *buying* nothing at all because they'd be too confused. They wouldn't know what to look for where, nor which they liked better."

By arguing that prices should reflect size, rather than quality or artistic merit, Miyamoto was following standard pricing procedure in the art world, where all work by an artist has to be presented as if it were of equal merit. Different price levels, along the lines I was suggesting, therefore, merely signalled that my work was not consistent (which, of course, it wasn't!) (cf. Thompson 2008: 208). During my research, I had in fact noted, though not fully appreciated, this difference in evaluative criteria between the creator and seller of a work.

⁵ At the time of the exhibition, the dollar-yen exchange rate was: US\$1 = ¥248.

⁶ In order to enable my readers to gauge how this top price of \$400 compared with prices charged by other potters in Japan, let me add that Kajiwara Jirō in Koishiwara would have priced a similarly sized stoneware pot at about \$600 and Tanaka Kakuei a porcelain dish at \$800, while a comparable Imaemon XIII overglaze enamel porcelain bowl would have been on offer at between \$1,600 and \$2,000. Stoneware tea bowls by Arakawa Toyozō, the holder of an 'important intangible cultural property' (*jūyō mukei bunakazai*), on the other hand, were retailing at approximately \$24,000 in the same year.

Miyamoto's attitude towards selling was precisely the opposite to that of potters when they took their work to be judged at a large exhibition. There I had noticed one famous ceramic artist carefully place his celadon vase between two pure white porcelain vases, precisely in order to make it stand out for selection by the judges.

The second display logic was one of size (and thus of kinds of pots displayed). In arranging pottery exhibitions, Miyamoto followed a standard procedure that placed tea cups at the entrance to the gallery. Next to them were *sake* cups; then small dishes and bowls; with larger pots at the further end of the display area. The reason for this was part pragmatic, part psychological. First, people often stole *sake* cups, which were small but expensive; so they needed to be placed near the sales counter where store employees could keep an eye on them. Second, a good way to attract people to any exhibition (as well as into, for example, jewellery stores and fashion house retail outlets) was to show cheaper goods near the gallery entrance and thereby lure them gradually further and further into the gallery towards the expensive artworks.

Mediating Values

Eighteen hours later, I had appeared on a late night television programme, given two national and regional newspaper interviews, and sold just under \$3,000 worth of pots. The gallery had been packed with people all day, including Imaemon himself and Tanaka Hajime, both of whom had been kind enough to take me round the display and tell me freely what they liked and disliked about my work. For the first time, I began to feel a bond of sympathy with a group of people whom I had hitherto tended to regard merely as objects of research.

As the exhibition went on, a number of things about how we evaluate artworks became clearer. Firstly, there were my relations with the media. Each of the half dozen journalists who came to interview me needed a 'story', and it was my job to provide them (as well as two more television announcers) with such a story. In other words, the creator is expected to weave a tale around his or her cultural products. I had recognized this earlier when I had negotiated sponsorship for my exhibition with the Anglo-Japanese Association. Now, however, I had to create an integrated tale that would help those who had no way of assessing my work to evaluate it according to one of various art (or pottery) discourses current in the public domain. The way that I chose to do this was to locate my work within the aesthetic tenets of Japanese folk art, which espoused the benefits of hand- as opposed to machine-made crafts; the beauty of imperfection and irregularity; use of natural rather than synthetic materials; and so on. During the course of such story-telling, I placed myself very firmly in a tradition that stretched back to William Morris and others living and working in 19th century Britain (cf. Moeran 1997: 209-220), and provided the media with an overarching discourse from which they could select parts that fitted their own agenda. This led to two newspapers describing me as 'the

second Leach⁷ and, as a result, something like 1,000 people a day came to see my show – a phenomenon that had *all* the senior management of Tamaya department store (including its CEO) coming to congratulate me on the ‘success’ of my exhibition (even though pots were not selling that well), and inviting me to hold a new show there the following year.

Secondly, a lot of pots were sold on the first day of the exhibition, but was that the relevant factor to consider when evaluating purchases? Miyamoto was acutely aware that the prices that we had set reflected not just my pretensions as a ‘ceramic artist’, but his reputation as a dealer since prices should never be reduced (cf. Thompson 2008: 208-9).

