

# CONNECTING HUMANITY ONE BRIDGE AT A TIME

by Lauren Karle

The potter was once an integral part of the community, providing objects essential for everyday life. North Dakota artist Michael Strand, through interactive projects such as *Misfit Cup Liberation*, *Cuplomacy*, *The Bowls Around Town*, and *ArtStimulus*, hopes to restore pottery to a central role in the community, not simply for pottery's utilitarian applications but also because of its potential to break down barriers, create social bridges, and help us to better understand humanity. To pursue these ambitious goals, Strand designs his work to go beyond the containment of food by building memories and experiences.

For his stagings of the *Misfit Cup Liberation* project, Strand makes 100 handmade cups, brings them to the location that he has selected for a project, and places each within its own unit, or

"house," on a set of shelves that he describes as the "Cup Orphanage." Members of the local community are then invited to come to the site and exchange one of their personal cups for one of his. Along with their "favorite rejected cup" they are asked to leave a story of when and how that cup was acquired and why they are willing to part with it. Over the next five to six years Strand plans to carry out ten iterations of the exchange, encompassing all continents and collecting 1000 cups and their accompanying stories for publication in a documentary book.

Though he makes cups, Strand's primary role is to facilitate ideas and narratives. He sets the stage, lets the projects evolve, then learns from each experience. The first exchange occurred at the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, North Dakota. Strand, an

1 Detail view of *Misfit Cup Liberation Project*, Estonia, 2012.



associate professor of art and department head at North Dakota State University in Fargo, North Dakota, realized that the project was successful when the center of interest was no longer himself but rather the people who left their objects behind. One of the most profound moments came when an ex-convict exchanged a cup, engraved with his name and inmate number, that he had used every day for a year in prison and three years afterward. He explained that he made the exchange because he was ready to leave that part of his life behind.

Strand held the second exchange in Estonia. The heart of the project is about memories, which can be difficult to convey in a foreign language. Though many of the participants spoke English, he employed a translator to help and learned the value of being physically present at each exchange. An elderly woman traded a small white cup and conveyed her gratitude through a hug. Hearing of the project, people came by boat from small islands that were once part of the Soviet Union. Looking at the cups, Strand found himself asking many questions about their history. The desire to learn more has led him to walk the border between the roles of ceramic artist and public historian. In the future he plans to ask for more information from participants to send to a cultural anthropologist to analyze and synthesize. Strand believes that the project, as a cultural anthropological study, should be assessed by the field with which he is integrating. The insights of an expert will undoubtedly generate new directions for future iterations.

Another addition to the exchange, when it was held in Houston, Texas in 2013, was to publicize the event with a one-minute infographic designed by one of his students. His passion for teaching and the pride that he takes in his students are evident when he talks about how much he learns from them. In all of his projects Strand collaborates with other artists. Since he cannot be an expert at everything, he invites those who are to take part in the work. Not only can his projects reach further in this way, but by sharing the success, he also raises the visibility of all those around him.

Strand has observed that the cups he makes can influence the content of the exchange. At first he used the kind of soda-fired cups with which he was familiar, but more recently, after realizing that he had been “imposing too much of an opinion and replacing their baggage with my baggage,” he has begun to refine the cups toward a greater simplicity. Moving to low-fire wares and testing glazes, he is taking on new technical challenges and expanding his repertoire as an artist. He envisions simple surfaces, more like blank slates ready to record the participants’ memories of the exchange, but he wonders whether his cups will be viewed as fresh starts by their

new owners or in some ways remain tethered to the history of the old cups that were exchanged. Prompted by such questions, Strand designs, tests, and reflects on the outcome after each iteration of the project in order that by the tenth exchange he will have tightened the process and made the experience as rich as possible.

Another of Strand’s evolving projects is *Cuplomacy*. The idea was sparked when Strand was eating at a restaurant. Dishes and utensils at restaurants are washed and used over and over by customers who come and go. He began to wonder who had previously used the plate from which he was eating or the fork that was entering his mouth and what conversations these objects had been a part of. People often go to restaurants to celebrate an occasion, hold a serious meeting, or spend time talking with friends and family. Strand’s goal was to document and direct the history of objects at such events, which he considered in terms of their ritualistic aspects, so that the objects that he made might create symbolic connections.

