

Whenever it is time for new eyeglasses, I am reminded once again, that I cannot see the big “E” on the eye chart. With this condition of extreme near-sightedness, I have worn glasses since the age of five. Vanity led me to contacts at age sixteen. Instead of using laser surgery to improve my overall vision, I have let it be. In fact, one of my pleasures is to take off my glasses, embrace this blurred viewpoint and think.

The theme of this conference is drawn from Marcel Proust’s quote, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” The concept of using a different kind of vision, peripheral and not focused, will be explored in my talk.

Another one of my favorite quotations puts the autobiographical nature of my presentation into context. The adventurer, Thor Heyerdahl during his voyage on his ship, *The Kon-Tiki*, commented, “Just occasionally you find yourself in an odd situation. You get into it by degrees and in the most natural way, but when you are right in the midst of it, you are suddenly astonished and ask yourself how in the world it all came about.”¹ This moment of recognition, of “how did I get here”, is parallel to Proust’s seeing with “new eyes”.

I have asked myself Thor Heyerdahl’s question, “how it all came about”, many times in my life. The answer to this question is that I am influenced by visual information that comes not from where I directly focus my attention, but from my peripheral or marginal vision. Those whizzing blurs that pass by you are fragments of information that lodge themselves into your subconscious. There they lie, waiting to be exploited in our work.

Peripheral vision occurs outside the center of the gaze. Both humans and non-human animals have the ability to see objects and movement outside of their direct line of vision. It turns out that peripheral vision is particularly good at detecting motion, but insensitive to colour. It is relatively strong at night or in the dark. For animals and our ancestors, this ability was useful for avoiding predators, who hunt and ambush at night. It strikes me that our use of peripheral vision must be pre-conscious and reflexive. We do not remember actually seeing something, but we have obviously reacted to movement in the margins of our sight.

As I look back over 30 years of work, I become conscious of the different peripheral movements within my life that have shaped my work. While my direct focus was on the physical and logistical problems involved in working with clay, peripheral personal, cultural and environmental events intervened, and even interfered with the evolution of my work.

Four years ago, I moved to a studio adjacent to a railway, expressway and harbour. Constant peripheral movement outside my window, a marker of the passage of time and my own life, encouraged me to finally abandon any reference to function in my work. Slipcast objects that decorated plates, pitchers and teapots have jumped off the surface into three dimensions and have become the subject matter for my current sculptural “accumulations”. Animal forms are derived from new and discarded commercial molds and I have developed a fresh, colour vocabulary based on a vast range of commercially prepared glazes. In doing so, I have moved out of the mainstream of traditional Canadian clay

methods and exhibitions and I find myself having to explain my work more than I did in the past. Going back to Thor Heyerdahl, how in the world did this all come about?

My art career began at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, which is a very bleak and cold location in the winter. This self-imposed exile was an escape from my hometown, Toronto and a difficult adolescence with elderly parents in a tiny semi-detached house. During the first semester there, I wandered into the ceramics department and met Robert Archambeau. He was hunched over a kick wheel, effortlessly throwing a large vase and then making dramatic gestural marks on the surface of the vessel. While focusing my attention on Robert Archambeau's mastery of throwing, I see now that I was also experiencing in my peripheral vision, the physicality of clay: its mass, smell and colour, the texture of the dust on the studio floors, the rich dampness in the clay closets and the tactile, organic forms on the work shelves.

After graduating with my B.F.A. from the University of Manitoba, I moved back to my home town, Toronto, and went to work at I.B.M. as a secretary. My husband was in graduate school and we needed the money. For four years, I worked in an office environment and traded the freewheeling energy of the clay studio for the commercial austerity of an office environment. My dusty jeans were replaced by blue suits and white blouses. Typewriters and arborite desks replaced my beloved wheel and kiln. I did manage to keep working sporadically in a small basement studio at my parent's house and my work developed slowly during the next ten years.

One of the most compelling peripheral memories from I.B.M. was of the compartmentalization of everything. While focused on my job, I had a peripheral sense of the rules and order of the place. Each night, everything on your desk, your pens, files and personal effects had to be locked inside the drawers. If not, you were issued a written “violation” by night security people.

During my time at I.B.M., I secured the job of production assistant in the Communications department. Working on advertising campaigns, I learned how to run a 16mm camera, edit film and do still photography. The Constructivist painter, László Moholy-Nagy, stated that “through photography, we can participate in new experiences of space . . . thanks to the photographer, humanity has acquired the power of perceiving its surroundings, and its very existence, with new eyes”.² Film allows us to capture moments in time and examine them. Peripheral information that may have escaped our gaze can be re-discovered in the edges and background of a photograph.

I became so interested in the process of filmmaking that I trained to become a professional camera assistant in feature films. I was admitted as one of the first women union members in Canada in the camera local of I.A.T.S.E. During each film or commercial shoot, my job was to focus the camera lens on one particular scene, shot in seemingly random order. In the editing process, I watched as short segments of recorded action were finally pieced together into a coherent narrative. I now recognize in this, a peripheral awareness of the power of accumulation and reorganization, like the frames of a film. This has proved to be a strong influence on my present work.