“So today was a success. But what made it so? A lot of small pots were sold. But then that’s to be expected with a show like yours. What was important was that, fairly early on this morning, a plump middle-aged woman in a fur coat came into the gallery. She was a doctor’s wife – the kind of person who has money to spend on art objects here in Japan.

“So once she started buying pots, I got interested. Not in *how much* she would spend, but in *which* pots on display she’d buy. If she’d stuck to those between \$10 and \$75, that would’ve been that. But she didn’t. She went for one of the four pots in the top price range of \$400, and another at \$300 just below. As I see it, that doctor’s wife was vital to the show because she helped create a mood among those visiting the gallery. Once people see somebody buying the more expensive works, they begin to want to do the same. It may sound ridiculous, but I can assure you from experience, it’s true.

“I have to admit, for a time I was worried. I thought I’d overpriced your pots. But now I feel there’s hope. It’s funny, but every time I’ve had a successful show, this ‘mood creation’ has come from a single stroke of chance... It’s all a matter of luck. But when it works, it really works.”

Thirdly, as is true of the art world in general, approximately 80 per cent of my total sales (which came to ¥1.7 million, or almost \$7,000, over five days) were made to people already known to Miyamoto, Tamaya and myself. Some of these private clients ordered pots over the phone; others came and bought things in the gallery, while spending a lot of time chatting with Miyamoto who ‘placed’, rather than ‘sold’, my work (cf. Thompson 2008: 40). In this respect, my show resembled more a social function than a purely sales venue. As Miyamoto explained:

“People is what business is all about. It’s the network of relations between people that really count. There’s a lot of give and take, you

⁷ Bernard Leach (1887-1979) was an English potter who spent the first four years of his life in Japan and then went to live there as an adult from 1909-1920 (with a year’s break in Beijing in 1914). He was instrumental in bringing William Morris’s ideas to Japan and became a close friend of Yanagi Sōetsu, founder of the Japanese folk art (or *mingei*) movement. Leach’s work is regarded extremely highly in Japan and fetch a high price (cf. Moeran 1997).

know. Precisely because I hold shows here in Tamaya, I'm expected to attend their special functions and buy myself a suit here, a fur coat or jewellery there for my wife. It's all part of the return for favours I've received from the store and it helps cement our business relationship. That's what connections (*tsukiai*) are all about."

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show the different kinds of evaluating practices adopted by different participants in an art world. Some of these are evaluations rely on subjective, objective, or relative judgement; others on logical, causal or perceptual reasoning; and yet others on inductive, deductive or rhetorical argument (Hutter and Shusterman 2006: 201-4). My desire to match stoneware and porcelain designs was a good example of subjective, and Miyamoto's emphasis on size of objective, judgement (with a bit of causal reasoning thrown in). His justification of his choice of Imaemon to write a recommendation on my behalf was a clear example of logical reasoning, while his chosen method of display involved perceptual reasoning. My own narrative about the influences on my pottery was of a generally deductive nature, since it drew from established and socially accepted folk art genre rules (cf. Hutter and Shusterman 2006: 204). As will have been appreciated, this paper has shown that evaluation practices are multiple, overlapping and have a cumulative effect upon the final appreciation of any artwork. They lead, inevitably, to a discussion of values.

During the course of my research, members of the contemporary ceramic art world in Japan regularly distinguished between three different, but complementary, kinds of value, each of which affected the others. One of these was 'aesthetic value' (*biteki kachikan*) and related specifically to the formal properties of an artwork in the context of the genre in which it was situated. It was in the historical and cultural context of stoneware and porcelain production that my pots were judged by ceramic artists such as Imaizumi Imaemon XIII and Tanaka Hajime. 'Aesthetic' values were in this sense historical and part of an 'ideology of appreciation'.

