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## Randi O'Brien relates the work of Michael Strand

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INTIMACY IS THE WORK OF ROMANTICS. ACTIVISM IS for volunteers and philanthropists. Sociology is for researchers of human behaviour. Journalism is for perceptive and keen writers and art is for seekers of beauty, concepts and, in some cases, transcendence. Like a prison of the past, these categories preserve and exhibit a snapshot of the quintessential individualisms that make them unique, authentic and separate. Facing these divided conditions, it is little wonder that artist Michael Strand has taken up bridge building.

In a departure toward more daring and encompassing categorisations, Strand works to construct bridges of communication between the worlds of intimacy, activism, sociology, journalism and, most importantly, between art and humanity. His work consist of community-based projects: three *Art Stimulus* cup drops, the *Cupolmacy* project, multiple *Clayroake* projects, the *Heirloom* project, the *MisfitCup Liberation* and the *EX.change* project that need to be, first and foremost, understood as processes of commu-

nicative exchange rather than physical objects.

Undoubtedly, Strand's contemporary ceramics have long outgrown the physical and intellectual limits of both conventional categorisations and galleries. Throughout his career Strand has used ceramics as his primary vehicle to intrigue his audience. After graduating with his MFA from the University of Nebraska, under Gail Kendall, Pete Pinnell and Eddie Dominguez, Strand, however, became increasingly unsatisfied with the pedestal format and insular path traditional galleries were leading him. Isolated from his audience, he self-rationalised the disconnect between his own work and the audience. Though deliberate and analytical, his rationalisation was not reactionary. In fact the initial seeds of his ideas were supported in his years of graduate school, yet took 15 years to blossom. As strand states, "Because this way of working is an extension of who I am and not a response to other 'socially engaged' artists and, while it took time for the idea to develop, it happened at the perfect moment in my career. I was a seasoned object maker ready now to make the leap into this kind of work."

In projects such as *ArtStimulus*, Strand's forms are loosely recognisable as 'tea bowls'. These ceramic vessels retain a strong resonance with their traditional function. Unpretentious and humble these works are ultimately utilitarian vessels, yet their primary utility (holding a liquid) is subverted by Strand's choice of deployment. Influenced by Michael Cardew's pottery quest in West Africa, where Cardew searched for the "perennial instinct to return to the source – a source not only of clays and glaze materials but also of inspiration, the potter's invisible raw



Michael Strand. Red Lodge Montana.  
*ArtStimulus* May 2011.  
Photo by Laura Tode

# By Means of a Cup



material” and where Cardew worked to create a sustainable ware for the middle class. Both Cardew’s and Strand’s instincts have led them to eschew the gallery. Strand instead highlights the dualistic function of a cup by hand delivering and engaging in an interactive and visceral relationship with his viewers.

On April 11th, 2010, harkening to the Recovery Act of 2009 and subsequent government stimulus packages, Strand initiated the first of three *ArtStimulus* projects. Thirty three residents of Dwight, North Dakota, US received a hand-delivered box, with the top lid open, revealing a cup. On the lid of the box is a sticker that merely reads “Hello” and on the interior is a note to the person who finds the cup.

*To the recipients of these cups:*

*A cup left quietly on your doorstep.*

*In a world of digital connections, social networking and twitter-palooza I offer an alternative, a physical how-do-ya-do in the form of a cup.*

*These cups, which are inspired by Japanese tea drinking vessels, are intended to be worn out through continuous use. With this in mind the cups are safe to utilize on a daily basis.*

*One cup at a time, I offer my warmest greetings.*

*Drink up, Dwight, enjoy and live well.”*

~ Michael Strand, Fargo, North Dakota

That being said, it is Strand’s skilful manipulation of form, distribution, correspondence and documentation that is essential to the nature of his projects. Deceivably simple in appearance, the ceramic forms are only a fragment in a series of conceptual gestures within Strand’s work.

