

# Ceramics

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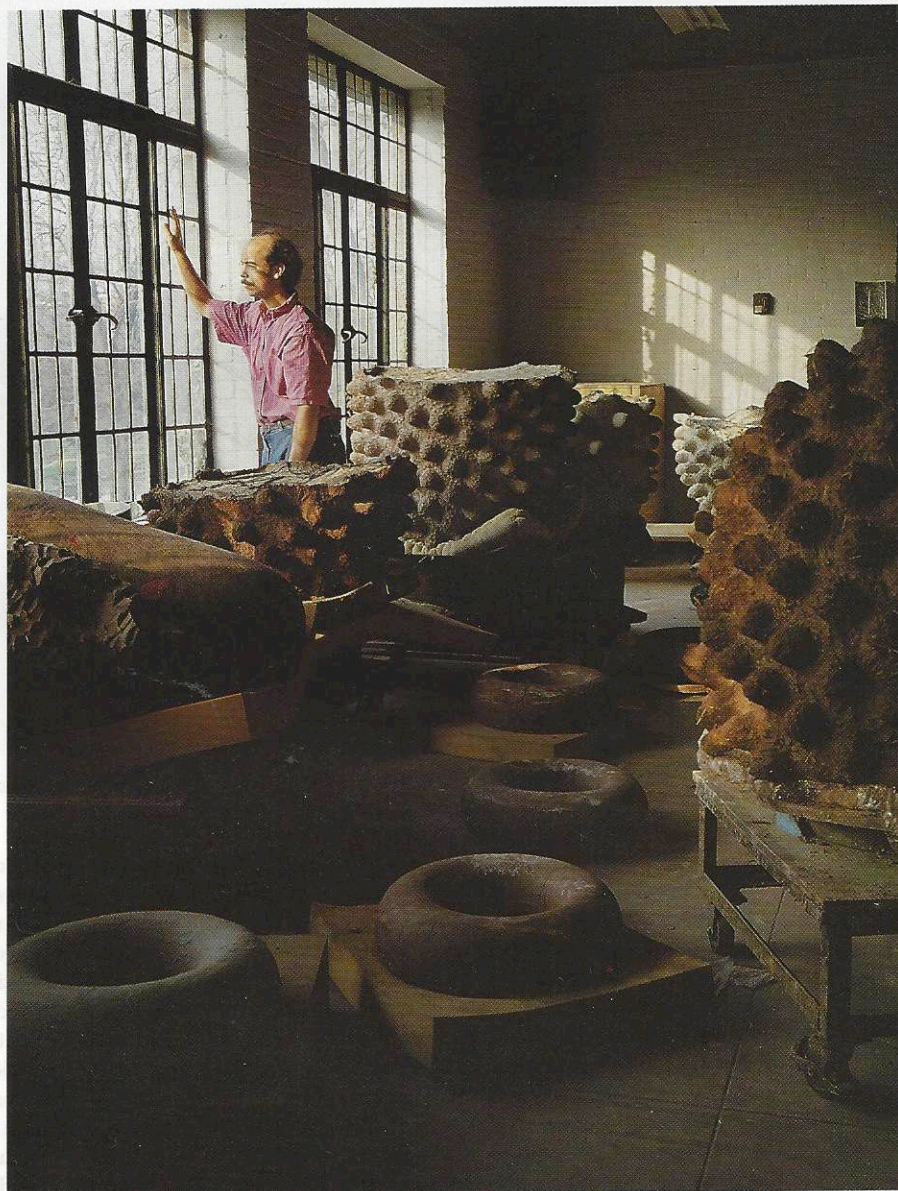
# Limits of Autonomy and the Autonomous Object

Article by Susan Crowell

IN THE SUMMER OF 1989, Graham Marks was arrested, along with 48 neighbours and colleagues, for obstructing proceedings of the New York State Low-Level Radioactive Waste Siting Commission in Allegheny County, Michigan, USA. Until then, critical discussion of Marks' work tended to limit itself to symbolic, associative and formalist terms; *vitalist* allusions to the environment, nuclear and other forms of toxic waste and the military-industrial complex were subtextual in the discussion of Marks' pod-like geomorphic forms. The motivations, mobilisations and strategies leading up to Marks' arrest are yet to be assessed in their manifestations in his work. With this shift toward content in mind, we can now call into question previous assumptions about Marks' intent and his relationship to the primary material.

Marks dedicated the work in his 1991 exhibition, a retrospective at the Michigan Artists Gallery of the Detroit Institute of Arts, to the Evergreen Alliance and 'Don't Waste Michigan' lobby "in the hope that one day people will see their efforts and actions as one of the many tiny sparks across the country that helped restore the ecological sanity of the earth". The exhibition featured six pieces dating from 1985 to 1990, all of coil-formed earthenware.

