

The Hegemonic Eye: Can the Hand Survive?

Chris Staley

Note: Ceramic artist Chris Staley, who divides his time between State College, Pennsylvania, and Helena, Montana, first presented this lecture at the 2004 annual conference of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts in Indianapolis, Indiana. Many thanks to Chris for permission to reprint.

Have you ever had a broken heart? Perhaps a pet you had for a long time passed away or a partner decided to leave. I can remember my heart aching when someone I loved left me. We often use a part of our bodies to describe our feelings and reactions, such as “You know what you said really touched my heart” or, when implying someone’s too sensitive, “they are thin-skinned.” This confluence of our thoughts and feelings with our bodies is one of the most profound aspects of our human experience. We are the only animal that sheds tears when happy or sad.

I am interested in the senses of the body, because I believe there has been a dramatic change in how we use them. I am concerned that we underestimate the extent to which our senses are used, how they



Chris Staley, **Still Life**, stoneware, 2005, 27 x 20 inches.
© 2005 Chris Staley.

influence our well-being. The writer Saul Bellow once said, “People are literally dying for something real when day is done.” It is my belief that our lives are becoming increasingly ocular-centric. In other words circumstances in our lives increasingly call upon us to use our eyes at the expense of our other senses. As vision becomes more dominant, our interaction with the world becomes flatter and the joy and fullness of our lives is diminished.

Part of the catalyst for my interest in this topic is what I do for a living. I am a potter and teacher at a large university. How I touch clay is a fundamental consideration when making a pot. I was recently asked to have electronic sensors attached to my hands as I was throwing a pot, to stimulate the creation of a form on a computer laser machine. With computers we can disseminate information to large audiences as never before. Why not teach a pottery course online? It might be the largest pottery class ever taught. What might some of the implications of this online learning be? I would like to discuss how the use of our senses can influence all facets of our lives, from how we learn to how we relate to others. In essence, how the use of our senses influences the quality of our lives.

I would like to address four topics. First, how dramatically peoples' lives have changed in recent times. Second, how sight and the eye are becoming more dominant. Third, how the sense of touch and the hand are vital to our well-being. And fourth, where hope can be found as we look into the future.

Change

With new scientific and technological innovations happening every year, human beings are experiencing change as never before. Twenty thousand years ago our ancestors were painting animals on the walls of caves, and since then there have been 800

generations of human beings (twenty-five years being one generation). The realization that there has been more change in the past 4 generations than in the preceding 796 gives us some idea of how quickly the human experience is changing.

Just over one hundred years ago a family's primary source of transportation was a horse, the Wright Brothers flew a plane for the first time, and sixty-five years later we landed a man on the moon. So much has changed, so quickly, that sometimes it is difficult to realize how profound the change has been. The late designer Victor Papanek said the two biggest changes in the twentieth century are that we went from working primarily outdoors to working indoors and that we now have the capability to destroy the world as we know it. It was only one hundred years ago that the majority of people in our society worked on single-family farms, and now it is less than 1 percent. And certainly our relationship to the world changed with the creation of the nuclear bomb and its devastating capabilities.

For over 100,000 years our ancestors gathered around the flickering flames of campfires, yet it is only in the past fifty years that we have instead gathered around the glow of a television. After work and sleep, watching TV has become the most time-consuming activity for the average American. The average home has a TV turned on for over seven hours a day. The



Chris Staley, Stoneware Bowl, 2004, 7 x 8 inches.

© 2004 Chris Staley.

average person watches more than four hours a day. According to the national average, those of us who live to be seventy-five years old will have spent over nine years of their lives in front of a TV. The different sensory experiences of watching a campfire and watching TV are worth noting. While the campfire can evoke silent contemplation, the TV creates a sense of anticipation according to its prescribed narrative. The

big difference is that, when we stare into the campfire, the story that is created is our own.

Thinking back on my own life, I find it remarkable how many new ways have been invented to communicate. When I graduated from high school in 1973, there were no phone answering machines, cell phones, fax machines, Powerpoint presentations, personal computers, online grading or dating. This information revolution shows no signs of slowing down.

With the increasing presence of TV in both private space and public space, from cars to airports and banks and schools, we are exposed to more information than ever before. By 2001 over half of all Americans were online, a statistic that has continued to grow by about two million Internet users a month. The writer Thomas Friedman says what comes next is not just the Internet but what he calls the “Evernet,” a world where we will be online all the time through a watch, cell phone, or portable PC.