By offering the cup as a gift, in contrast to the monetary exchange of commodities as seen in a gallery, Strand humbly serves the emotional and innate needs of his recipients. His viewers express behavioural differences that are rarely exposed in a gallery setting. In Dwight North Dakota, Kevin (a recipient of one of Strand’s cups) gave Strand an auto tour of the town, with details about the history and life of the community. Kevin also invited Strand into his house to meet his family as well as view his collection of elk and deer heads in the basement. In Red Lodge, Montana, at a later *ArtStimulus* project in 2011, Strand met Violet on the doorstep of her home. After she received one of Strand’s cup’s, she invited him in and proceeded to show off her collection of big game trophy heads and yarn covered coat hangers. She simply refused to let Strand and his assistants leave without a multi-coloured coat hanger as



*Above left: Strand bringing art to the people, Dwight, Nebraska. ArtStimulus April 2010. Photo by Amy Smith.*

*Above: First Cup and Box from the first ArtStimulus project in Dwight North Dakota. ArtStimulus April 2010. Photo by Josh Zeis.*





Above: *Ella*. Dwight North Dakota. *ArtStimulus* April 2010.  
 Below: *Violet*. Red Lodge, Montana. *ArtStimulus* May 2011.  
 Photos by Michael Strand.



a gift from her in return. Strand's recipients respond to his genuine gesture with welcoming sincerity.

Since the manifestation of Strand's original *ArtStimulus* project, the subsequent projects in Dwight, Nebraska; and Red Lodge, Montana, have progressively grown in scale. In 2010 Strand disseminated 177 cups in Dwight, Nebraska and on May of 2011 the Red Lodge Clay Center celebrated its 5th anniversary by inviting Strand and his team of six to perform their largest cup drop, with a delivery of 350 cups to the community of Red Lodge, Montana.

The scale and process of each project asks us to listen with great care to the greater expanse of stories and experience. Each house where Strand leaves a box is different. Some boxes are left covertly on doorsteps, some are simply unwanted. New and old families, poverty stricken and upper middle class, no two stories are alike. Community and individual history is a proud topic of choice. While there is never a spoken complaint, from the perspective of an outsider looking in, economic disparity is common.

Strand's experiences lead us through a humble exploration of small scale societies and how people interact within these contexts. Through Strand's photo-journalism he takes us down dirt roads riddled with puddles from the fresh rain, sparsely lined with single story houses, simple fencing and white trim. While tidy and clean, the homes are generally unornamented. Instead of embellishments reflecting the extent of one's bank account, the interior of the homes are lined with reflections of history and family. Strand in his own words describes the communities as "villages", small and tight knit. Despite the fact that the documentation is ripe with socio-economic content, Strand ever so modestly rallies forward, shedding the all too common categorisation of 'artist versus viewer'. Strand's process reinforces each person as having an equal sense of being human. His work carries information about mankind that has a different appeal from anything else being shown in a gallery.

There is no avoiding the fact that art galleries are for art lovers. This relationship is a courtship for both knowledge and image consumption, within a space that determines social and economic value. Confirmed by increasing resale value of sculptures and paintings, there is a belief that art can sustain its value beyond other forms of investment. Within this steady rise to investment stability, art has drifted away from the public audience in favour of exclusivity.

In truth, there have never been direct intentions of exclusivity on behalf of the museums, galleries and artists. To their credit they are far more practical and rational than they are attributed. Living in rural North

Dakota, however, where the average annual income is \$41,619 USD and the poverty rate is 12.9 percent, it is hard to appreciate the value of *Pink Panther*, a porcelain figure of a woman embracing the pink feline, produced in 1988 by Jeff Koons, which had been sold at a 1998 auction for \$1.8 million USD and was later auctioned for \$16.88 million USD in May of 2011.

Perhaps no artist or group of artists has been more captivate by this disparity (the space between our general public and art) than Strand and social practice artists alike. But what if the artist came to you, to rural North Dakota? What if the artist resisted a valuation of the art market? What if the value was not placed on objects but, instead, on the investment of social restoration? Through discursive thinking, critical inquiry and the functions of a cup, Strand has done just that. By using the cup as a moderator, Strand circumnavigates the space between spectacle and common place, the space between the gallery and the home, to reform the artist-viewer relationship. While subtle and, to some degree, sneaky, Strand crosses into the threshold of the public's private-space by means of a cup.