The scale of Marks' work is large for clay (up to 1 m), and has a significant impact upon the viewer through its form, structure and texture. Marks has worked within a similar scale and format, developing a mood and vigorous textural vocabulary, over the past 15 years. His forms have not changed to a great



Graham Marks in the studio.

extent; they remain vehicles for a surface language which articulates refinements in his philosophy and analysis. For example, in his earlier work he employed a variety of methodical and repetitious coiling methods, a formalized series of 'making' gestures which, along with the frequent use of vitrified



*Earthenware. Coil construction, sandblasted. 73.5 cm/h. Collection Aaron Milrad. Photo: Michael Sarnacki*

engobes, seemed to portray a unified structural system, its source unknown. Newer work, especially that produced since 1983, appears less 'made' and more the result of some natural phenomenon. Lacking the lens of glaze or engobe, it takes a more naked, unadorned and tenuous view of life in the balance. The mystery it embodies is no longer technical (how was it made?) or mimetic (what does it look like?). Instead, it is now metaphysical (why was it made? How did it get here?).

Of course, Marks did not undergo these changes in isolation: time and events have transformed the field of ceramics, the artworld and global consciousness; all have participated in similar transformations and Marks' work reflects the jolt from complacency that our colleagues, our culture and our planet have undergone. This is not merely an aesthetic shift: it represents a change in how we view the roles of artist and art in society. In this transitional period, this means a change in power relations with the material itself,

where the artist becomes the enabler (Marks himself uses such words as enlist and, increasingly, participate) rather than maker. This shift in power and responsibility reflects a change in perception of art's power and responsibility in the larger world

Keeping in mind that in transformations there can be no gain without a loss, we must understand the price Marks has paid for his relinquishing power over the clay.<sup>1</sup> There has been loss, not only of youthful idealism, ambition and certainty, but of the ingenuous belief in the supporting culture and the control that it offers as endorsement of that culture. Becoming an advocate of the earth means to assume a new relationship to the material one has previously exploited. This is revolutionary in its implications: making the move, Marks undertakes an important risk to status and determinacy. Along with him, we confront the limits of autonomy and the notion of the artist as an autonomous maker. This calls into question the relationship between technology and art and ulti-



*Earthenware. Coil construction, sandblasted. 73.5 cm/h. Courtesy Habitat/Shaw Gallery. Photo: Michael Sarnacki.*

mately the role of art in revealing the limits, possibilities and dangers of continuing to work in this way. We have yet to see the gains, the full impact of this risk upon his work.

Marks owes a monumental debt to Bill Daley, his teacher at the Philadelphia College of Art. While the two men differ in their respective approaches to inner and outer space and how those spaces relate to one another, they are linked in a common understanding of structure and concerns for the articulation of space. They share a carefully maintained, long-distance relationship to the vessel. Philosophically, they both embrace an unmediated relationship between the maker, the material and the object, and in practice explore the dialectics between expression and construction and the commitment to the shaping of a

larger social reality. Marks, from the beginning of his career, has been concerned with intent, not only of the artist but of the object itself. Almost 15 years ago, he wrote in a letter to the *New York Times*, that "one must first establish what an object intends and then deal with it accordingly".<sup>2</sup> The philosophy in this writing suggested a certain autonomy within the work itself, and did not speak of the artist's intent. But perhaps more than the work, his intent has changed: most certainly the forms, while similar to those of earlier years, assume a different intent (and exist in a different context) than they did 15 years ago. Changes in surface treatment are easier to document. For example, knowing Marks' commitment to environmental stewardship, we read the surfaces of his work with different eyes. What was once celebrated in ceramics

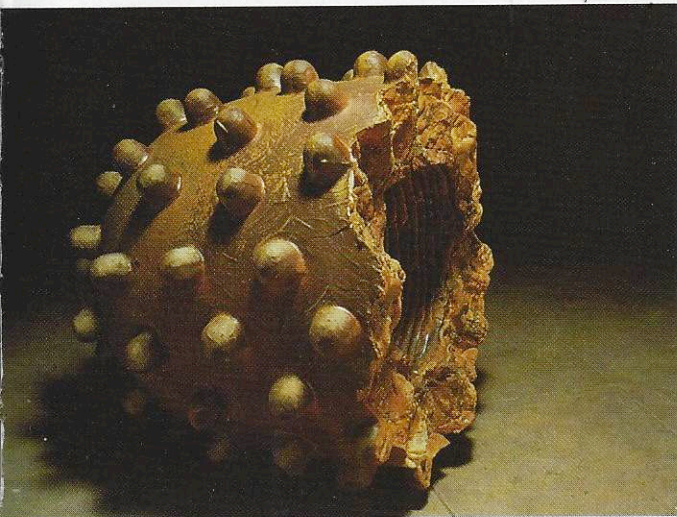
as tactility, the intensely textured and 'pleasihgly articulated surface which generates a haptic response, now signifies a more sinister and apocalyptic form of sensory aggression. Increasingly, the tactility itself is no longer a source of pleasure: the inclusion of scrap metal in the slip which covers a portion of the outer surface betrays an injurious shrapnel, a foreign material, a pollutant of earth's material innocence and purity. Cracks, a long-standing semiotic of clay's way of drawing, have come to signify barrenness and abandonment. As ready-made archaeology, the evidence is no longer of man the maker but of man the destroyer, the defiler, the polluter. These metal fragments appeared in Marks' work some time before his public involvement in ecological concerns. Through

them, he has transformed what was once an intuitive, pleasure seeking and subjective response to material into assertive and mobilising statements of environmental hell-fire and damnation.