It is difficult to dispute these remarkable changes. Many of these innovations have enriched our lives,



Chris Staley, Stoneware Cover Jar, 2005, 18 x 19 inches.
© 2005 Chris Staley.

with the most tangible being that life expectancy has increased by thirty years in the past century. With innovation comes change. Oftentimes change brings consequences that have both positive and negative implications that must be considered. Certainly when Henry Ford created the assembly line to build automobiles, he did not consider the phenomena of smog or global warming. Yet new electronic

technologies have become part of our lives with such speed that we have had little time to consider the implications of these changes. There are two paradoxes in this new world of electronic communication. First, one of the supposed benefits of the new technology is its efficiency and the free time that it allows. Yet this urgency to do more in less time has only fueled our desire to be more productive by working harder. The second paradox of technology is the more

connected we become through the Internet, the more disconnected we become with each other. A student recently told me that he lives with several students in a house where it is easier to just e-mail each other from their respective rooms than to meet in the living room to talk. With this new technology we can work at home and be in contact with virtually anyone anywhere. Yet with these increased connections, we often begin to reduce the time we have available to spend with family and friends. Insofar as relationships can be messy, sometimes it just seems easier to either watch TV or surf the Internet than to deal with the reality of

someone in the flesh.

What has happened to our relationship with time? What is real time? Most often when you ask someone how he or she is doing, they reply, “Oh, I’ve been busy.” Who hasn’t been in an elevator and pressed buttons to make it move faster? It seems like we never have enough time to do all the things we want to do. After a while it seems our lives become a to-do list, racing from one thing to the next. In cultural critic James Gleick’s book *Faster*, he writes, “We have become a quick-reflexed, multitasking channel flipping, fast-forwarding species. We don’t completely understand it and we are not altogether happy about it.” Socrates long ago anticipated the effects of a frenetic culture when he said, “Beware of the emptiness in a busy life.”

The Eye

In western culture the eye has been regarded as the noblest of senses, and vision as an extension of thinking itself. Aristotle once said, “Sight is the most noble of the senses because it approximates the intellect most closely.” During the Renaissance the five senses were understood to comprise a hierarchical system with vision being the highest and touch being the lowest. Many philosophers since then have reinforced this notion of the hegemonic eye and its connection to the mind. When Descartes declared, “I think therefore I am,” he implied that thinking is paramount and that

the notion of our other senses giving meaning to our lives is of lesser significance. The eye is the sense of privilege in our culture. As children we were often reminded of this when visiting someone’s home to just “look but don’t touch.” The phrase “out of sight, out of mind” reinforces the notion that what we see is what we think.

In his book *The Object Stares Back*, art historian James Elkins says that the act of looking is one of desire and that we want to possess what we see. He argues that looking is a search for what we want, and goes on to use the example of when we are shopping and the salesman asks, “May I help you?” We respond with, “No, I am just looking,” when in fact we are examining the merchandise and making judgments about what we see. “Do I like the fabric of this shirt? When would I wear it?” This doesn’t occur only when we are shopping, but continually. What we look at triggers thoughts. For example, seeing an empty cup reminds us that we are thirsty, seeing a pile of mail on our desks reminds us that we haven’t corresponded with someone. The eye is being called upon as never before in our daily lives and when our thoughts are not reciprocated with a corporeal experience, we increasingly feel separated from the world.

In our ever-increasing technological world, the only part of our body that is fast enough to keep up with its rapid pace is our eyes. With this steady

stream of images, whether on TV or the computer or periodicals, our eye dominates how we experience our lives. According to the Association of American Advertising Agencies, the average person is exposed to 1,500 advertisements a day. Less than 60 of those are even noticed. TV advertising is more common and sophisticated than ever, with corporations paying 2.3 million dollars for a thirty-second commercial during the Super Bowl. Over the years TV commercials have gotten shorter and shorter, challenging the eye to process what it sees. Advertising has become so ubiquitous and persuasive that it has caused what philosopher Jean Baudrillard refers to as a sense of lacking because consumption is irrepressible, and in the end we continually feel empty. Increasingly we live in a culture where the desires for money and status are the primary goals in peoples' lives. With a steady diet of visual information, ironically we become numb. As we "tune in," we "tune out." When the hegemonic eye dominates touch, hearing, taste, and smell, it diminishes our feeling of participation. The most obvious example is watching wild animals on the Discovery Channel versus actually experiencing them out-of-doors where suddenly our whole body is responding. This detachment of our other senses leads to alienation from the world that we live in.