At the age of 27, my husband and I decided to start our family. We had two children, first a son and then a daughter, 22 months apart. They became, and still are, the main focus of my life. Peripherally, it plunged me into a new world of toys, books, diapers, television, cartoons and the fragmentation of every oasis of time. Most importantly, with respect to my current work, I realize that it was at this time that the characters and forms of animals manipulated to be the voice of cartoons, advertisements and moralizing tales, entered my peripheral vision and memory.

Once the children were old enough, I was able to refocus on my work as an artist. I enrolled in a two year program in commercial ceramics at George Brown College in Toronto. Afterwards, I set up a production studio for throwing and selling functional ware. While the studio was a commercial success, the throwing proved to be too much for my wrists and I developed severe carpal tunnel syndrome. Switching from throwing to handbuilding relieved the wrist pain and changed the format of my work entirely. The production work slowed and more sculptural pieces emerged. Personal narratives from my childhood were carved into the surfaces. I even experimented with post-fired surfaces such as acrylic paint and glue. This would foreshadow the use of epoxy and post-firing assemblage that I currently use for my accumulations of animals.

At the age of 40, I decided to go to graduate school. Tony Hepburn, my teacher at Cranbrook, taught me new ways of seeing. Instead of insisting that I follow a particular style of work, he asked me to go to the library and copy images of anything and everything that inspired me, without imposing a critical matrix.

With these images papering the wall of my studio workspace, I began to make work that resonated with the overflowing imagery and colour of Palissy's heavily detailed plates, Gaudi's tiled benches and Archimboldo's fruit, vegetable and animal portraits. I was drawn to the work of artists who accumulated masses of individual items to form larger works.

My focus was certainly on my studies because I realized the remarkable opportunity I was given at Cranbrook. But there was a constellation of new ideas and resources always wheeling around on the periphery. It was there that I began to use discarded plaster molds to press-mould and slip cast textures and three-dimensional objects. These objects became the surfaces and structure for plates, pitchers, vases and goblets.

Even the architecture of the Academy influenced me. My two years spent at Cranbrook were among the most rewarding of my life. After graduating with an M.F.A. in 1994, I moved back to Toronto and worked on functional-based, handbuilt work with intense ornamentation and colour. The change of peripheral environment from the idyllic and architecturally significant surroundings of Cranbrook to the urban core of downtown Toronto was profound.

My first space after Cranbrook was a ten foot by ten foot nook in the Residency program at the Harbourfront Craft Studios. I shared my environment with glass blowers, fiber and metal artists and, while we worked, we were on full public view. Due to the lack of studio and kiln space, I learned how to fabricate my larger pieces in sections. For one exhibition, a twelve foot outdoor fountain had to be made in ten separate parts and epoxied together on site. At

Harbourfront, my immediate focus was on fulfilling my three year contract, but peripherally, my confined working space taught me to work with components, and this continues to form the basis of my current methodology.

At Cranbrook I had learned the importance of art history and a cross-disciplinary approach to ceramic art. We were encouraged to research the vocabulary, processes and history of media such as architecture, design, painting, fiber and printmaking. I realized that to further my understanding of all media and makers, I would need a graduate academic degree and therefore enrolled in a Masters Degree program in the History of Art at the University of Toronto.

During my three years of graduate study at University of Toronto, I authored papers on everything from the work of Christopher Dresser, to the paintings of Caravaggio, to the Storyville photographs by E.J. Bellocq. I graduated in 2003 with an expanded world of information to apply to my ceramic practice. While my degree was my focus, once again, my peripheral vision and memory became crowded with information from outside of the ceramic world.

My graduate work at the University of Toronto gave me many opportunities, including the chance to work with two professors at Minoan ruins, which they had discovered at Pitsidea, Crete. I worked one summer there as a pottery profiler, which involved handling and drawing clay shards, dating back to 2500 B.C. The importance of this experience can barely be described. Ceramics of this antiquity would normally be displayed in a museum case. But there, I was surrounded by hundreds of exquisite Minoan pottery pieces, laid on long tables.

One by one, the pieces were examined, categorized and reassembled by archeologists and ceramic restoration experts. Perhaps there, in Pitsidea, I became most acutely aware of the importance of “peripheral” vision and experience. This process of examining and gluing together individual pieces into a larger assemblage was one that I could not have experienced in any other way.

At this point I want to interject another profound change that occurred in my life. It began again at the periphery, but over time has moved to the very core of my being. My daughter, at fourteen years of age became vegetarian. Her decision was not health-related but a moral and ethical one. I was sympathetic to her ideas, but not entirely convinced. One day, we followed a truck carrying chickens into the city for slaughter. I could not pass the truck and followed this sad spectacle for miles, using the wipers to get the feathers off my window. The fear and terror of the animals transported in open air cages, was palpable. Ten years ago, I became vegetarian and more recently, vegan. As a result, a compassionate responsibility for animals is a motif that I want to project through my current and new work.

