KEN PRICE'S *HAPPY'S CURIOS* (1972-1978): A CRITICAL HISTORY

by

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In 1972 ceramist Ken Price (b. 1935) embarked on *Happy's Curios*, a six-year long project that he described as an homage to Mexican folk pottery. It ended with a 1978 exhibition of the same name held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The project and the related exhibition integrated and critically investigated three common classifications of cultural objects: fine art, folk art, and craft. This thesis argues that the *Happy's Curios* project deploys these categories in a manner that challenges and deconstructs how they are used. The thesis offers a critical history of the *Happy's Curios* project and its reception in order to interrogate how the project engages the taxonomy of fine art, folk art, and craft, as well as its relevance to a broader art historical context.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1950s and through the 1970s, California was the locus of important developments in American art and ceramics, responding to cultural circumstances quite different from those in New York, the then-reigning world leader in the arts. In California, ceramics took on a level of respect and legitimacy as a creative medium that was unheard of on the East Coast. Following the energetic example of their teacher, Peter Voulkos, a group of students at Otis (then officially called the Los Angeles County Art Institute) began pushing the boundaries of what could be done with clay, a medium that in the United States had long remained within the domain of a formal crafts aesthetic that espoused truth to materials, form following function, and eschewed surface decoration. These artists, Voulkos, Ken Price, Billy Al Bengston, John Mason, Paul Soldner, Michael Frimkess, and others, were unconcerned with adherence to traditional methods in ceramics or contemporary art trends, and more interested in the excitement and intensity within their group. That same spirit, and a few of the same artists, like Price, Mason, and Bengston, could be found a few years later in the group surrounding the Ferus Gallery, which itself played an important role in the development of Southern California's art scene.[1]

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[1] Ferus Gallery, founded in 1957 in Los Angeles by Walter Hopps and artist Ed Kienholz, played a key part in the development of a vital, internationally recognized, Los Angeles art scene. Besides Kienholz and the abovementioned artists, the gallery also represented West Coast artists Jay DeFeo, Ed Ruscha, and Larry Bell, among others. For more on the Ferus Gallery, see: Roberta Bernstein and Kirk Varnedoe, *Ferus* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009); Kristine McKenna, *The Ferus Gallery: A Place to Begin* (Götingen, Germany: Steidl, 2009); James K. Monte, *Late Fifties at the Ferus* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968); and Betty Turnbull, *The Last Time I Saw Ferus, 1957-1966* (Newport Beach, CA: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1976).

Ceramist Ken Price (b. 1935) grew up in Southern California and had been part of both groups. By the time Price had embarked on his 1970s project, later dubbed *Happy's Curios*, which is the focus of this thesis, he was already a well-established artist in the California arts and ceramics scene.[2] He was known at the time for his meticulously produced vessels and sculptural forms, and was often characterized as an artist who either bridged or repudiated the presumed art and craft divide. In 1971 he relocated to Taos, New Mexico and soon after, in 1972, began work on the project that would ultimately consume more than six years of his life. It ended in 1978 with a show by the same name, "Happy's Curios," at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).[3] For the *Happy's Curios* project, in which he "intended to pay homage to the Mexican folk pottery of the 1950s," he produced a series of works that addressed the nature of ceramics as a craft medium through his reinterpretation of Latin American folk art forms and processes.[4] The project was hybrid: it combined fine art, folk art, and craft, as well as a hybrid of Latin American art forms. The provocative joining of these elements of fine art, folk art, and craft resulted in a project and exhibition that makes an ideal case study for examining popular and critical conceptions of those frequently-used but problematic taxonomies in the arts. Although the latter half of the twentieth century had seen increasing movement away from the rigid, hierarchical separation of fine art, folk art, and

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[2] Happy is the name of the artist's wife, though other than bearing her name, the project does not pertain to her in any way.

[3] *Happy's Curios* refers to the project and the entire body of work, while "Happy's Curios" refers specifically to the exhibition at LACMA.

[4] Ken Price, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, "A Life in Clay," *Artnet Magazine*, 2008, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/drohojowska-philp/drohojowska-philp10-22-08.asp (accessed April 7, 2010).

craft, the distinctions persisted, and still do, often subconsciously or intuitively. With them persist biases in how individuals and institutions interact with objects. By the time of the *Happy's Curios* project, the separation appeared all but inconsequential. I argue that it is because Price's project demonstrates how this taxonomic ordering continues to operate that the project has been forsaken, so to speak, by the artist himself and by critics. This is of particular interest because Price, who invested so many years in it, summarily writes it off as a failure; and critics, who repeatedly acknowledge it as important in his oeuvre, nevertheless have avoided addressing it with critical depth. The project forces an awareness of the artist's and critics' own validation of the project's implicit categories and hierarchies: an uncomfortable reality for the internal contradictions it reveals to those who conduct themselves with the assumption that their ideology and contemporary interpretations of cultural objects transcend the taxonomies. In Price this reveals itself as a deep ambivalence throughout the project, and in critics through their omission of critical analyses of the project. This thesis on the Happy's curios project is twofold; it fills a gap in the literature on Price's oeuvre and offers a detailed analysis of the project's development, influences, and institutional context as a way to critically explore how the taxonomies of fine art, folk art, and craft continue to influence the ways in which we display, evaluate, and historicize art objects.

Overview of Ken Price and *Happy's Curios*

Ken Price became interested in the arts during high school; he took his first ceramics course in the early 1950s, and later earned his BFA from the University of Southern California (USC) in 1957. Throughout the 1950s, he took classes from

numerous schools in the area, including the Chouinard Institute, University of California Los Angeles, Los Angeles City College, and Santa Monica City College. Most importantly, he went to a demonstration given by Peter Voulkos and was so excited by what he saw that, after graduating from USC, he went to study under him at Otis Art Institute's newly founded ceramics department, which Voulkos had been hired to run. (Figure 1) He received a scholarship at Otis, but left the program after a year, objecting to the graduation requirements imposed by the dean, Millard Sheets.[5] Price later enrolled in the MFA program at the State University New York at Alfred (commonly referred to as simply "Alfred"), which he completed in a single year.[6] Never one to placidly follow convention, even as a young man he did not let existing standards direct him.

Figure 1. Peter Voulkos with slab-built sculpture, late 1950s.

Price's resolute approach towards his education carried over into his professional career, and he quickly established himself in Los Angeles' growing art community by his use of clay and color, making abstract sculptural forms in high-fire stoneware, noted for their color finishes and glazes and their diminutive size, and for the quirky lines of cups he produced regularly and distributed to friends in the art community. He worked through his ideas in series, but each object was essentially a stand-alone piece. (Figure 2) *Happy's Curios* was a significant departure from his other works in style and concept, as it used

[5] Ibid. Students were required to work on mosaic murals designed by Sheets on Home Savings and Loan buildings around the Los Angeles area.

[6] Edward Lebow, "Ken Price," *American Ceramics* 7, no. 2 (1989): 22.

color differently, relied on decoration, and the individual objects were dependent upon the whole, rather than being self-contained. (Figure 3)

The “Happy’s Curios” exhibition at LACMA in 1978 was not the culmination of the immersive project that dominated Price’s life for five years, in the sense that it was not a complete resolution of the work and did not represent an achieved goal. The LACMA show was, rather, a necessary and convenient stopping point for the artist, and a point of departure for critics and the public to explore the issues and ideas that the project encompassed.