For some, the process might be considered simple. Because of functional wares centrality in our lives, it is often assumed to be the vehicle for communal interaction. In terms of traditional research and conceptuality the literal function of a vessel (holding liquid) comes first and the communal function is often secondary. For Strand, the first and primary function of his cups is to initiate social interaction, to reignite the dialogue between artist and viewer. "This is not about a random act of kindness, I need to know what they need," Strand states. It is clear Strand has a certain desire to create an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of the physical or symbolic participation. His work is more than 'tea and crumpets at noon'. It is an engagement of social restoration.

The intriguing and philanthropic properties of Strand's *ArtStimulus* projects are, of course, not restricted to the rituals of simplistic gift giving. Strand's blog serves as an extended social network to the real and physical network that he is building. Recipients of the *ArtStimulus* cups are given the opportunity to respond through comment sharing and photo sharing. Strand states, "There is no obligation, expectation or preferred outcome. There is simply the opportunity through this blog to share any response you may have to finding the cup on your doorstep." In Dwight, Nebraska more of the cup recipients chose to respond by Strand's *ArtStimulus* blog. Michelle, another recipient of a Strand cup writes, "Hello and thank you. I was rather baffled at first when I opened my door to see this little box with a cup waiting for me. Naturally the first reaction was to look around to see if I could figure out who put it there. Then as I read the note, it brought a smile to my face. Such a simple gesture, made purely with kindness, is so rare anymore. My brother is an artist and I know the love and attention that goes into every piece created no matter how simple. Every time I use this cup, I will be sharing in a small way that love. Thank you again." The blog exists to



Top: Strand in conversation with a passerby and dog companion, Red Lodge, Montana. *ArtStimulus* May 2011. Photo by Laura Tode. Above: *ArtStimulus* Cup. 2011. Cone 10 soda fired stoneware. 4.5 x 3.5 x 3.5 in.





*Before his recent boom of social restoration, Strand founded and established art educational programs and communities throughout Nebraska and North Dakota. He is the former Chair of the Department of Art at Concordia University in Nebraska where he also served as the Director of the Center for Liturgical Art. While in Nebraska, Strand received the PRISM award from the Nebraska Art Teacher's Association for excellence in Secondary Art Administration. Strand served as the first Education Director at the Lux Center for the Arts in Lincoln Nebraska, where he established their education program, their residency program and co-founded the Art of Fine Craft conference, which continues today. Recently Strand's work was featured in a solo exhibition at the Museum of Nebraska Art.*

document Strand's and others' social practice art projects and becomes an avenue to investigate current modes of deploying art into culture.

There is a complex continuity to Strand's work that upon first appearance is deceptively simple. His holistic approach to form, distribution, correspondence and documentation combines for a critically minded marriage that embodies the platform of the social practice genre. Due to its recent emergence, the question of what social practice art actually is, who is defining its parameters and to what end, is particularly complex. It is still an under-evaluated genre. Since the mid 1990s, art critics and historians have worked to document the lineage and development of this infamously chaotic set of practices. The genre has been identified under an ever changing set of brands including new genre public art, socially-engaged practice, relational art, dialogical aesthetics and so on. Since 2008, however the term 'social practice art' has rapidly become professionalised through the emergence of conferences such as "Intervene! Interrupt! Rethinking Art as Social Practice: The University of California, Santa Cruz, 2008", "Open Engagement: Portland State University, 2010, 2011, and 2012" and MFA programs, such as California College of Arts, Otis College of Art and Portland State University. While the product of social practice is translated using a variety of disciplines (art, activism, journalism, anthropology and community outreach) and can be seen as performance, activism or material based, the bottom line is that social practice maintains the idea of approaching a problem, rather than representing or exposing it.

Since 2010 Strand has emerged, respectfully (it has been more like an explosion) from the quiet world of his studio and the lecture halls, to develop multiple social practice projects across the northwestern US. In 2011 Strand deployed the *Cuplomacy* project, which comprises a wooden box, cup, camera and diary. The project was sequentially sent to four religious leaders: Pastor Steve Wold from the Trinity Lutheran Church of Moorhead, Minnesota; Head Priest Kyoki Roberts from the Pittsburgh Zen Center; Imam Makram El-Amin from the Masjid An-Nur in Minneapolis; and Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben from the Kehillat Israel Reconstructionists Congregation in Los Angeles, California.