Since 1839, when the first photo was taken in Paris, photography has transformed our lives in the

most fundamental ways. Recently I read that a person whose life is first made evident with a sonogram may likely die in a hospital in front of the glow of TV. Certainly in ceramics a photograph of a pot can have profound implications. Often it is slide transparencies or digital images that determine what art schools we go to, what jobs we get, or where we sell our work. And yet we know a functional pot isn't really appreciated until it is used. As a young potter I was told that the quality of a 4x5 transparency was more important than the pot itself, simply because more people would see the photo. When we experience art, in this case pottery, solely through our eyes, we become an audience of viewers, which is much different than the full sensory experience of using a favorite cup. By using a cup we reclaim personal experience.

The essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," written by Walter Benjamin over fifty years ago, is about how the photographic image has changed the way we experience art. Most people today experience art objects through films, magazines, books, announcement cards, or images online. The mass production of images has depersonalized the interaction between the art object and a person. Recently, I stood in front of a painting of shoes by Van Gogh. I got very close to the painting to look at individual brush strokes. The metaphysical energy of a brush stroke took me to that moment when



Chris Staley, **Still Life**, stoneware, 2005, 20 x 24 inches.
© 2005 Chris Staley.

the brush stroke was applied to the canvas. I was with Van Gogh. Time had stopped. The images of the shoes had drawn me in—yet it was the memory of my hands having experienced thick textures, once touched brush strokes and felt their thickness, that enabled me to realize that I could “virtually” touch a brush stroke of Van Gogh’s and stirred my emotions.

It’s worth noting how our relationship to time itself is changing. For centuries our existence revolved

around the sun and the cycles of day and night. Then was a time when we worked outdoors and we were very attuned to the rhythms of nature. According to historian Daniel Boorstin, about seven hundred years ago, mechanical clocks were used for the first time on church towers and the hour was born. Time became something measurable, something to use more efficiently. We have become accustomed to the idea of “time as money.” Time has become

a commodity—something to spend wisely. We lose something with this efficiency: our ability to play and to create moments of silent reflection. With almost daily scientific technological breakthroughs, children growing up today will soon realize that their lives will be significantly different than their parents’. Recently, my eight-year-old daughter Tori asked me, “Dad, who is more curious, adults or children?” I said, “I don’t know. Who do you think?” She responded, “Children.” When I asked her why, she simply replied, “Because we have more time.”

When a “lack of time” becomes a state of being, we lose part of ourselves. We can lose our curiosity

to go on a walk with no particular place to go, or our compassion to just check on how a friend is doing. As a teacher I have wondered how long I would last if students had a remote control device in their hands and I was just another character or channel on TV. The writer Milan Kundera has observed that often when you see two people talking, one person is giving a speech while the other person listens impatiently for that person to finish or pause so they can interrupt to give their speech, with no one really listening.

The Hand

As a professor at a large university, I've often thought how unusual it is to be teaching students to make pottery. On a basic level I am teaching students how to use their hands to shape clay. In almost every other subject, students are asked to use their eyes and ears to process information and expand their minds. The nuances of touch are rarely called upon by the academic institutions. The interconnections between the ancient art of making pottery and a generation of students raised in a new visual electronic world are profound. When students' hands touch clay, there is learning that takes place that goes far beyond just skin touching earth.