The exhibition installation featured several series of ceramic wares housed in custom-designed and built wooden cabinets, along with two shrine constructions, a few stand-alone pieces in vitrines, prints, posters, and wool rugs or wall hangings. The overall style references Latin American arts, in particular Mexican folk arts. Price’s intention was to work in the manner of Mexican folk artists, to work serially, and to attempt to efface

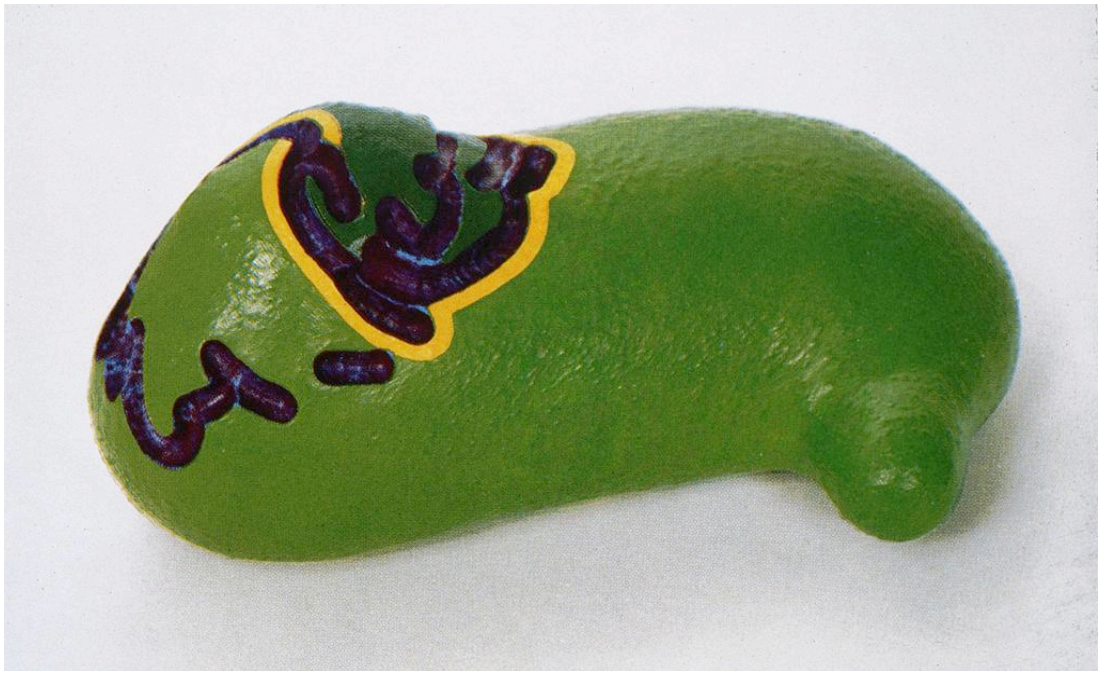

Figure 2. Ken Price, *Untitled*, 1966. Fired and painted clay, W 6 ¾ in.

Figure 3. Ken Price, *Town Unit 1* (detail), 1972-77. Ceramic and painted wood, 83 x 39 x 20 in.

his individual identity and ego as an artist.[7] He wanted to be "actually making some of the wares" and to "experience the whole thing."[8] While the consciousness of desiring to work in an unselfconscious manner is obviously contradictory, he continued to pursue his experiment and developed a plan to open an actual "curio shop" stocked with his wares. Citing mainly financial reasons, as he would have had to fund the store himself, Price never realized the curio shop, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art became the public and formal manifestation of his project.[9] (Figure 4)

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[7] Maurice Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1978), 8-9.

[8] Ken Price, interview by Michele D. De Angelus, May 30-June 2, 1980, transcript, California Oral History Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 26.

[9] Ken Price, "Ken Price: A Talk with Slides" *Chinati Foundation Newsletter* 10 (2005): 28, 30.

The show was well received, but the critical response tended to be largely superficial in describing the show as paying cheerful homage to Mexican folk art. Reviews were brief and generally overlooked deeper consideration of other ideas central to the project, such as his borrowing of Latin American motifs, and the implications of the show's institutional position with regard to culture, craft, folk, and fine art.[10] Regardless, the project and LACMA show are now fixtures in the literature on the artist, and though more recent analyses are also brief, a few critics and scholars, such as Peter Schjeldahl, Garth Clark, and Glenn Adamson, continue to revisit the project in their writings.[11]

Apart from literature on Happy's Curios, Price's work and career has been written about frequently, but with limited depth, and usually in relation to a current exhibition. Among the first, in 1966, was a catalogue essay on his work by Lucy Lippard, for his show with Robert Irwin at LACMA.[12] He has been part of numerous catalogues in association with his steady exhibiting history, including a dozen or more small monographic catalogues that focus on the work represented for its given show. Most of these are short essays that give an overview of his career and a brief discussion of the work that appears in the show, but offer minimal analysis or original ideas. One exception

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[10] Bernard Kester, "Kenneth Price" review of "Happy's Curios" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Craft Horizons* 38, no 3 (1978): 57; Suzanne Muchnic, "Curios from the Home Folk" review of "Happy's Curios," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1978; Peter Schjeldahl, "Ken Price, Los Angeles County Museum" review of "Happy's Curios," *Artforum* 17, no 3 (1978): 79.

[11] Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Garth Clark, *American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present* (New York: Abbeville, 1987); Garth Clark, *American Potters: The Work of Twenty Modern Masters* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1981); Garth Clark, *A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978: A Study of Its Development* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979); Peter Schjeldahl, "Ken Price, Los Angeles County Museum" review of "Happy's Curios" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Artforum* 17, no 3 (1978): 79; Peter Schjeldahl, "Ken Price's L.A. Edge" *Art Issues*, no. 48 (Summer 1997): 17-19.

[12] Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Robert Irwin, Kenneth Price* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1966).

is the monograph authored by Walter Hopps (founder of the Ferus Gallery), and Edward Lebow, published in conjunction with a retrospective exhibition at the Walker Art Center and the Menil Collection in 1992.[13] In most respects it is a thoughtful history and analysis of Price's work, however it entirely omits Happy's Curios. This was attributed to the fact that the exhibition derived from the Menil Collection, which owned no pieces from Happy's Curios. A few other books also offer more interesting analytical approaches to his work, but again, not in great depth. Since the 1960s, Price's work has also been regularly reviewed in a variety of journals, magazines, and periodicals, such as the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Newsweek, Art in America, Artforum, American Ceramics, and others, and is a favorite of critics like Peter Schjeldahl, David Pagel, and Roberta Smith.[14] In addition to literature connected to his exhibitions, he appears in most historical surveys, large and small, related to ceramics and craft in America, and in books dealing with the history and development of the arts in California.[15]

Fine Art, Folk Art, and Craft

The terms *craft*, *folk art*, and *fine art* are central concepts to this thesis. Each of these terms is defined both by social and cultural factors, and by material considerations; in which the identity of the maker and their social position together with the specific

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[13] Walter Hopps and Edward Lebow, *Ken Price* (Houston, TX: Menil Collection / Houston Fine Art, 1992).

[14] Ken Price's website includes extensive lists of selected books, catalogues, and articles in which his work appears. Ken Price, "Ken Price: Bio. & Exhibitions," *Ken Price, Contemporary Art Studio and Gallery*, http://www.kenprice.com/bio.php (accessed March 3, 2011).

[15] To name just a few, see Clark books in note 11 above, as well as Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Elaine Levin, *The History of American Ceramics, 1607 to the Present: From Pipkins and Bean Pots to Contemporary Forms* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988).

medium used play a role in how an object is labeled. As categories, they may initially appear distinct, however there is considerable overlap and uncertainty between them.