A second kind of value was 'social value' (*shakai kachikan*). This occurred in a variety of forms, some institutional, others more inter-personal, yet others in the form of language use. For instance, the selection of one department store (Tamaya) rather than another (Iwataya) sent out a message to prospective visitors that my exhibition was more 'cultural' than 'sales' oriented. This message was reinforced by my choice of sponsors, who were *not* national newspapers, but appeared to be (and in fact were) cultural organizations far removed from commercial activities. This foregrounding of the cultural over the economic also permitted the main actors – Miyamoto, Tamaya and the Mainichi Newspaper – to adopt a 'carnavalesque' approach to my exhibition, as well as participate in a characteristic 'disavowal' of the importance of its financial outcome.

At the same time, social values were generated through inter-personal connections. One obvious example here was our success in securing the public 'recommendation' of my work by Imaemon, thereby smoothing the path towards its favourable reception by other potters living and working in northern Kyushu. In this respect, Miyamoto merely followed time-honoured practice in the literary (and academic) world:

As regards getting published, one fact has been observable since at least the eighteenth century – the fortunate situation of anyone who is in personal touch with writers who are well known and have their public and a certain prestige with the publishers. Their recommendation may carry sufficient weight to smooth away the main difficulties for the newcomer. Thus it is almost a rule that the beginner's work does not pass direct from him to the appropriate authority, but takes the indirect and often difficult course past the desk of an artist of repute.

(Schucking 1974: 53)

Another example of the importance of social values stemmed from my own foray through research into the ceramic art world. It was because of previously established personal connections that my show was accepted in principle by the institutions concerned (newspaper company and department store), which themselves then conferred social status on myself as an 'artist' by means of their public reputations. So, too, with my 'choice' of Miyamoto, rather than of another gallery owner, to use as go-between. Miyamoto and Tamaya guaranteed a kind of 'pedigree', offering potential buyers a sense of security about my work that my name in itself could not afford (cf. Hauser 1982: 509). It is probably fair to say that none of my most expensive pots would have been sold without this social guarantee. It was only because they did sell that I could in any way be referred to as an 'artist' potter (*tōgei sakka*).

Lastly, social values underpinned the gossip that pervaded the art world of contemporary Japanese ceramics where having the inside story on a particular person or event indicated weighty connections, and so reflected one's own position within that art world. That this situation was by no means unique may be seen in the following comment on the Western art world:

The Art Establishment subsists on words – much more, in fact, than it does on pictures. Talk there has more power than elsewhere because decisions are less sure and the consequences of acting on them more uncertain. In this sense, everyone in the art world has power, at least the power to pass the word along, mention names, repeat stock judgments, all of which produce an effect. The first qualification for entering the Art Establishment is to be familiar with its jargon and the people and things most often referred to.

(Rosenberg 1970: 391)

Thus, on the one hand, those who gossip possess and exhibit their knowledge of certain conventions which define the art world concerned (Becker 1982: 46). On the other, by focusing on the personal affairs of participants in an art world,

gossip prevents art works from being evaluated independently of such personalities (ibid.). The art work 'becomes a success only if... one gets talked about' (Schucking 1974: 71). As a general rule, one can say that the greater the 'buzz', the higher the prices that can be charged (Thompson 2008: 41).

Thirdly, there was 'commodity value' (*shōhin kachikan*) – the price attached to an artwork on the basis of the interaction of aesthetic and social values. The difficulty in establishing a price for an unknown artist has been made clear earlier in this essay.

Although, as I said, informants themselves clearly distinguished between these three sets of values, I believe that this study of evaluative practices brings to light three other values which I call technical, situational and functional.

Let me start with 'technical values'.⁸ It will be recalled that I had never made porcelain before my exhibition. As a result, when I came to do so, I approached the clay as if it were stoneware and very quickly realized that porcelain clay was extremely dense in structure and totally different from the kind of clay that I was used to throwing at the wheel. As a result, I had to learn how thick the walls of my pots should be (much, much thinner than in stoneware), how wide it would be possible to make a foot rim at the base of a pot (much wider), what forms would or would not collapse on the wheel, and so on. And then there were all sorts of other questions relating to decoration, glaze materials, kiln firing, and so forth, with which I had to deal. I could not hope to begin to understand, let alone master, these technical values in the time available to me. It was such mastery, however, that would have made me a 'professional' rather than 'amateur' potter.

