



Subversive *Ceramics*

Claudia Clare

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claudia clare

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*For Tina (1961–2001),
ex-Catholic lesbian and labour-movement feminist, who
loved blasphemy, irreverence, satire and blue stockings.*



As a subversive, I strongly object to the idea that living in a family unit is in any way more natural or superior to less conventional arrangements such as friendship groups or living alone.

Julie Bindel



Frontispiece: *The Three Disgraces*,
2008, Rose Wallace, courtesy of the
artist, see p. 86

Contents page: *155H*, (detail) 2010,
Peter Lewis, courtesy of the artist,
see p. 145

Page 6: *Nu-shabti on a tea-break*,
2014, Zahed Tajeddin, courtesy of
the artist, see p. 96

Page 7: *Nu-shabti protester*, 2014,
Zahed Tajeddin, courtesy of the
artist, see p. 96

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Introduction

In November 2012 I was asked to give a paper for a symposium at the Holburne Museum in Bath, entitled 'Subversive Ceramics'. I was delighted to be asked, but I was and still am a sceptic. When working on *The Pot Book* in 2011,¹ I was struck by the number of contemporary practitioners either declaring their work 'subversive', or having it described as such by others. I was similarly struck by the absence of any evidence to support the claim. In most cases, the artists concerned were doing what artists should do: experimenting with new ways of doing things. The conference, however, was oversubscribed; there was clearly a great deal of interest in the subject. The result is this book, which aims to provide a different and, I hope, more productive set of analytical criteria with which to understand and appraise the disparate work which has been marshalled under the 'subversive' umbrella.

Had I attempted a 'survey book', a study of all the contemporary ceramic work that is described as 'subversive', it would have run to ten volumes. Instead I have used a critical framework and selected specific works that best illustrate the arguments I am making. Some of the artists and individual ceramic works cited are very well known, others largely unknown, including some student work and work by artists no longer making ceramics. I define 'subversive' in political terms and discuss the works in their political context. I argue that much of the work featured in this book is satirical rather than subversive. The artist may not always intend it so but it can certainly be understood using satire as a critical framework. I have drawn on the literary tradition of satire and applied it to ceramics, building on Judith Schwarz's groundbreaking PhD thesis from 1983. I have also considered many of the featured works from a feminist position. This is because I am a feminist and feminism therefore shapes my political analysis. Although the contemporary artists whose works are featured in this book have connections with fifteen different countries, most are British, or resident in Britain, or show their work in Britain or in the 'West', so it has a British, European or American context. I have deliberately set these limits, partly in the interests of containment but mainly because I need to understand the context of the work in order to analyse it.

The book is divided into two parts: the first half discusses satirical and political work made towards the end of the twentieth century and, in the second chapter, discusses a selection of historical works. Part two, divided into three chapters,

Opposite: *Suspended Together*, 2012, Manal AlDowayan, see p. 127

¹ Edmund de Waal, *The Pot Book*, London: Phaidon, 2011.

discusses contemporary work made since the beginning of the twenty-first century. This is not an overly academic book. It is referenced but it is also opinionated and, at times, personal. A second aim of this book was to encourage debate, so I hope there is plenty to disagree with, and vehemently enough that readers are provoked into a written response. This would add to the existing writing and go some way towards building a substantial body of knowledge on the relationship between ceramics, politics and political movements, and the way we express these ideas through the form and also how we debate them.

PART ONE

SUBVERSION AND SATIRE:

Definitions and history



1.1 Previous page: *Free Kiranjit
Ahluwalia!* plate, 1992, Claudia
Clare, courtesy of the artist

1

Vice and Folly

Campaigning craft and covert histories

Free Kiranjit Ahluwalia! Resistance No Crime! (Figure 1.1) is one of a series of slipware plates I made in 1992, in support of the Justice for Women campaigns.¹ Ahluwalia had been sentenced to life imprisonment for killing her violent husband, but the conviction was overturned on appeal after a prolonged campaign by Southall Black Sisters with support from Justice for Women. Researching this book involved extensive reshuffling of papers, journals and catalogues of various exhibitions going back some twenty years. One, *The World Service* (1996, private collection), included a short essay by a journalist, Mary Hockaday, about some of my earliest ceramics including that slipware plate. She writes: 'She used the slipware tradition ... subverting it to use as a campaigning craft.'