Both craft and folk art are often defined relative to fine art, a binary in which they are indicators of what fine art is not. The modern concept of fine art originated in the mid-eighteenth century and was soon developed further by Immanuel Kant, who argued that fine art was, as anthropologist Nestor García Canclini paraphrases, "a disinterested symbolic movement, a set of 'spiritual' goods in which form predominates over function and the beautiful over the useful."[16] Fine art came to be associated with spontaneous creative acts on the part of an artist genius for the purpose of "pure, disinterested delight."[17] Given the spiritual transcendence of fine art, a hierarchical relationship developed in which anything with *interest*, Kant's reference to functional need or usefulness, occupied a lower class of objects.

Function became the basis for defining craft, which situated all media associated with function, such as clay, metal, wood, and fiber, in the "minor" arts by default. High levels of mastery and skill in a medium were also associated with craft, a connection that has only been reinforced in the intervening centuries with the Arts & Crafts movement and the rise of studio craft. Finally, craft's usefulness means that it must meet market demands, while fine art would theoretically be free of market influence. Crafts are also

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[16] Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 173.

[17] Immanuel Kant, "The Critique of Judgement," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80.

sometimes included as part of applied arts or decorative arts, though both these terms are also inclusive of industrial design.[18]

Folk art, like craft, serves as foil to fine art, but under different conditions. Where craft is associated with functionality, folk art is more closely associated with social position or class. This relationship to class has in most respects allied it more closely with craft than fine art, as both occupy have come to occupy lower positions relative to the elite fine arts. Folk art is less clearly defined than craft, but most dictionary definitions agree that it is art belonging to the popular aesthetic, has a component of tradition, and "exists in clearly defined geographical regions among peoples with shared characteristics such as language or religion."[19] Furthermore, these popular cultures are usually rural and/or poor, as García Canclini points out, connecting the opposition of fine and folk (or popular) art to the schism between rural and urban, traditional and modern, the anonymous collective and the solitary artist genius.

García Canclini writes that in the Kantian idealization of form over function and beauty over use, "crafts appear as the Other, the kingdom of objects that could never be detached from their practical meaning."[20] The same applies to folk art, which, as defined by the *Longman Dictionary of Art Terms* from 1986 is "[t]he general term for the native arts and crafts of any particular region, arising from traditional cultural forms which are *practical* rather than theoretical and handed on between individuals without the

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[18] *Oxford Art Online: Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, s.v. "Craft," http://www.oxfordartonline.com:80/subscriber/article/opr/t234/e0135 (accessed February 4, 2011).

[19] *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996), s.v. "Folk Art."

[20] García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 173.

development of formal systems of training."[21] Folk arts also occupy the role of Other, perhaps even more literally, as objects belonging to cultures of interest for their perceived remoteness, exoticism, and often marginalized status. Besides their oppositional relationship to fine art, folk art and craft are similar for their connection to tradition and conservatism, community and the collective, and for being handmade. They differ in that folk art is not necessarily functional, and craft is not necessarily authorless.

By the time Price began working on *Happy's Curios* there was a burgeoning interest in folk arts that ultimately served to increase the confusion about what exactly folk art defines. Meanwhile, as contemporary artists increasingly assimilated media previously consigned to the "minor" arts, the material categories related to craft had become less rigid.[22] Nevertheless, many museums, including LACMA, still implicitly subscribed to existing definitions, however contested, for folk art and craft, thus making them relevant to an understanding here of how these categories function, and although artists need not be limited to painting or sculpture, the mystique of artist genius was (and is) still widespread.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter II of this thesis will construct a history of the Happy's Curios project, including the development of Price's ideas and production, and a formal overview of the

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[21] Judy Martin, *Longman Dictionary of Art: A Handbook of Terms, Techniques, Materials, Equipment and Processes*, (Essex, England: Longman, 1986), s.v. "Folk Art." [emphasis mine]
Indicative of the degree of this schism between craft and fine art is the fact that, while there is an growing field devoted to the study of craft, and despite the common and academic usage of the term, craft is so divorced from fine art, or even art, that it does not appear in most art dictionaries, while folk art does.

[22] The growing interest in folk art may be due in part to the mainstream art world's trend of inclusivity of non-traditional media and forms of expression, and those with an interest in folk art insisted on its equivalency with fine art.

content of the LACMA show. Additionally it will review Price's wider oeuvre in relationship to Happy's Curios, and will contextualize the project's relationship to the culture, art, and history in California between the 1950s and the 1970s. To date, the literature on the project is incomplete, lacking verifiable information on the history of the project. Curator Maurice Tuchman's introduction to *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, the catalogue published in conjunction with the 1978 exhibit at LACMA, fails to clearly explain or document the information it provides, and most of what has been written with regard to basic facts of the show and project has come from the Tuchman text.[23] There are only a few substantive reviews of "Happy's Curios" from the time of the exhibit, and only a few times since has it been revisited with a critical eye, though it is nearly always mentioned as significant in any discussion of Ken Price, his work, and his career.[24] My project, in contrast, provides a history of the project and exhibition through extensive analysis of Price's interviews, public talks, and published writing.[25]

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[23] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1978).

[24] See note 10 above.

[25] The bulk of the history is a synthesis of published oral communications by the artist, together with some information written on the artist in books and articles, which follows. Much of the information is repeated in more than one of these sources, however if there are facts that are anomalous, unique to one of the sources, or derive from an entirely different source than those that follow, I have cited them individually: Edward Lebow, "Ken Price," *American Ceramics* 7, no. 2 (1989): 16-25; Richard Marshall and Suzanne Foley, *Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1981), 70-86; New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, *5x7: Seven Ceramic Artists Each Acknowledge Five Sources of Inspiration* (Alfred, NY: New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, 1993), 34-39; Ken Price, interview by Michele D. De Angelus, May 30-June 2, 1980, transcript, California Oral History Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; Ken Price, interview by Joan Simon, "An Interview with Ken Price," *Art in America* 68, no. 1 (1980): 98-104; Ken Price, interview by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, "A Life in Clay," Artnet Magazine, 2008, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/drohojowska-philp/drohojowska-philp10-22-08.asp (accessed April 7, 2010); Ken Price, "Ken Price: A Talk with Slides" *Chinati Foundation Newsletter* 10 (2005): 22-37; Ken Price, oral transcript, "Ken Price," in *Low-Fire Ceramics*, by Susan Wechsler (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1981), 112-117.

Chapter III will look more closely at what Price's inspirations were for the *Happy's Curios* project with regard to form, process, and concept. The most obvious of these are the oft-mentioned Mexican folk potters, but this chapter will identify other sources, both named and unnamed, and will make comparisons between these and Price's own work. Throughout these comparisons I will investigate what his project communicated about ceramics and craft, folk art, fine art, and culture through his exhibition choices, and through an exploration of the similarities and differences between his work and processes and those of his formal and conceptual sources.

Chapter IV will turn to the significance of this project's institutional context by examining the museum-as-site, the audience, and the critical reception. In this chapter, I will also discuss the phenomenon of the curio shop, and will explore how locating the project at LACMA conferred credibility.

Through an investigation of the processes, forms, and institutional context of the Happy's Curios project, this thesis provides a history of the project that demonstrates how the taxonomies of fine art, folk art, and craft affect perceptions of art objects, precluding a balanced examination of them, as evidenced by Price's work for the project and his attitude towards it, and by critical responses to the exhibition. Finally, though Price's *Happy's Curios* project ended in 1978, this thesis will look at how many of the issues surrounding the taxonomy continue, and are repeated and reprocessed in contemporary art institutions.

CHAPTER II

THE *HAPPY'S CURIOS* PROJECT

The basic concept of *Happy's Curios* derived from Price's interest in and appreciation for Mexican folk pottery and its processes, a fact that is reflected in the overall look and feel of the body of work that he produced from 1972 to 1978. This chapter will discuss his work during those years and the 1978 exhibition at LACMA, drawing from the artist's own words, the catalogue that accompanied the LACMA exhibit, and writings by other critics and historians. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Ken Price, "Happy's Curios" (installation at LACMA), 1978.