After throwing about 35 cups, Strand selected one for *Cuplomacy* that felt quiet but proud, celebratory but not connected to the traditions of any particular faith. A Christian pastor, Buddhist priest, Muslim imam, and Jewish rabbi all agreed to use the chosen cup in their respective sacred spaces, be photographed in the process, and write about the experience in a diary. Cradled in a wooden box with satin velvet interior, the cup traveled 5000 miles via FedEx ground shipping from Fargo to Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and back to Fargo, creating an implied social network among the four religious leaders and their followers.

In accordance with his “launch and learn” strategy, the project is continuing to evolve and grow. Working with a researcher



**2** *Misfit Cup Liberation*, detail, Estonia, 2012. Soviet-era cup exchanged for a handmade cup. Photo: Mark Anthony.

**3** Teabowl by Michael Strand. *Misfit Cup Liberation*, Houston, Texas, 2012. Photo: Mark Anthony.



4 *Cuplomacy*, detail of cup, diary, wooden box, 2011. Photo: Mark Anthony. 5 *Cuplomacy*, with Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, 2011. Rabbi Reuben was one of four faith leaders who participated in the *Cuplomacy* project.

who is a specialist in interfaith structure, Strand will incorporate a follow-up to provide a collective view for the participants. By partnering with a theological scholar, his vision is to form even stronger bridges among religions and congregations that hold less ecumenical views. He hopes that by reaching out to different religious leaders each time that he organizes *Cuplomacy*, he can extend the project incrementally so that the same cup will someday have connected the Pope to the highest leaders of all of the world's major religions.

As his *Cuplomacy* and *Misfit Cup* projects continue to develop, Strand is using what he has learned from them to shape new projects. Recently launched in Portland, Oregon, *The Bowls Around Town* involves a serving bowl, nestled in a carefully crafted box, traveling to different family homes to serve as part of a daily ritual. The participants will also receive a hard-bound journal in which to place a photograph of their dinner-time ritual along with the recipe for what they ate, the history of the recipe, and their reflection on the project and experience. The bowl serves as a tool in Strand's inquiry based work of interviewing people about a range of "American family dinners." Five bowls were released into the city in a variety of ways to capture a wide spectrum of families. Two were placed in libraries, entering the card catalog to be checked out. A third bowl entered a chain of fire stations, as teams of fire fighters are often like families who treat meals as occasions for fellowship. Another was given to be passed through a group of organic foodies with a community garden. The last was placed in a neighborhood where the community is typically underserved.

By observing the diets of families from a range of socio-economic levels, Strand is gathering public history. The act of consuming food, sustaining life, is common to all continents and time periods. The kinds of food people eat, where they get it,

how they prepare it, and whom they share it with reflect lifestyles perhaps more than anything else. Even in America, over the last 100 years these daily rituals have changed dramatically. Strand is using a simple bowl to harvest a vast amount of information and stories about our culture today.

Strand is well aware that the design of the bowl will affect what people choose to serve. For this first iteration, he made 16-inch passing bowls about 4 to 5 inches deep that are extremely functional, with broad rims and a minimal aesthetic that makes them humble and approachable. Having learned from the *Misfit Cup* project, he does not want to impose a viewpoint on the user; he prefers that the focus be on the food. In the future he may alter one variable at a time to see how a long tray or organic shape might produce different results.

The bowl itself is just one component of the complete experience. The box, fabricated by North Dakota State University ceramics student Mike Weiss, with design assistance from faculty Daniel Siverson and David Swenson, has a sliding lid that slowly reveals the bowl, signaling its importance. Strand spent two hours choosing just the right fabric for the pillows that cradle the bowl and present it upon opening. The graphics and construction of the book are also carefully considered as part of the branding that will attract people. Strand plans carefully: "The right kind of design and the tone it sets are crucial to meaningful participation. Just like any other art form, if the people know I care, they care! It is all part of my craft and all part of making the bowl."

Although the bowls are the vehicle, the project is not about the pot; it is about the recipes. Strand will eventually compile the recipes into a relational cookbook with more than just ingredients and directions. The stories and experiences included with each recipe will allow cooks to have a different connection with the



food they make. By selling cookbooks, he will reach a different audience and market. At the same time he is building community and advocating for craft by getting handmade pottery into the hands of people who may not experience it otherwise.