After completing my art history degree, I rented a six hundred square foot studio in the historic Gooderham and Worts Distillery, a turn of the century site, in Toronto. I am in the Case Goods building and it was originally designed to stock barrels of pure alcoholic spirit for loading onto railcars at the immediately adjacent railway line. Today, the buildings stand hard up against one of the main rail, road and water access points in downtown Toronto. This peripheral information mixes with my memory of my father, who had a passion for railway

trains. He even built an elaborate model railway train in the basement of our house for me.

In my urban studio, I soon discovered that the most compelling feature were the sounds and vibrations of trains running by my window, day in and day out. This peripheral movement includes trains, sixty cars long, which transport animals twice a week to the slaughterhouse. The idea of voluntary or forced relocation and the concept of time expanding and contracting have influenced my work. This constant peripheral motion reinforces the certainty that nothing stays the same and that everything changes and decays. In my studio, movement, time and the hard reality of industry constantly jockey for attention outside my window.

The peripheral effect of the art history degree and the study of a more tangential approach to materials was that I completely abandoned the hands-on manipulation of clay. I replaced it exclusively with slip-casting commercially available plaster molds. I also started to glaze the majority of my work with commercial low-fire glazes. Removing the element of “touch” and “uniqueness” has been a controversial move in my work. Walter Benjamin stated that “mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses towards art.”³

This move from traditional clay methods to those found in the local “Paint Your Own Mug” stores or commercial casting factories is contentious. But it is the only way that I can convey a message of production, industry and consumption. And I truly enjoy the process of producing individual modules and assembling them outside the anxious atmosphere of the kiln.

Producing hundreds and hundreds of cast objects from commercial molds allows me, first hand, to examine society's need to acquire, accumulate and display. The history of ceramics is crowded with the production of figurines and animals made for children, home owners and collectors. Often there is a compelling, emotional attachment to these items. A beautiful ceramic "Bambi" figurine stood in its place of honour on my dresser when I was young. In a fit of anger, I accidentally threw something in its direction and broke it. Tearfully, I glued it together and its peripheral ghost hovers over my work table as I assemble and glue animals together.

My own work attempts to comment on the care, use and detainment of animals. A mound of animals heaped together in a box, suitcase or carriage echoes collections of animals being relocated for the meat industry, for show or for breeding. In the future, that message may become more emphatic. That means moving away from the conscious atmosphere of "play" and reverence I have in my studio now, similar to Laura and her collection of animals in the Glass Menagerie. It means physically distorting animals either by my hand or by over-firing; winding kanthol wire around the necks and firing bunches of animals strung together or placing decals on the chest of every animal with proper human names such as Emma, George or Conrad. In the future, my work may present a more disturbing and critical message about animal welfare in today's society.

At the age of 54, I wonder if the peripheral, but inescapable partners of time and age lessen concerns about how the clay exactly echoes my physical movement and gesture. After all the peripheral and focused periods in my life, I

see how little time is left. The work I make has no time to waste. It must have a point, a cause, and challenge received ideas and rules.

In conclusion, I return to the intrepid explorer, Thor Heyerdahl. In his diary he wrote that wind and waves under his ship caused a peripheral movement as they “pushed and propelled” the small craft. But he knew that “the ocean current lay under us and pulled straight towards our goal.”⁴

Some people move in straight lines through their lives. From age five, they embrace the professions of doctor, actor or architect and unfailingly pursue them. I knew early on that art was my best bet, but there was no way that my life could travel in a straight line. Instead, my professional clay work was interwoven with essential events such as marriage, earning a living and children. As a result, a peripheral movement of people, places and objects have caused and shaped my work. I believe that because of this circuitous path, and rather late in life, my current work is my best voice yet.

¹ Thor Heyerdahl, *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*. (London: Furnell & Sons, 1950) 11.

² László Moholy-Nagy. “A New Instrument of Vision,” *The Photographer Reader*, Liz Wells, ed. (London: Routledge, 2003) 95.

³ Walter Benjamin. “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *The Photography Reader*. Liz Wells, ed. (London: Routledge, 2003) 49.

⁴ Thor Heyerdahl, *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*. (London: Furnell & Sons, 1950) 97.

Biography:

Wendy Walgate completed a M.F.A. in Ceramics from Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan in 1994 and a M.A. in Art History at University of Toronto in 2003. Walgate also received a B.F.A. in Ceramics from University of Manitoba in 1974 and a Ceramics Diploma from George Brown College in 1986.

Solo exhibitions have been held at Prime Gallery and Harbourfront Centre in Toronto and Network Gallery in Detroit. In October 2005, Ferrin Gallery featured her work at SOFA in Chicago, and in 2006, exhibitions in Minneapolis, Philadelphia and Baltimore will include her work.

Wendy works full-time at her studio in the historical Distillery District of Toronto and has taught at the Ontario College of Art and Design and Sheridan College. In May 2006, she will be inducted into the Royal Canadian Society of Artists. Her work can be seen at www.walgate.com and www.ferringallery.com