The Project and Exhibition

The Happy's Curios project was not about individual ceramic pieces brought to a unique and final resolution. Similarly, the exhibition at LACMA should not be viewed as

the final resolution of the whole project. The individual pieces were part of a larger process in which Price explored his fascination with Mexican pottery, and the exhibition was an installation of some those pieces, representing only a portion of the ambitious project and practice that extended over several years. The exhibition was a mixed media installation that included drawings and paintings, rugs, and a few store-bought items, but the main body of work consisted of ceramic wares—plates, cups, bowls, vases, jars—colorfully decorated with both abstract and representational designs, displayed in groupings on wooden shelf units. As previously stated, he based his concept on Mexican folk pottery, frequently referring to his long-time appreciation for this work and his interest in the manner in which it was produced. Price grew up in Southern California in the 1940s and 1950s and recalls that Mexican folk pottery was a common sight in people's homes at the time. During the 1950s, as he began to work in ceramics, he took a greater interest in these pottery pieces, seeking them out in Tijuana when making surfing trips to Mexico. (Figure 5)

Figure 5. *Curio Store in Tijuana*, postcard, n.d.

While Price had long been drawn to Mexican folk pottery, his 1971 move to Taos, New Mexico marked the germination of the project, where his ideas for what he would

later call *Happy's Curios* began to take shape. In Taos he enjoyed the lack of stimulus that in Los Angeles had been constant, and he followed in the footsteps of other artists who had been relocating to New Mexico since the 1920s, who like Price, were drawn to the local landscape and the escape from the urban centers.[26] Those early transplants were also attracted to the exoticism of the local culture, and while Price only obliquely acknowledges such an interest, it can be no accident that his move there was immediately followed by a project based in Latin American culture. He acknowledges that he was inspired by the colors and beauty of the landscape and admired the many roadside shrines. Plans to make his own roadside shrine pieces, involving erotic figures tucked into nooks along the roadside landscape, developed in tandem with his thoughts about producing Mexican folk pottery. For the shrines, he began making drawings and sculptures but, lacking the collaborators he hoped would help realize his vision, he ceased that pursuit and turned instead to the more independent exploration of Mexican pottery. Both ideas shared a Mexican influenced color palette and folk art inspiration, the idea of the shrine, a similarly distinct departure from his previous work in Los Angeles, and involved environmental and experiential concepts. As he turned all his efforts toward this exploration of Mexican pottery, he did not think of what he was doing as a project, referring to it later as "just a funny idea that got out of hand."[27] That Price simply allowed the project to carry him along may be part of the reason he was so disillusioned with the it in the end. He entered it with excitement and idealism, without stopping to consider the

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[26] Charles L. Briggs, "The Role of *Mexicano* Artists and the Anglo Elite in the Emergence of a Contemporary Folk Art," in *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, ed. John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research, 1986), 207.

[27] Susan Wechsler, *Low-Fire Ceramics* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1981), 116.

project's implications as it developed and grew. After having personally positioned himself as removed from concerns of how to classify art objects, he did not anticipate that it would force his hand on the matter, revealing his attitudes towards folk pottery and the classification of objects fine art, folk art, and craft through his iconography, language, and form.

Many of Price's ideas and interests with regard to Mexican folk pottery concern the process involved, and how that process informed the final product. For example, when he talks about what sparked his interest in the project, he describes handmade production in which "the makers considered themselves to be operating 'pottery factories,'" though without machines.[28] He saw this type of production as leading to unselfconsciousness in the Mexican potters' work, since they would produce hundreds and hundreds of the same forms, year after year, the technical execution of which would become second nature to them.[29] He considered them master ceramists, on a par with those formally trained in the Western tradition, and admired their objects for their proportions, skill, looseness, decoration, and ease of approach. Price wanted to move toward the freedom and spontaneity offered by serial production, in which one no longer thought about the individual piece. The process would, he believed, remove the potter from identifying himself as a singular potter/author, and give no one piece a singular identity. He was not interested in reproducing the exact style of Mexican ceramic wares themselves, but rather he wanted to involve himself with a similar process of

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[28] New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, *5x7: Seven Ceramic Artists Each Acknowledge Five Sources of Inspiration* (Alfred, NY: New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, 1993), 35.

[29] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, 7.

unselfconscious and repetitious production in order to make wares with the same spirit. (Figure 6, Figure 7) There is no question that Price had a great admiration for the style and quality of Mexican pottery, but the language he uses to express himself reveals his adherence to traditional conceptions of what constitutes folk art as well as a philosophical ambivalence. The idea of a factory suggests both faceless anonymity and lack of agency on the part of the worker (or maker), both typical characteristics in folk definitions, but also industrialization, the bane of protectors of folk, and an analogy that is a far less romantic conception than the tug of the exoticism of the Other. Overall, his characterizations of unselfconsciousness and authenticity tend towards a primitivizing view of Mexican folk potters as partially informing his admiration of them.

He began throwing pots, using production as a way of understanding or appreciating this art form to which he was drawn. His motivation was to work as he conceived a Mexican potter did, however he quickly found that his own mode of production inherently conflicted with what he was trying to imitate. Namely, he was an academically trained individual with a decidedly self-conscious, aesthetic purpose, in contradistinction to the anonymous and unselfconscious maker he purported to emulate. However this did not deter him; he simply modified his expectations and tried as much as possible to do the "tightrope-walking" in which he gave his personal judgment moments of authority before returning to inhabit his projection of a Mexican potter.[30] In the beginning he was making pieces without a plan, and was still working on earlier series unrelated to Mexican folk pottery. Then he thought, "it would be really nice to have a

[30] Price, interview by Michele D. De Angelus, Archives of American Art, 26.

Figure 6. Ken Price, *Town Unit 3* (detail), 1972-77. Ceramic, 11 ¼ in.

Figure 7. Plate, n.d. Patambán, Mexico.

hundred of them instead of one," which stylistically developed into the repeatable series. Finally, he decided he wanted to show them all as a tableau, in what would become his fantasy of opening curio shop. As he worked, his ideas "mushroomed" into more ideas and more wares, and with the curio shop fixed in his head, his efforts changed from experimentation to more serious and focused production.[31] He believed he could execute the curio shop idea, stocked with a large quantity of repeated series, in one year. In reality his project stretched into five years of production, eventually sacrificed the actual curio shop, and required an additional year of planning and preparing for the exhibition at LACMA.

The details of how Price worked during those five years are, unfortunately, hard to come by. While he sometimes speaks openly about his ideas, Price prefers not to explain his working process or technical specifics, claiming that it can be boring, irrelevant, and distracting from the art itself, nor does he comment on meaning in his work. He makes no exception for Happy's Curios, therefore questions of design development, his training in different production and decorative techniques, and how much he actually produced can only be cautiously inferred from his accounts and knowledge of his general working habits.