Hockaday's expression, 'campaigning craft', was a precise and useful description. It is still useful now, sifting through the possibilities of what may or may not be considered subversive. In ceramic terms, my campaigning mugs and other tableware were consistent with a long tradition in British slipware: simple, black and white slip-trailing, on an earthenware, wheel-thrown plate. The subversion was in the message and in the campaign itself, which did present a significant challenge to the authority of law, to government and, above all, to patriarchal entitlement, particularly in the domestic realm, in the context of marriage and in the criminal justice system. Presenting such a message on a plate, an otherwise conventional item of domestic tableware, had a certain poetic subversion, perhaps, but more than that, it was a call for action in craft form.

The World Service itself was a covert political device, reflecting on the relationship between the Oxford Botanic Gardens, the history of plant-hunting and the development of trade in commodities: 'Into this most private and decorative artefact, a tea set, Claudia has smuggled ideas and material for a sort of politics of plants.'² It was a deceptively appealing way to present an aspect of colonial history. *The Huddersfield Daily Examiner* generously declared that it 'packs a political punch',³ but I doubt that Tate & Lyle so much as flinched. It was less hard-hitting than the plate, and could be viewed as a luxuriantly floral, oversized tea service. Revisiting these two early works helps to set up at least two possible ways of thinking about what 'subversive ceramics' might be.

¹ Justice for Women, established 1990, is a feminist campaigning group that advocates on behalf of women who have fought back against or killed violent male partners. <http://www.justiceforwomen.org.uk/kiranjit-ahluwalia/> accessed 1 November 2014.

² Mary Hockaday, *The World Service*, exhibition catalogue, 1996, 2.

³ David Hammond, *The Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 27 September 1996.

Defining subversion

To subvert something, or to be 'a subversive', implies a specifically political character and intention. It means 'to overthrow' or 'overturn', usually with reference to a regime, government, religious authority or dominant social norm. 'A subversive' is defined as a revolutionary. It is a strong word, or should be. Little, if any, of the ceramic work characterized as subversive in recent years is politically subversive, or presents any serious challenge to institutions or to a dominant social order. Even if we shift the meaning of the term to an art or craft context, it should still imply that an established tradition or an authoritative school of thought has been overturned, but these kinds of challenges are difficult to prove. Both art and craft are in a continuous state of flux – what is oppressively dominant to one group of artists may be wholly irrelevant to another.

In the last decade or so, the term 'subversive' has been applied to almost every kind of ceramic object that is not tableware, splashed about like a graffiti tag, a convenient holdall with multiple meanings, depending on context. From 2012 to 2014, it occurred in the title of an international conference, a museum symposium, a Crafts Council exhibition, a university event and in numerous reviews, previews and statements from artists and curators, as well as in magazines and journal articles.⁴ One has to ask why so many ceramic artists, and their curators, wish to have their work characterized as subversive. What charge does this epithet carry that is apparently so desirable?

The term 'subversive' has acquired an additional meaning in the context of contemporary art and craft that it does not and should not possess. It has become a value judgement, one which implies that the work is exceptionally good, a bit 'edgy' and, above all, worthy of attention and status. James Beighton, in his paper at the Subversive Ceramics symposium 2012, suggests that this may have emerged from a desire, among some ceramicists, to be recognized as contemporary artists in the broader sense, and that contemporary art is often taken to be inherently subversive, particularly since the appearance in the 1990s of the Young British Artists (YBAs).⁵ These artists acquired considerable status and some became international celebrities, whose work still commands huge prices on the art market where investments are fiercely protected. Beighton suggests that this is behind the faulty reasoning in the following triangulation: 'Contemporary art is both lucrative and high-status. Contemporary art is also subversive, so subversion must be lucrative and equate to status.' He believes many craftspeople – ceramicists in particular – are under the impression that all art – as opposed to craft – attracts high prices, resulting in a better living than that attained by most craftspeople: a belief for which there is no evidence whatsoever, but for which there is some evidence to the contrary.⁶ If we add to this the success, in both in art market and celebrity terms, of Grayson Perry, whose work is routinely described as 'subversive', it is little wonder that subversion has become an attractive idea to potters. When one considers the real meaning of

⁴ Subversive Clay, 2012, Australian Ceramics Triennale; Subversive Ceramics, Holburne Museum, Bath, 2012; 'Hidden Agenda and Material Subversion', The Naughton Gallery, Queen's University, Belfast, 2014; and 'On Subversive Ceramics: Keith Harrison in Conversation', at the University of Bath, 2014. In *Ceramic Review* in 2012 alone, four of the six editions (nos 253, 254, 256, 258), carried articles about 'subversive' ceramics.

⁵ James Beighton, 'A Matter of Manners: Subversion in the Ceramics Field', Subversive Ceramics symposium, unpublished paper, 2012.

⁶ Beighton 2012. Beighton is referring to the comparative valuation of a ceramics collection and a collection of modern British art from the same period.