I can remember how challenging it was to learn how to throw clay on the wheel. I remember learning how to center and attempting to connect my thoughts

with the movement of my hands. Wondering how much pressure and from what direction do I push? It is this moment of connection between touch and thought where time stops. When our thoughts are focused on how we are touching, our consciousness is following the lead of our fingertips. I believe it is the direct consequence of how we touch the clay that is so satisfying. Part of clay's appeal is its malleability—how responsive it is to our touch. I would be hard-pressed to teach someone how to throw without showing them. I often demonstrate how I hold my hands, the speed of the wheel, how much water to use; in doing so the student begins to sense what to do. The essence of making with the hand is the wisdom of the body and its stored memory. It is our past history of tactile experiences that assist in guiding the hand. I have always been intrigued by the fact that when ceramic artists visit our program, students invariably ask them to demonstrate how they shape the clay. We want to watch their hands, and it is only through this corporeal experience that we gain real insight into how they create their work. Why don't painters set up an easel and paint? The answer, I believe is complex, yet part of the answer is that clay is formless when it is dug from the earth. It takes on the shape of the shovel, and when it is put into a plastic bag it takes on the shape of the bag. It's been said that shaping clay is like drawing in space—instantaneously creating three-dimensional shapes. As we touch clay we leave

fingerprints, which when fired remain for thousands of years. While we are throwing on the wheel, the water and clay slowly move through our hands with new forms seeming to emerge on their own. It's no wonder the self-proclaimed world's greatest potter George Ohr once called his pots "clay babies."

Often the cups that I use at home are the ones that have been made on the slower-moving treadle wheel. Potters who throw on this wheel often use much wetter clay, and this contributes to a great deal of variation in wall thickness of the pot. I believe we are drawn to this variation because it reminds us of the same sensation of touching the human body. When using the cup I imagine touching someone's hand. Time and again studies have shown that when humans feel a connection through touch it is beneficial to their well-being. What are the experiences that make you feel most alive?

Who hasn't marveled at the interior of a bird's nest? A bird gathers blades of grass and twigs and shapes them with its whole body, using its chest and even the palpitations of its heart to conform the nest to its body. Part of our appreciation for the bird's nest is that we realize the time and care it took to build such a simple structure. Our body memory understands that some things take time to build. Standing on a beach and gazing towards the horizon line where the ocean ends and the sky begins is like staring into the future. The distance of the long horizontal line creates the allure

of tomorrow. When I pick up a stone polished by the tumbling of endless waves, it's like holding time in my hand. Feeling the stone's weight in my hand I have a feeling of connection not only to the stone, but to its past as well. Somehow the touch creates a greater sense of awe about where it's been. Ultimately I feel immense gratitude for holding such a gift, smooth and dense in color with an interior that only adds to its mystery. When I touch the stone, time slows down and seems larger and I feel more alive.

I remember the excitement of getting dirty when I was younger and then the pleasure of taking a shower and watching all the water turn brown. And, more recently, digging into the black earth with my hands and the pleasant surprise of finding a potato has given me pleasure. Dirt is full of paradox. Plants and life come from it, and plants and animals die and return to it. Clay closely resembles dirt and as an artistic medium has always struggled to be considered a material worthy of high art. There are complex reasons for this bias that I won't go into in this essay. Yet clay as a medium has great potential to address issues of our mortality. Gone are the days on the farm when we saw animals butchered for food and witnessed grandparents passing away in our homes. Death has become an out-of-sight, out-of-mind proposition. What the messiness of clay does is connect us to the cycles of life. In contrast technology is both "clean" and "efficient." As a pot shrinks, cracks, and

sometimes breaks in the firing or when we are using it, we become participants in the evolution of a pot's life. As our own bodies change with time, a pot's fragility can be humanizing.

We are part of a culture that fears growing older. We want to erase the effects of aging on our skin with Botox or face lifts. Yet pottery is often at its best when it reveals the process by which it was made, thus revealing passage of time. We can feel a kinship with a pot's history because the marks left by the hand, a tool, or the firing process are much like the wrinkles and scars that we acquire during our lifetime. It's a good thing that pots eventually break; otherwise we would have no shelf space available for new ones. As our bodies age and begin to decline, we can have a shift from the physical world to one of reflection and compassion. Robert Turner once told me to look to the inside of the pot for answers. It's this empty space and its potential to be filled with anything that reminds us of our own potential to change. In the forming of the pot, it is the pushing from within that shapes the pot's exterior. So too in our existence do our inner doubts and dreams shape the lives we live.