Price's production practices were neither quite those of a studio potter, nor those of a Mexican family pottery. For example, Price did not make everything himself, as a family of potters might, or as a studio potter is expected to. Although early in his career he had made his own glazes, he probably used prepared glazes, since he discovered that

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[31] Ken Price, interview by Joan Simon, "An Interview with Ken Price," *Art in America* 68, no. 1 (1980): 100.

he could get what he needed from commercially available supplies, even finding qualities in paints and finishes that could not achieve with glazes. For Price, it does not matter if he or an assistant makes the ceramics or applies the glazes, as long as they do it skillfully and per his specifications.[32] He completely controls design, creating detailed studies to develop ideas, forms, and colors. Drawings, both as studies and as drawings for their own sake, represent a significant but less well-known part of his creative practice, and these, together with large paintings, were included as part of the LACMA exhibit. Additionally, he created drawings from which Zapotec weavers made large rug for the wall hangings in the show (commissioned through an intermediary company in the United States).[33] (Figure 8) Price is known for technically excellent work, one of the prerequisites, so to speak, in a traditional understanding of craft, but, as he says, "although I have fairly good work habits I don't really operate like a craftsman."[34] This is clearly evidenced by the fact that he purchased pre-made blanks for some of the ceramic pieces.[35] He was not married to a romantic notion of the master craftsman, one who controls every step of the process in order to achieve absolute integrity and refinement in a piece, as evidenced by the fact that he used so many different production resources for his project. That Price was not actually making everything seems to diverge from his interest in using process as inspiration. Where his original goal had been to have an *experience*, an intangible outcome, as his ideas for the project developed they shifted towards a tangible final

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[32] Ibid., 103.

[33] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, 86.

[34] Price, interview by Joan Simon "An Interview with Ken Price," 104.

[35] Garth Clark, *American Potters: The Work of Twenty Modern Masters* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1981), 46.

Figure 8. Ken Price, *Wall Hanging*, 1975. Wool, 102 x 74 in.

product, the curio shop. To that end Price's role for himself shifted, reinserting himself as author-master rather than, or in addition to, maker, and disturbing the premise of his utopian project.

About a year into the project, in 1973, it began to consume most of his working time, though he is vague about how he worked. Although in the beginning he had no clear plan, the idea of working in series became critical to this project. Serial production, making one ware after another, each one like the previous, was at the root of what he was working towards: to achieve the looseness and freedom that came from repetition. Therefore, he certainly was producing nearly identical pieces in series, but it is not clear how many. Photographs taken of his studio during those years, such as one picturing works in progress from *Unit 3*, show hundreds of pieces in various stages of completion but do not give the impression of vast numbers of duplicates. (Figure 9) In a talk he gave at the Chinati Foundation in 2005 he mentioned the difficulty of producing a piece and

Figure 9. Ken Price, *Works in Progress*, *Unit 3* (studio), 1974.

then having to make three copies of it, saying that it was like "self-forgery."[36] He interpreted his actions as criminal, violating an unspoken law in himself with his deviation from producing singular works (as a singular artist). The term also skirts the unspoken question of the ethics of his appropriation of Mexican pottery styles. Strictly speaking, he was not intending to defraud viewers into believing the works were either actual Mexican pottery or purely original invention on his part, but that there might even be an issue was largely avoided by Price and critics.

Perhaps the real defrauding was in the idea that he was producing series in a way that fostered the freedom and spontaneity he admired in Mexican folk pottery. In the end most of the pieces that went into the LACMA show were not duplicates at all. He developed several very consistent styles or types, and within each type, several different vessel forms, of which there would usually be as many as four, but sometimes more, of each. Vessel forms and surface decoration within a certain type would vary from one piece to the next, sometimes quite subtly and other times not. For example, *Unit 1* contains two basic forms: five red-handled vases with yellow bellies and multicolored necks, and eleven multicolored "vase planters." (Figure 10) The multicolored glazes on all pieces initially appear to match, however seven of the vase planters do not utilize a dark glaze. The forms of the vase planters vary slightly in height from one to the next, and the vases are all composed slightly differently, with longer and shorter necks and bellies, and all with angular handles, but attached at different places on the vase. The overall impression, however, is one of similarity over difference, especially apparent

[36] Price, "Ken Price: A Talk with Slides," 29.

Figure 10. Ken Price, *Unit 1*, 1972-77. Ceramic and wood, 70 x 35 ¼ x 20 in.

when compared to a unit *Town Unit 2*, on which each piece is stylistically and thematically related, but has no sense of being a duplicated series of a single form or image. (Figure 11) There was the appearance of serial production, but on many levels he did not follow through with his interest in process as leading to fluid spontaneity. After

Figure 11. Ken Price, *Town Unit 2*, 1972-77. Ceramic and wood, 70 x 39 x 20 in.

all, four "copies" seems a small number to qualify as a significant serial production process. Furthermore, working drawings for *Happy's Curios*, many of which were published in the exhibition catalogue for the show, betray a level of planning that seems in contradiction to creative discovery through spontaneity. (See background, Figure 9) The level of planning manifest in his working drawings leads one to wonder if the variations in *Unit 1* were deliberate and studied, rather than the organic result of his process. It is possible, however there seems to be two distinct tendencies in his surface decoration for *Happy's Curios*: the schematic or geometric as in the *Town Unit 2* or *Unit 3*, for which there are working drawings, or the organic as in *Unit 1* or *Unit 4*. (Figure 26) The variations in the latter tendency are less suggestive of deliberate variety and may be evidence of straining at the yoke of duplication ("self-forgery") and the variations provided relief. In this way it is similar to what he saw Mexican folk potters as doing:

working within a set of restrictions, but within them finding new visual expressions. To some extent, his exploration of process serves as justification for his formal borrowing of Latin American arts, without which the project becomes more troublesome, asking for additional explanation or justification on the part of the artist for those appropriations, which he was wont to do.

In terms of his research for the project, he drew from his own personal experiences and observations. He had gone to Tonalá, and circumstances suggest that his visit was directly related to his Happy's Curios project, though no source reveals much about this trip.[37] In one instance, he talks of learning from Tonaltecan (people from Tonalá) potters how to make small tequila cups on a mold; prior to that he had been struggling with making them on a wheel.[38] In the end, he included over one hundred tequila cups in the exhibit. Additionally, one source reports that the blanks he used were purchased from Mexican folk potters themselves, also indicating that his visit to Tonalá was made in conjunction with his work on the project.[39] It is interesting that Price rarely mentions this visit, providing only tidbits related to how the potters worked. This does suggest that he was more fascinated with the objects themselves, and not with the exoticism of their producers, to whom he gives little thought. His comments, previously discussed, betray an attachment to the idea of folk art as exotic Other, remote and

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[37] Aside from his frequent mention of their work process from the perspective of a firsthand observer, in one interview Price also talks of a trip to Tonalá in which he specifically discusses struggling to make tequila cups on a wheel, and then learning in Guadalajara to make them using a mold.
Interview by Michele D. De Angelus, May 30-June 2, 1980, transcript, California Oral History Project, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 61.

[38] Ken Price, interview by Michele D. De Angelus, Archives of American Art, 61-62.

[39] Clark, *American Potters*, 46.

anonymous. However, it seems that he is barely interested in culture, which typically significantly factors into peoples fascination with the Other. For his purposes, they nearly disappear, becoming only a mental state or condition that gives rise to a tangible body of ceramics. This could be construed as either the ultimate in violent decontextualization, robbing them of any shred of identity; or as largely avoiding the practice of defining and labeling people according standards external to their own culture by not talking about people at all.

