

A photograph of a ceramic art installation. On the left, a dark metal stand holds a cluster of shiny, teardrop-shaped ceramic pieces. In the center, a white ceramic tray with five pointed sections sits on a white table. To the right, a red woven ball and a string of grey beads are on the table. The background is a light-colored wall with a window on the right.

VIRTUAL
PARIS

CERAMICS AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB

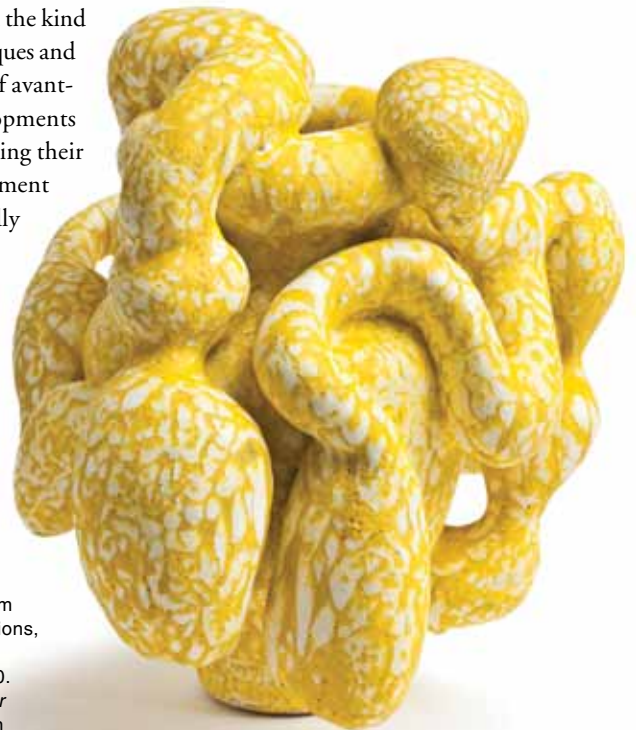
by Glen R. Brown



Dubbing 1920s Paris a “moveable feast,” Ernest Hemingway encapsulated the sentiments of countless writers and artists who reveled in the cornucopia of stimuli offered by the city on the Seine in perhaps its most captivating hour. Concentrating an unprecedented creative energy, Paris drew from afar a legion of artistic innovators such as Archipenko, Modigliani, Soutine, Brancusi, Rivera, Pascin, Chagall, and Lipchitz. With the light of genius playing over their determined brows and shabby dishabille, they converged on Montmartre and Montparnasse like zealous pilgrims to starve their bodies and sate their souls on the cathedral steps of modernism. In Picasso’s circle at the Bateau-Lavoir and in the smoky confines of the Café Azon, the discourse of modern art tumbled from the lips of avant-garde provocateurs. In the galleries of Vollard, Kahnweiler, and Zborowski the future contents of today’s museums lined the walls. Nothing quite like the School of Paris had existed before, nor has it since. When Nazi storm troopers marched triumphantly up the Champs-Élysées and dispersed the vibrant nucleus of modernism, the world lost a hothouse for art that would linger only in sentiment and pathos in the minds of those who had known it.

Without venturing into the quagmire of debate over similarities and differences between post-WWII New York and pre-WWII Paris, one could argue that at least some of the general advantages enjoyed by artists in early 20th-century Paris not only could be reproduced but in fact have been. The site for this renaissance has not been a concrete-and-steel city, but rather the prime embodiment of the metaphorical global village: the World Wide Web. The celerity with which information—news of opportunities to show work, opinions on exhibitions, or reports on an artist’s new series—can be disseminated on the Internet today far outpaces the rapidity with which conversation, commentary, or even sensationalist gossip could possibly have spread through the studios, clubs, and cafés of the Left Bank a century ago. But speed of communication is only the tip of the Internet iceberg that has made the World Wide Web perhaps the greatest boon that artists have ever enjoyed. Through its multitude of support mechanisms for contemporary artists, the Web has built a virtual Paris—and one that, for ceramics at least, is better than the original.

Like modernist Paris, the virtual Paris of the Web is a congenial host to experimentation. Ceramic art has never manifested an avant-garde in the sense that modern painting once did. It has never embodied a dialectic, nor has it embraced an ethos of progress that encourages abandonment of the past. The field of ceramic art expands rather than progresses. Nevertheless, since the second half of the 20th century, ceramic art has experienced the kind of rapid introduction of new techniques and styles that was once characteristic of avant-garde art. Some of these new developments have been extremely vulnerable during their nascence. After all, as the critic Clement Greenberg observed, “all profoundly original art looks ugly at first.” The virtue of Paris was that it provided toeholds for burgeoning talents that would have wilted in the shadows anywhere else. Today, the World Wide Web—the most democratic forum that has ever existed—assures that every germinating seed has access to



Left: Jennifer Forsberg’s installation from the *Proportions* series, variable dimensions, ceramics, wood, glass, iron, Plexiglas, cotton, lightbulb, and electric cord, 2010. Right: Morten Løbner Espersen’s *Horror Vacui #3 (jaune étoile)*, 16 in. (40 cm) in height, stoneware and glazes, 2011.

light. Young artists such as David Gallagher, whose ceramic and mixed-media installations include microprocessor-controlled plays of laser beams and other time-based elements, not only have the opportunity to present their work to distant audiences on the Web but can do so in real time through streaming technology.