Such technical values came into play at all stages of the production process. For example, I had to decide (sometimes experimenting on the spur of the moment) on which kind of design and which of several glazes to apply to which kind of pots. I had to be careful not to dry pots too fast in the sunshine, as well as to ensure that they dried evenly. Otherwise they would get warped and cracked in firing. I also needed to ensure that they were fired to the right temperature at an even pace, and to judge when it was appropriate to allow a lot of smoke to generate inside the kiln (known as reduction firing) since this affected the final colouring of the glazes. My own evaluation of my work depended in large part on my evaluation of the success of the techniques and materials that I had used (as well, of course, as on the aesthetic conventions in which I had been socialized in my training as a potter) (cf. Becker 1982).

So, technical values are in part aesthetic (or in my preferred term, 'appreciative'), but they are not necessarily shared by non-professionals (although critics can make it their business to find out about and highlight them when making aesthetic evaluations of artistic work). They also came to light in a more general formulation when I found myself having to make up a story about my work for the benefit of the media. Here I resorted to a number of technical

⁸ In Hutter and Shusterman's terminology (2006: 199), 'art-technical' value.

explanations with regard to the advantages of hand- versus machine-made work, to the use of natural rather than synthetic materials, and so on. The fact that natural materials – a few grams of feldspar in a glaze recipe, for instance – tend to vary in quality, depending on their source and seasonality (as with wood ash, for example), means that it is virtually impossible to reproduce *exactly* the same pot from one firing to the next. It is with such technical unpredictability – occasionally picked up and made into an aesthetic ideal – that potters working with natural materials are always wrestling.

Secondly, let us look at ‘situational values’. These came to the fore at two points in preparations for my exhibition. The first of these was connected with timing. *When* my show was to be held was an important consideration for Miyamoto as he set about framing the exhibition. The fact that his wife came up with the suggestion that it be held concurrently with the national Traditional Crafts Exhibition provided the show with a *raison d’être* that had a knock-on effect upon the social evaluation of my work (potters, rather than the general public *per se*; and Tamaya’s agreement to go ahead with the show), as well as on its appreciative values (that it should be seen as ‘fun’ rather than ‘money making’).

I have written here of the ‘framing’ and ‘strategic packaging’ of my exhibition, as well as noted how I was obliged to fabricate a story for the benefit of the media. In this respect, potters, and artists more generally, are obliged to package *themselves* in order to sell their pots. The fact that creation of a ‘mood’ is a vital component of success in an art world, however, is similar to the more general emphasis on entertainment in the selling of commodities.

The exhibition of commodities, their inspection, the act of purchase, and all the associated moments, are integrated into the concept of one theatrical total work of art which plays upon the public’s willingness to buy. Thus the salesroom is designed as a stage, purpose-built to convey entertainment to its audience that will stimulate a heightened desire to spend.

(Haug 1986: 69)

Finally, there are ‘functional values’. As part of my technical approach to pottery, like many other potters, I emphasized the uses to which my work might be put. A dish was made to serve food on, a vase to hold flowers, a cup to drink tea from, and so on. However, there was no guarantee that my pots would in fact be functional in the manner that, as their creator, I had intended. A vase might end up being placed in its buyer’s home as a purely decorative object without holding flowers; a tea cup might serve as a pen and pencil holder; a rice dish might be transformed into a tea ceremony bowl (and vice versa); a set of plates might be put away in their box in a storehouse and kept for the sole purpose of reselling it at a profit.⁹ Actual functional values are almost entirely beyond the artist craftsman’s control, since they depend on the

⁹ See Volland (1978: 185) for similar examples of the uses to which Cézanne’s paintings were once put by their owners.

purchaser of a work. In this respect, evaluating practices can slip beyond the negotiated conventions of the art world.

What is clear, however, is that technical, appreciative, social, situational and functional values coalesce into an overall 'symbolic' (read 'cultural?') value that is then exchanged for money as someone makes the decision to purchase a cultural product. The commodity exchange (or economic) value of an art work, as Hutter and Shusterman (2006: 200) point out, almost certainly increases in proportion to the density of other values found therein. In other words, the various processes of evaluation outlined here lead to an equation between symbolic exchange and commodity exchange, and enable the mutual on-going transformations of 'culture' and the 'economy' in which we all engage.

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