The idea to open an actual shop that would be stocked with wares became the organizing principle that propelled the project forward. It was certainly informed by the shops that he visited in Tijuana in the fifties, since he frequently mentions them. With the curio shop in mind he continued to produce more work. As Price envisioned it, the store was a logical extension of his homage in that it, as a location, would have been analogous to the would-be destinations of the type of pottery on which he was basing his project. Busy and well stocked, his shop would have had little to do with the rarified air of a contemporary gallery or museum. He has talked of planning and drawing designs for storefront windows, small billboards, shelves of wares, an area in the back for his erotic pieces, and enough of each type of pottery to evoke the sense of endless seriality and quantity. Citing financial reasons and personal issues, Price never realized his idea for the curio shop. He had worked on little else during those years, supporting himself by selling previously made works, since he could not sell the *Happy's Curios* pieces before it all came together in a shop. Eventually, he ran out of money, and had even given up his studio. He did not have the capital to open the shop himself, and was unable to find

backers to help him. Ultimately, James Corcoran, who represented him at James Corcoran Gallery in Los Angeles, helped arrange for the show at LACMA, presenting an opportunity to bring the project to an informal close, if not a resolution. In this new context, Price reconceptualized how he would present the works, carefully designing all aspects of the exhibition, right down to the type of cases and shelves that would hold his works. Different from the crowded tourist shop environment, his new plan responded to the museum environment, retaining echoes of the curio shop with the wooden shelving and showcase windows displaying the different series that he had produced, while adjusting to the atmosphere of the galleries, with their open spaces and white walls. He had directed so much energy towards the curio shop idea as the final product of his efforts, but the necessity of doing something in order to move on pushed him to do the show at LACMA, which he considered a capitulation. He thought it impossible to recreate the curio shop in a museum gallery, though whether that was a personal opinion or the influence or request of another, perhaps Maurice Tuchman, he does not say. His failure to carry out the curio shop as planned is undoubtedly one source of his overall disappointment in the project.

In the final installation at LACMA, the show extended through four galleries and was primarily organized into *units*, wooden hutch-like cabinets, designed by Price and fabricated according to his careful instruction, with the ceramics arranged on the shelves. (Figure 12, Figure 13) Approaching the entrance the first thing one would have been faced with was not ceramics but a large, woven wool rug with a flatly rendered view of

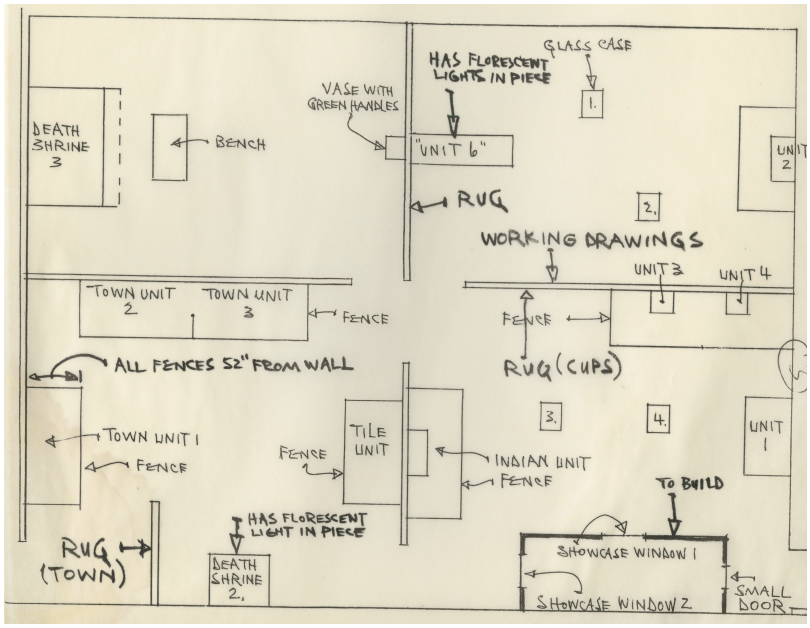

Figure 12. Ken Price, Installation drawing for "Ken Price: Happy's Curios" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, ca 1977.

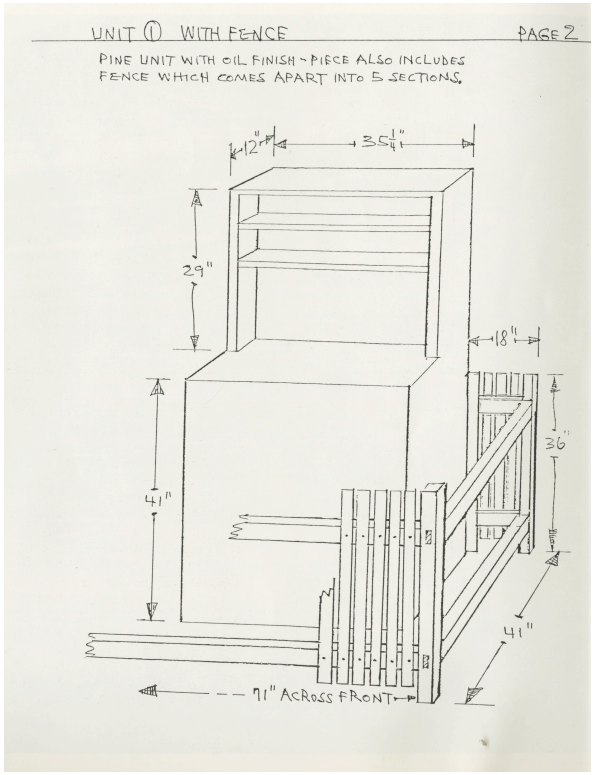

Figure 13. Ken Price, Installation drawing for *Unit 1*, ca 1977.

houses and a person wearing a sombrero, and reading "MEXICAN ARTS" across the top and "HAPPY'S CURIOS" on the bottom. (Figure 14) Once inside the galleries, the focus was on the pottery and cabinet units. Each wooden cabinet was unique, with an arrangement and depth of shelves designed specifically for the ceramics they held. Some were painted white and others left as natural wood, and a wooden fence surrounded each. They held a carefully arranged set of ceramics, usually stylistically consistent in terms of surface decoration, but with a variety of vessel forms, as previously discussed for *Unit 1*. There were nine units, most with names like *Town Unit 1* or *Unit 3*. Any logic or consistency to the naming and design of the units is difficult to ascertain, beyond noting that the Town Units' shelving was all painted white and their ceramics contained pictorial decorations (suggestive that representation imagery was urbane), and that two units, *Tile Unit* and *Indian Unit*, bore names that could be logically connected to the theme or style of the pottery that they contained. Two large mixed media installations, *Death Shrine 1* and *Death Shrine 3*, held ceramic pots, fabric decorations, small skulls, and fake flowers. (Figure 15) Showcase windows built into walls held other pots, and a few pieces stood on freestanding wooden plinths with vitrines. The walls were hung with wool wall hangings, prints, posters, and Price's working drawings. Clay, textiles, and wood, the principal materials in the exhibition, were not traditional fine art media. The paintings were executed so flatly as to appear like prints, and the working drawings looked like something for commercial arts, incorporating references to industrial design, a relationship that for traditionalists in craft and folk art has been uneasy at best. Overall,

Figure 14. Ken Price, *Happy's Curios* (installation view), 1978. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

the galleries were still relatively spare with their white walls and spotlights, but the colors and subject matter of the units and other pieces in the show were bright and cheerful, and the wooden units with their fences instantly created an environment distinct from traditional gallery spaces.

The 1978 "Happy's Curios" show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was by no means the most significant aspect of this phase in Price's work, but it was the most concrete realization, and a means of public, critical engagement with the project. The exhibition was very successful and was extended three times.[40] Subsequently, the units and shrines were sold off individually and appeared in several other shows over the next few years, such as the 1979 Whitney Biennial, and several shows in 1980, including

[40] Garth Clark, *A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978: A Study of Its Development* (New York: E.P. Dutton), 203.

