

# David Jones

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## **Permanence and Performance in the Crafts with Particular Reference to the Firing of Ceramics.**

Firing, (like the making of all works, as Hannah Arendt observed in *The Human Condition*) has “the capacity for producing durability”<sup>1</sup>

In our co-modified world there are issues of duration that impinge on the clutter and congestion of our planet, through its overpopulation with objects. Ceramic objects are amongst the longest surviving artefacts, and so it is my own specialism that occupies the majority of space on the shelves of museums of ancient history. In this paper I shall reflect on the essential nature of their manufacture and of their being as objects of use / objects of art / objects of consumption. I shall readjust my ‘Malthusian’ focus to critically examine how the new ‘performances’ featuring public and participatory firings might start to disclose the essence of the fired, and thence of the hand-crafted, object. Through this interrogation of the ‘craft object’ I hope to show how it can point a way to a sustainable future, with its implicit emphasis on value in both labour and product. I wish to undertake a particular examination of ‘my mystery’ (in the old guild sense of the word) firing, and through the decoding of the control of heat and fire when it is revealed in public spectacle, I wish to suggest ideas about sustainability and the future of Crafts in general.

In recent years it has become a significant aspect of ceramic symposia and fairs to explicate the process of firing by revealing it, in real time, to a participatory audience. The firer becomes conductor, shaman, phenomenologist and rhythm analyst; we observe and assist him or her, alternately directing, mediating, decoding, revealing and brokering the experience / commodity that is the juncture of clay and heat.

I shall use a framework derived from a labour theory of culture based on the ideas of Charles Wolfson and Hannah Arendt to examine an understanding of the handmade and the fired. This position is mediated by a reading of Heidegger, through theories of embodiment drawn from Merleau-Ponty, to Raymond Tallis, and his thinking about “The Hand”; thence to an analysis of the clay ‘touched’ by fire, informed by Bachelard and Derrida. By returning to the hand (made) and hand (making) I shall offer a complementary view of a world where progress is only seen as developments in the ideas-based economy; I shall suggest that this is one of the contributory factors leading to the proliferation of commodities, that can be balanced by a new understanding of skill, achievable only through these slow processes of craft making / firing. It is Duchamp, through his institutionalising of the readymade, and its inherent denial of the hand, who contributes an attitude of disrespect to objects imbued with skill. I shall propose a re-reading of the readymade that looks to a more sustainable, less overpopulated future, that looks forward, not retroactively to a Romantic, pastoral past, but instead to an emancipatory position that is based around a rethinking of the hand-made object and its permanent place within all our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, H., *The Human Condition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998. p172.