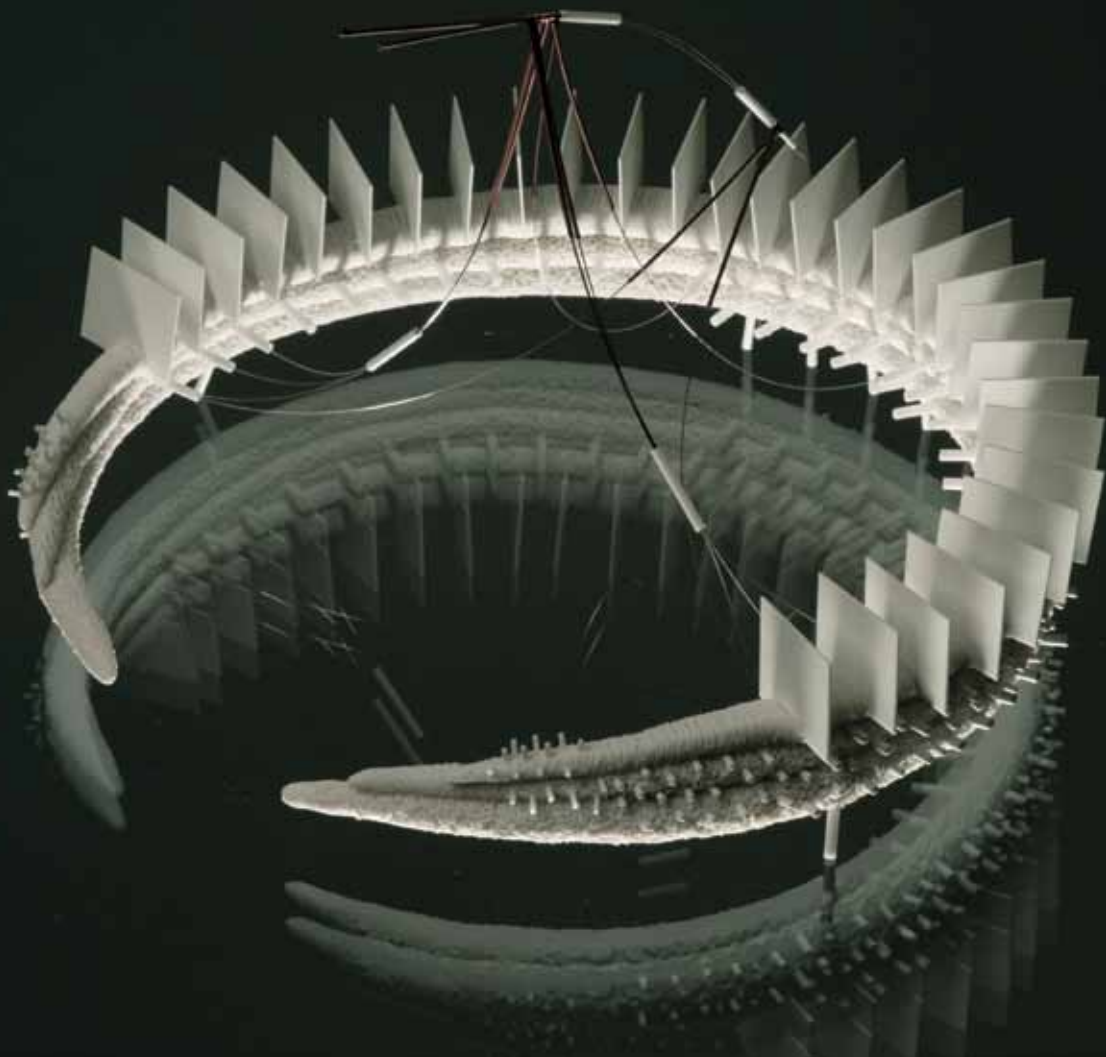
Early 20th-century Paris was not, of course, indispensable to the advance of modernism simply because it offered aspiring artists a chance to declare their existence. Beyond fulfilling that basic need, the city manifested community; it provided the sense of shared purpose, mutual support, and confederacy of risk that made a term like *avant-garde* meaningful in the first place. An inventory of the inhabitants of the flophouse La Ruche in the early years of the 20th century would have yielded a checklist of modernist luminaries from Apollinaire to Zadkine, all rubbing elbows with one another on a daily basis. Obviously, the Internet cannot recreate those conditions of physical camaraderie, but its virtual counterparts can be in some ways functionally equivalent. For example, web-based image resources such as accessCeramics (<http://accessceramics.org>) and artaxis (<http://artaxis.org>), the latter of which is self-described as “an evolving independent network of artists,” are important because they provide ceramic artists with

a tangible group identity. Since inclusion on artaxis is determined by a jury of seven randomly selected members and accessCeramics by the approval of a curatorial board, affiliation with these online groups carries a small measure of the kind of cachet that once came, for example, with a spot on André Breton’s official roll of Surrealists. Of course, these web-based cohorts can be beneficial to the careers of individual ceramic artists, but they also entail important consequences for the field of ceramic art as a whole.