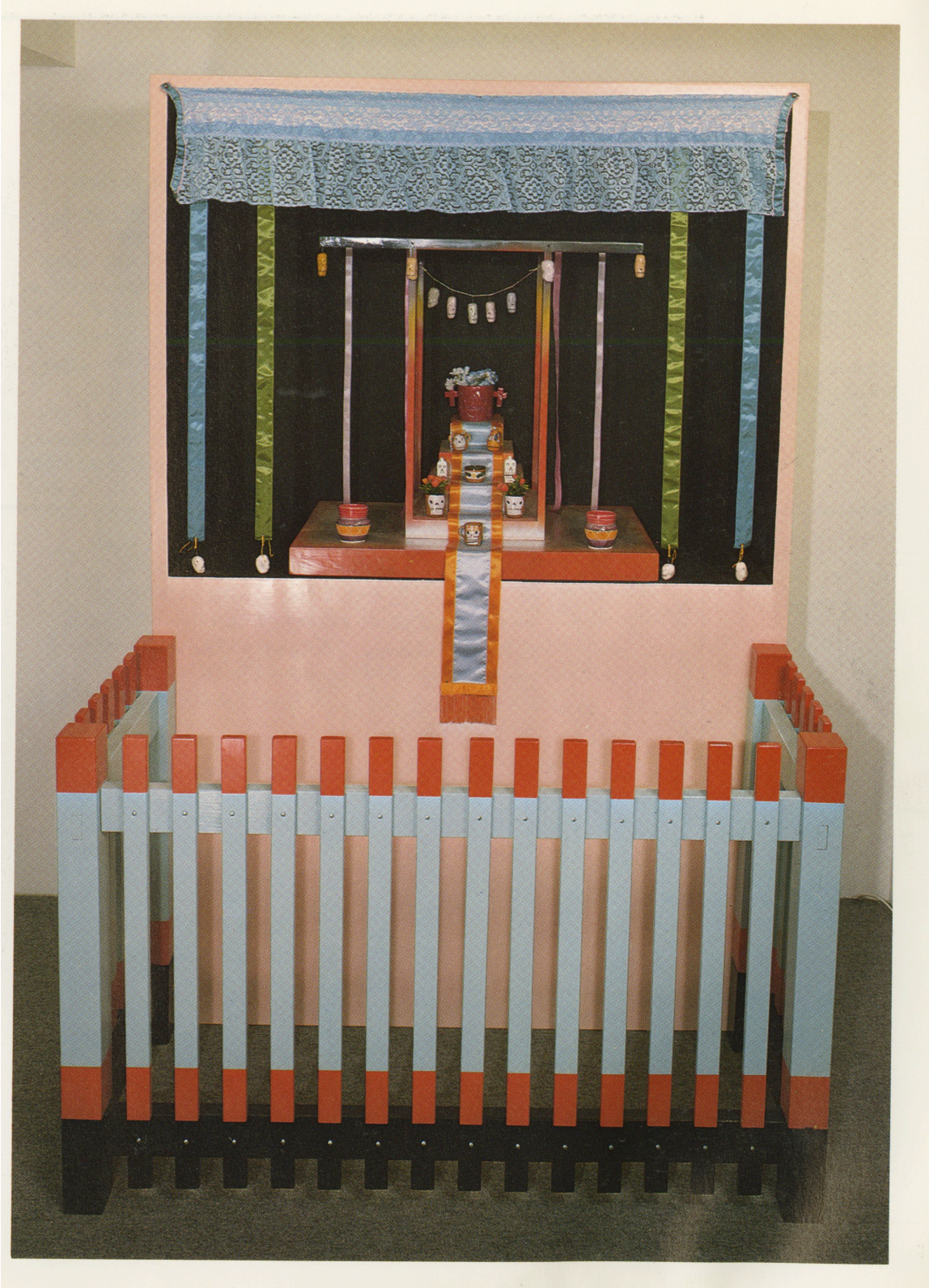

Figure 15. Ken Price, *Death Shrine 2*, 1972-77. Mixed media, 84 x 55 x 48 in.

"Ken Price: Selections from 'Happy's Curios'" at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, "Directions" at the Hirshhorn Museum, and "Ceramic Sculpture: Six Artists" at the Whitney Museum of American Art and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Its appearance at such institutions indicates that Price's work was taken seriously, but when separated into pieces, the units are barely indicators of Price full vision. They lack the environmental experience and interrupt the total effect of the multiplicity of series. In truth, the LACMA show itself was only a symbol for what *Happy's Curios* was, but it was sufficiently complex that it was able to illustrate Price's ideas of serial production, and the total celebration of a type of ceramics, as well as raise the issue of how objects are classified as fine art, folk art, and craft. Separated, the loss of context results in muting Price's basic intention as an homage and an exploration of seriality, since one unit would show only one of his styles, and about twenty objects. With the different styles and borrowings from Mexican folk art, it was as if Price had been picking out fibers, one by one, and trying to bring them together to form a new thread. It was tenuous to begin with, and if the exhibition at the museum was already an unraveling of the project from its conception as a curio shop, it comes apart completely when split into different locations. The thread is no longer visible. Additionally, a unit alone amplifies the troublesome sense that it is just a collection of Mexican folk ceramic look-alikes, and lacks the conceptual tension that existed in the symbolic combination of objects not normally considered on the same ground.

Happy's Curios in Context

In the 1950s, his early years working with ceramics, Price was a member of the Otis group of students that, together with their teacher Peter Voulkos, broke away from traditional contemporary ceramics in which value was placed on truth to materials and production of functional wares. Voulkos worked furiously, freely, and expressively with the clay, producing large works that critics called Abstract Expressionist, though his work was essentially unrelated.[41] The core group was dynamic and energetic, worked long hours, and was extremely prolific. Price and the other members explored clay in an environment that freed them from traditional pottery practices but demanded high levels of skill through friendly but intense competitiveness, both between each other, as they tried to keep up with Voulkos's speed, and within themselves as they, like Voulkos, sought to always surpass their own expectations.[42]

Price was strongly influenced by Voulkos's style and, while his influence was not unwelcome, was so strong that his friends said he "was even walking like him for a while there."[43] Price left the program at Otis and enrolled at Alfred in New York, primarily because he disagreed with the dean, Millard Sheet's requirements for earning a degree in that program, but also he looked at the move to Alfred as an opportunity to get away from

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[41] The inclusion of the work of Voulkos and other ceramists as a vital, mainstream art form had critics feeling compelled to assign known values to it, like Abstract Expressionism, even if it wasn't entirely suitable. Sculpture was which as also routinely applied to all manner of works in clay, and in her 1979 article "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" Rosalind Krauss explores this idea in the field of post-modern architectural installations, and environmental and earth works. In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[42] Garth Clark, *American Ceramics: 1876 to the Present* (New York: Abbeville, 1987), 108.

[43] New York State College of Ceramics, *5x7: Seven Ceramic Artists*, 39.

his Voulkos's influence on him and his work.[44] At Alfred, he pursued an interest in developing glazes, particularly bright ones, which at the time were rarely used in ceramics. The style that he developed in the following years was the antithesis of what Voulkos was doing. Price began to work smaller and over time more meticulously, with pristine finishes and clear, saturated colors. (Figure 16) His recognition in the art world grew, and he showed his work at mainstream art galleries rather than ceramic or craft galleries. This may have been the result of Price's early alienation from the ceramics establishment. He may also have felt that his work would be better understood and financially more successful if placed in settings with a higher perceived value, value informed by the traditional elevation of fine arts over crafts, where crafts are clearly connected to market demands while fine arts are cerebral luxuries. This decision certainly reflects a conceptual separation between art and craft, an interpretation supported by statements like, "[t]here has to be content over professionalism. That could be the difference between art and craft…It's a matter of intention as well as result."[45] Professionalism speaks to the expectation in craft of high levels of skill. In *Happy's Curios*, Price's ostensible content or intention was the actual practice, or professionalism, that Mexican folk pottery entailed. Price was very sensitive to these considerations. Indeed, he had a deep appreciation for the craft as (or as well as) the intent, which *Happy's Curios* sought to highlight. He did not abandon traditional ceramic forms, frequently revisiting the cup form, and using it to explore the possibilities of clay with color and glaze. Color has been a continuing preoccupation for Price, using both glazes

[44] Price, "Ken Price: A Talk with Slides," 24.