Hope

A cup is meant to be used and isn't complete until someone actually draws the cup to his or her lips and drinks from it. Having a kitchen full of handmade cups enriches our lives in many ways. Certain cups get

used more than others. The many reasons for this are the weight, color, gesture; often it just feels right, like caressing a polished stone. When I asked my daughter Rowan why she liked using handmade cups instead of the machine-made cups at school, she said, "Because they have mistakes." Rowan found these so-called mistakes to be comforting. Handmade cups represent a fired moment in the journey of a potter's life. When we hold a cup and can feel the indentation made by the potter while the clay was still wet, it becomes a shared moment. Hence the cup becomes a catalyst that brings two people together to celebrate the beauty and difficulties in life.

In the past several years I've wondered why fewer ceramic students are interested in making functional pots. Perhaps part of the answer is their busy schedules. They eat a bag of Doritos on the run in one hand and talk on a cell phone with the other. Who has time to cook a meal or hassle doing dishes? Today Americans consume half of all their food outside of their homes. I recall reading that the three aspects of a childhood that people most remember are dinner time, family vacations, and experiences in nature. Everyday people put a cup to their lips to drink. This can be an unconscious activity or one of deep reflection. I have been curious about my students' memories of their dinner time while growing up. I often start the conversation by asking what is the difference between

ritual and a habit? I ask students what they recall about family dinners while growing up. The discussion that follows is engaging and often thought-provoking. Individuals who study child development have found that the sit-down family dinner is one of the most significant ways a child can experience the family coming together and as a result feel a sense of security. I will never forget when my daughter Tori was three years old and we had sat down for dinner as a family after a particularly busy day. As Kate and I started to eat, Tori reached out, wanting to hold hands to do what we usually do, have a moment of silence before we eat. Obviously this sense of coming together was important to her.

How we experience our surroundings is both complex and innate. When I've become stuck in a long traffic jam, I become quite agitated. I believe the reason most of us have a hard time being stuck in traffic is that it is unnatural, since for almost all of human existence we just walked when we needed to go somewhere. Being buckled into a seat and wanting to go forward feels frustrating. I also believe a similar response occurs when our computers crash and we are suddenly unable to use them to communicate with someone. This seems unnatural, particularly when we have no idea what went wrong with the computer. Odd how disconnected we can feel whereas in the not-too-distant past we would write a letter or walk to a neighbor's

to talk. Perhaps these examples seem simplistic yet I have been personally struck by my visceral response when technology malfunctions. When corporeal assumptions like movement or communications become compromised, something deeper gets triggered.

Numerous scholars have written about how our innate desires have been formed over years of evolution. Ellen Dissanayake has written extensively about how human beings have a biological need to make objects of meaning with their hands. Art-making is an essential part of the human condition. To make something special is fundamental to our humanity—from college freshmen wanting to decorate their dorm rooms to wanting to dress up for a special occasion. This making things special is a form of caring.

Whether it is making art, or playing in an open field—when our senses are wide open we feel alive. These activities that charge our senses can be experienced in a myriad of personal ways. Yet it is this subjectivity, this personal expression in the arts that is often thought of as non-essential to learning. Since the arts are not easy to quantify or measure, our culture finds them difficult to assess and find relevant. Often music, art, or dance are the first areas in school curricula to be cut when budget concerns arise. Our schools are increasingly driven by standardized testing. In not-so-subtle ways our students learn that passing tests is more valued than nurturing the curiosity to learn. The arts

send a message that each student has a personal story to express and it is essential that they be heard.

Art inspires us to ask questions, and questions are profound things. Art, whether it's a song, a poem, or a cup, has the potential to reawaken the childhood wonder we all once had. We live in such frenetic times that you think we would spend more time reflecting on what really matters in our one short precious life. When author Norman Maclean writes, "It is in the world of slow time that truth and art become one," I believe he is saying that in order to have a sense of awe we can't be working on our "to-do list."

For it is in the world of reflection and in quiet moments that epiphanies and a sense of awe can be discovered. As poet Mary Oliver writes so eloquently, "Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world

offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese harsh and exciting, over and over announcing your place in the family of things." So our challenge is not to let our lives become flatter and more ocular-centric, but to reach out and engage life with all our senses.

When we experience all the nuances of life, the sadness in another's face, the warmth of the sun's rays on a cool day, these enable us to feel connected to something larger than ourselves. It's the ability to pay attention to life's subtleties and ambiguities that enables us to make our lives deeper and richer. It is in the moments of slow time when we lean into life that meaning can be found. And so it is when our hand touches clay that we embrace the moment.