One of the key functions that such sites perform is the fostering of a global ceramic-art community. Just as Paris once endorsed the universality of modern art through its egalitarian embrace of artists of all nationalities, web-based groups today potentially shape conceptions of contemporary ceramics as a community without borders through their encouragement of membership from all parts of the world. While accessCeramics and artaxis are still populated primarily by North American ceramists, other members include Eduardo Andaluz from Argentina, Chang Hyun Bang from South Korea, Morten Løbner Espersen from Denmark, Peter Biddulph and Gudrun Klix from Australia, Antonella Cimatti from Italy, Gert Germeraad, Backa Carin Ivarsdotter, and Jennifer Forsberg from Sweden, Margreet Zwetsloot from The Netherlands, Jason

Peter Biddulph’s *Strata Tripod Guinomi*, Southern Ice porcelain, fired to 2372°F (1300°C) in reduction, 2010; for more, see www.ceramicdesign.org. This piece received honorable mention in the 9th International Ceramics Competition, Mino, Japan, in 2011.





Annie Woodford's *Circllet*, 9 in. (24 cm) in length, handbuilt porcelain, fired to 2318°F (1270°C), copper, and stainless steel.

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Lim from Singapore, Veronique Maria and Annie Woodford from the United Kingdom, and Waleed R. Qaisi from Iraq. In the absence of any physical location today that can rival the artistic cosmopolitanism of Paris at its zenith, internationally inclusive online groups (virtual though their effects of fraternity may be) lend credibility to the assertion that contemporary ceramics constitutes a truly global culture rather than a mere conglomerate of nationally distinctive schools that borrow from one another but ultimately retain discrete, inwardly oriented perspectives.

Art in a global context has long been an intriguing subject. The discourse of early 20th-century modernism in Paris, invariably calibrated to a reckoning of art in universal terms, drew largely on observation of the international band of artists inhabiting the

boarding houses and studios of Montmartre and the Left Bank. In the early 1920s any inquisitive theorist of art could have sauntered through the studios of Montparnasse, perusing the newest work of the Chilean artist Manuel Ortiz de Zárate, the Japanese printmaker Fujita Tsuguharu, the Mexican painter Ángel Zárraga, and the Canadian artist Prudence Heward feeling that his or her gaze had to some degree encompassed the world. Today, that kind of panoptic experience of contemporary art is available to most people at the click of a mouse. Through the benefit of the Web, any home computer can access websites for galleries in London, Sydney, or Buenos Aires, personal pages of artists in Geneva, Bangkok, or Cairo and artists' blogs from Madrid to Manila. Historical art is just as readily accessible. Modern painters and sculptors haunted the voluminous halls of the Louvre and absorbed the exoticism of the Trocadéro's collections, but today's artists have at their fingertips a vastly more extensive archive of images than Picasso could have viewed in his entire lifetime.

Ceramists, like other contemporary artists, have pursued citizenship in virtual Paris as eagerly as aspiring modernists once flocked to the pensions and ateliers of the original, embracing the proliferating visual resources, technical information, personal networking, and critical discourse offered by the Web while exploiting virtual venues for marketing their work, from exclusive online gal-



Above: David Gallagher's *Liminal Processing of Euclidean Data to No Available End*, stoneware, porcelain, enamel, monofilament, fluorescent light, digital processor, motors, and lasers, 2011. Below: Waleed R. Qaisi's *How to Look at it?*, 22 in. (55 cm) in length, stoneware and glaze, 2009.



leries to Etsy. The enticements offered by cyberspace do not, of course come entirely free of liabilities. The uniform scale of the virtual realm, for example, epitomizes the primary deficiency of Malreaux's "museum without walls," and virtual volume can be an irksome substitute for the complexities of real space. Potters, in particular, may lament the overwhelming precedence granted to the eye over the hand, to vision over touch, in the textureless environment of the Web. Nevertheless, the Web's advantages—above all as they pertain to the freedom that artists have held dear, even in times when art itself has been enslaved—so manifestly trump any imperfections and yet-to-be-surmounted obstacles that it seems reasonable to assume that fields like contemporary ceramics will continue to embed themselves deeper in the folds of virtual reality. Younger generations have already begun to shape clay never having known a world without the World Wide Web; future generations may not even be capable of imagining a time when art could not be immediately offered up to a multitude of potential viewers. The ability to surf the Internet has forever transformed the kinds of conditions defining center and periphery that once prompted artists to congregate in early 20th-century Paris. Today, that Paris is everywhere, rendered more truly a "moveable feast" by virtue of the virtual.

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