Community-based projects like Strand's are also changing the role of the museum. The success of the curator is not to arrange artwork, but to build bridges in the community. Art museums often serve the educated and privileged, but rather than reaching out to get people to come to view art, in the case of *Bowls Around Town*, which is part of a series of projects *Object Focus: The Bowl*, the curators at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland, Oregon are reaching into people's homes, bringing the art to them. The community becomes the gallery, and a new context for the work and museum is created. The museum's director Namita Gupta Wiggers and curator Sarah Margolis-Pineo have been essential collaborators with Strand, bringing cookies to fire stations and building relationships in the community to foster interest and awareness in the Object Focus series. After two months in the community, the bowls and recipes will return to the museum to reveal all the cultural information gathered. The premise of *Misfit Cup Liberation* is that the curators will inspire the community to participate. The museum becomes permeable, not just displaying artwork but allowing the community to create the show. The desire to participate changes who attends the openings and alters the whole atmosphere and experience in the museum.

Strand designed the project *ArtStimulus* as yet another way to build community and advocate for the arts. By making cups and placing them on the doorsteps of each household in a small community, he builds bridges between people who work with their hands.

In the fall of 2012, I and several other art students at Kansas State University had the privilege to participate in one of Strand's *ArtStimulus* cup-drop events, this one held in the small town

of Dwight, Kansas. Our experiences were diverse. Some met a 90-year-old veteran of World War II, others shared coffee with locals in a café, and I had the privilege of meeting a 94-year-old man who was working at the bank that Saturday morning, just as he had for the past 76 years. We gave away 145 cups made collectively by our Potters' Guild. Comparing the retail value of those cups to the value of the interactions that we shared with amazing people and the life lessons that we learned, Michael pointed out that we had been amply rewarded for our time. Would the \$25 for which we might have sold each cup have been worth more than the conversations that we had and the connections that we made? None of us would have made that trade.

The true success of *ArtStimulus* is revealed through the continued relationship between the residents of Dwight and our Potter's Guild. Sue, an active resident of Dwight, gathered 20 recipes from the community along with information about how each cook acquired the recipe and the memories it evokes. Each member of our Potter's Guild chose a recipe and story for which to design a serving dish. We then held a collaborative potluck: We brought the pots to serve the food cooked by Dwight residents. Matching potters with cooks, we were able to describe how their story and recipe influenced our design decisions. The seeds planted during *ArtStimulus* have grown into genuine links of which Strand is no longer a part, suggesting that the connections are real and the project a success.

As a graduate student facing the real world, I ask myself how many artists actually make a living exclusively from selling their work. Almost every potter and artist I know is involved in the field in multiple ways, integrating those activities to find a means to create a whole. As artists, we have to be creative in more than just our decisions about what to produce. We have to be adaptable, and we are problem solvers. When Strand has an idea that is not likely to be funded by an arts or educational institution, he devises



6 *Bowls Around Town* Project, 2013. Bowl pictured in its protective wooden box. Photo: Mark Anthony. 7 *Bowls Around Town*, one of the serving bowls shown in use by firefighters at a Portland fire station, 2013.



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8 Michael Strand, Lauren Karle, Julia Polidoro, Sarah McNutt, Amy Santoferraro, and Kyla Toomey preparing for *ArtStimulus* in Dwight, Kansas at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 2013.

9 Left: Kait Snoddy and Amy Santoferraro, right: Lauren Karle, Sarah McNutt (along with other KSU students), delivering 145 handmade cups to residents of Dwight, Kansas, for *ArtStimulus* Dwight, 2013. Photo: Kolle Kahle-Riggs.

10 A gift bag with a cup made by Kansas State University students waiting to be found at the doorstep of a Dwight resident, 2013. Photo: Abigail Thompson.

11 Detail of a gift bag with a handmade cup made by Kansas State University students for *ArtStimulus*, 2013. Photo: Abigail Thompson.

12 Michael Strand giving a Dwight resident a cup that suits him as part of *ArtStimulus*, 2013. Photo: Kolle Kahle-Riggs.



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projects that are self-funding. Often he raises the necessary funds through production work, putting the money that he earns from his salable “hotel art” into the projects that he is passionate about. He believes in the power of art, large or small, local or international, to connect people. His drive and vision truly match the saying, “If there’s a will, there’s a way.” Strand’s presence and optimism are palpable and contagious.

Michael Strand is clearly a designer of much more than pottery. He is a facilitator of experiments, interactions, and experiences. The functional pots that he creates become relevant in completely new ways that are meaningful to the world today. Drawing on the resources of other disciplines as well as those of ceramics, he practices social activism, collaborates with others, and advocates for the handmade. He carefully designs every aspect of the work, initiates the project, and then reflects on the outcome. For Strand everything starts with the question, “What if?” Curiosity lies at the center of his practice and the rewards come in human form. An artist and activist of enormous heart, he perceives of his activity not as “do-gooder work” or social art, but rather as a way to gather information, answer questions, and create bridges between people.

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