The *Cuplomacy* project is an intimate approach where the cup functions as a conduit of communication. Each religious leader utilised the cup within his home or service and he was then given the opportunity to photograph and write about the experience with regard to issues of peace-making, trade, war, economics, culture, environment and human rights. Through the project's title, Strand not only addresses diplomacy but recognises the individual and authentic experience of religion. Despite the fact that individualism is preserved, Strand again masterfully constructs bridges between form, distribution, correspondence and documentation, to expose the interfaith and universal desire to 'share freedom', 'dignity' and 'harvest beauty'.

Strand's intentions have recently evolved from exchanges with a few people, to engaging the energy of an entire



economy. On 1–2 October, 2011 Strand challenged conventional modes of acquisition through the *EX.change* project. Rather than pursue his questions of exchange in the private spaces of a home, Strand took his concepts to places where people already engaged traditional currency: the FMVA-Fargo Studio Crawl. Through this project, Strand informed his audience that their ability to acquire his work and the work of other contributing artists was dependent upon the *Ex.change* currency they earned from positively affecting their community, through volunteering or community service. Strand writes, “To fulfil their side of the deal, participants are asked to document through photography, their community efforts and provide short written reflections on the experience.” Strand’s *EX.change* project has provided “more than 450 hours of dedicated, new community goodness in the region”.

Strand’s new approach centres on democratising strategic opportunities and engaging people in the subtleties and shared stories of business. Strand’s real symbol of success is not only in the hours of community service provided to the region but by bringing these strategic ideas and issues to life in a process that makes sense for all participants. Strand and the participants in this project reach an understanding on the secrets of authentic and sustained engagement. Strand’s experiences allow onlookers like us to see intricate connections to patterns of human behaviour. Through the perspective of a sociologist we see the paradoxical nature of desire. Strand’s participants become more conscious of what it means to give and what it means to receive.

Though Strand’s work parallels many social practice themes, it is important to remember that for Strand this is not about reacting to social practice as a genre, his work is about service and the human touch that makes a profound interpersonal difference. It is to restore the frayed relationship between artist and viewer and to make the relationship functional. Strand’s work directly reflects the qualities of his character: genuine, critically minded, with a passion for shared experience. Without the gallery to outline the value of the object, Strand’s interactions are ripe with significance. His forms are containers, albeit containers in a literal sense but more importantly in an aesthetic and psychological sense. The space between the home and gallery is fragile but the foundation of human interaction (shaking hands, exchanging gifts, ideas and a closing embrace) strengthens this space. Michael Strand reminds all participants that the focus and interest in his work is not about making things but, rather, a focus on living or the life around the making of his art.

Randi O’Brien is an artist, historian, writer, presenter and educator who has lectured on and inducted Maria Martinez into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and co-curated 60 Artists, 60 Artworks, 60 Years for the Montana Museum of Art and Culture, celebrating the Archie Bray’s 60th Anniversary Celebration. O’Brien earned her MFA in studio ceramics and is currently completing an MA in Art History with an emphasis in Criticism and Curation. O’Brien is currently an adjunct professor of Art History at Montana State University in Billings and an adjunct professor of Ceramics at the Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell Montana.



Facing page, top: **Cuplomaticy Box.** Cup, Diary, Camera in Box.

Photo by Mark Anthony

Facing page, below: **Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben.** Cuplomaticy at the Kehillat Israel Reconstructionist Congregation (Jewish Faith) in Los Angeles, California.

Above: **Imam Makram El Amin.** Cuplomaticy at Masjid An-Nur (Islamic Faith) in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Below: Red Lodge, Montana Artstimulus Cup Team. May 2011.

Pictured left to right:

Amy Smith, Michael Strand, Josh Zeis, Meg Roberts, Michael Hutton, Maren Shallman, Lenaya Kerlin, Larry Pelter. Photo by Laura Tode.

*Strand, is currently a husband, father, Department Head and Professor of Art at North Dakota State University, in Fargo, North Dakota. He is the founder of Engage-U.org, which provides an avenue to continue the rich dialogue of his interactions. Strand presented a TED.com talk in February 2011.*