The contradictions that technology presents to the artist inform the working process and are embedded in the work itself. The employment of technology is inherent in the production of ceramics, and Marks, while acknowledging the impact of waste gases from the kiln upon the ozone layer, continues to fire his work. Here technology is a necessary instrument for critiquing itself and for moving art ahead of everyday life: the autonomous work of art can call into question the fraudulence of autonomy and can chart a course of moral action and enlightened conduct.

*Earthenware. Coil construction. 71 cm/h. Courtesy Perimeter Gallery. Photo: Michael Sarnacki.*





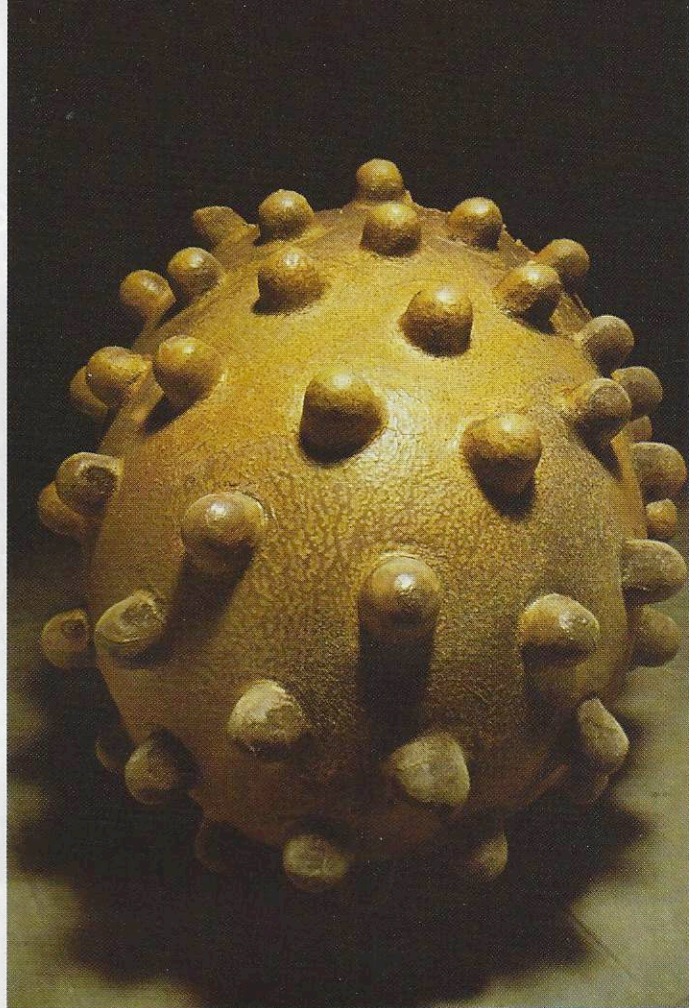
Stoneware. Anagama fired. 81 cm/h. (detail)

Marks, by nature interested in movement, mystery and structure, was a 'vesselist' until midway through graduate school at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred. Fifteen years ago, he assigned the role of the vessel form to be "a container in the physical sense but at the same time the notion of containing operates on a more abstract level. It is already full, full of gathering from the environment, both physical and psychic."<sup>3</sup> But for Marks, in 1991, what does this mean, what has the abstract come to represent? What has it gathered from the environment? Of what is it full? To what is the psychic responding? The transformation of Graham Marks' work over the past 15 years reflects significant changes in his own world view and that of his audience. His notions of the artist's role and the choices he has made regarding that role have shifted dramatically since the early days of his career. In acknowledging his global responsibilities, Marks now faces larger struggles – aesthetic, moral and contextual.

Notes.

1. Ironically, Marks' work was included in a 1983 exhibition organized by the Detroit Institute of Arts titled *Power over the Clay*. The title of the exhibition was drawn from biblical sources. 'Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?' (Romans 9:21) but at that time, the view of many clay artists was that the theme expressed a wrong-headed, bullying and antagonistic relationship to the material.
2. Marks, Graham. Letter to the *New York Times*, August 21, 1979.
3. Keith, Stephanie. *Perspectives: Graham Marks*. John Michael Kohler Arts Centre, Sheboygan, Wisconsin. 1991.

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Stoneware. Anagama fired. 81 cm/h.



Stoneware. Anagama fired. 81 cm/h. (detail)