[45] Price, interview by Joan Simon, "An Interview with Ken Price," 103.

Figure 16. Ken Price, *B.G. Red*, 1963. Clay with acrylic and lacquer.

and other color finishes such as enamels, to try to unify the color surface with the clay body so that they read as a single, indistinguishable object.

Given his interest in joining form with color, together with his practice of creating unique and precious pottery pieces in which the individual piece was worked laboriously to its own distinct resolution, embarking on the *Happy's Curios* project appears as a complete reversal. In this project, he took on the pot as a vast, indistinguishable body, in which production, quantity, and the collective result were his emphasis, rather than quality and uniqueness of individual pieces. Additionally, he turned to decorative glazing, in which designs were conspicuously on the surface, rather than trying to eliminate that sense of a surface on top of the clay, as he had before and has done since. There was something very different at work in Price, based on the degree of his departure from previous styles. His move to Taos, the utopian aspects of his project—these represent major experiments in his self-conception and directions as an artist. This idealism was characteristic of the sixties, and gradually dissolved through the seventies, leaving a more jaded society, very much like Price's experience with *Happy's Curios*.

Still, there were themes that were continuous with his earlier work. For example, he said of the cup that it "essentially presents a set of formal restrictions—sort of a preordained structure. If you buy it, then you have a lot of freedom within that, which I like."[46] This echoes what he said about serial production in Mexican folk pottery. In their limited range of forms and designs, there was the possibility for freedom. Following his move to Taos, Price continued to produce works that focused on color and the cup form,

[46] Price, "Ken Price: A Talk With Slides," 26.

such as his deconstructed, geometric cups in brightly colored glaze and acrylic finishes, some of which date as late as 1974, but his time was increasingly devoted to what would become *Happy's Curios*. (Figure 17) He continued to participate in exhibitions, having numerous solo and group shows from the *Happy's Curios* years, 1972 to 1978.[47] A few pieces from the "Happy's Curios" show at LACMA reflect the style of cups that he had been working on since before his move to Taos, such as the *Square 3 Leg Cup* and the *Indian Nosecup* from *Indian Unit*, as well as other similar pieces from the project that were not included in the exhibition. (Figure 18) The geometric cups were formally quite

Figure 17. Ken Price, *Untitled Cup No. 8*, 1973-74. Clay with glaze, 3 x 4 x 4 in. and 2 ½ x 1 x ½ in.

[47] Price's inventory of selected exhibitions on his website lists eight solo and ten group shows from those years. Ken Price, "Ken Price, Contemporary Art Studio and Gallery," Ken Price, http://www.kenprice.com/bio_ page.php?biopage=solo and http://www.kenprice.com/bio_page.php?biopage=group (accessed February 4, 2011).

different than earlier works by Price, but they were in keeping with his interest in the cup as a point of departure for ceramic explorations. In the late sixties he produced a series of cups on which the lower third was like a mound that raised up, unseparated from the surface that it rested on, grounded in a solid, broad footprint. That lower portion would often be an organic form accented by some living form, such as a nose or a snail, or occasionally the mound was the creature itself. None of the cups in *Happy's Curios* have such an exaggerated base, however some of the cups, particularly those in the *Indian Unit*, have similar proportions with regard to the height of the curved bulge of the body and the longer, cylindrical neck, or with a nose shape protruding from it. Overall, cups represent the largest proportion of objects, with nearly as many cups as any other object, including all vases, tiles, and skulls.

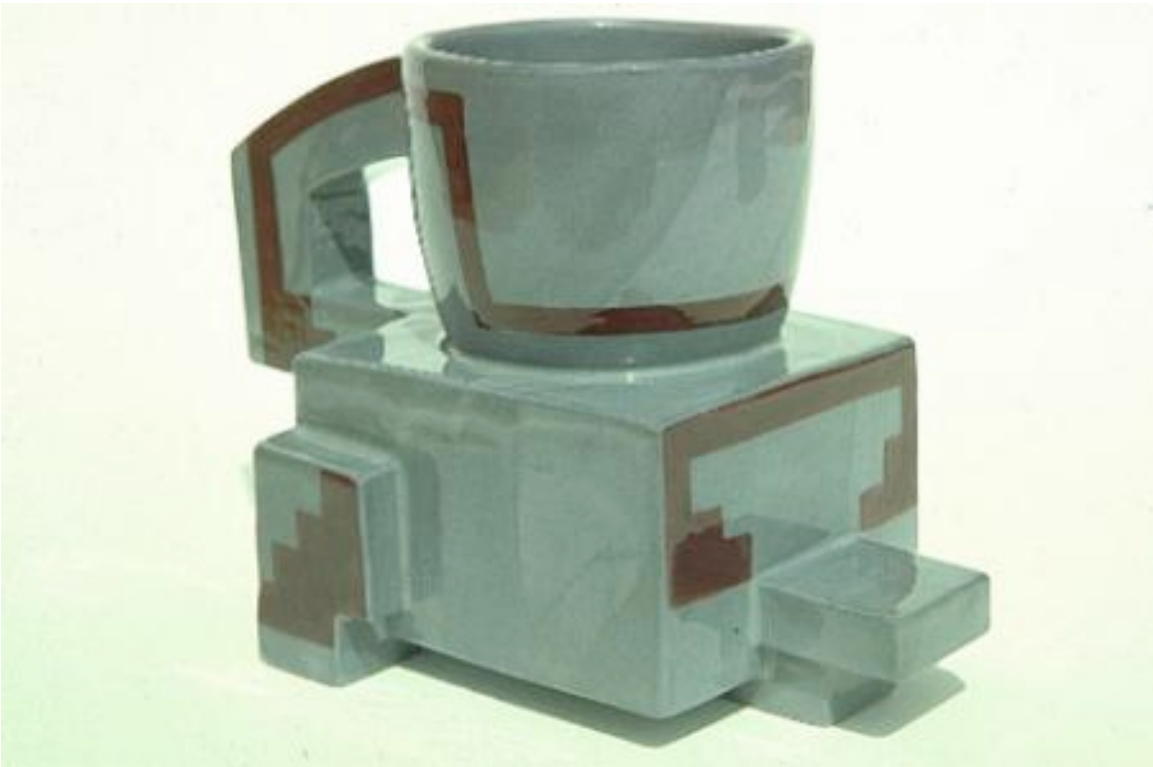

Figure 18. Ken Price, *3 Leg Cup*, n.d. Ceramic, 4 x 4 ½ x 3 in.

When *Happy's Curios* was over, Price picked up exactly where he had left off and returned to making the geometric cups for a time, though he soon moved away from the purely geometric forms, and away from the cups entirely. His subsequent forms have been increasingly more organic, and while early ones retain some of the solid, brilliant colors and pristine finishes of the geometric forms, they make almost no reference to the vessel, save for a small opening to a dark interior cavity, which eventually disappeared, or to *Happy's Curios*. (Figure 19, Figure 20) Today Price gives the clear sense that, while his admiration for the work of the Mexican potters has not lessened, the project itself is like a bad memory. He has spoken of running out of money, drinking too much, his inability to complete it with the curio shop, as envisioned, even that it was misery and if he had it to do over, he wouldn't. When it was over, he says that he was "wiped out in every way."[48] The preoccupation with the cup changed, Price says, when he gave up coffee and alcohol, so the "primal connection" was lost.[49] For many, clay is primal based on its connection to earth and fire. For Price, the connection is in the physical use. This again demonstrates the important of function in the making of his pieces, to the extent that if he can't use them, he won't make them. The formal restrictions alone do not provide the inspiration.

Other elements of *Happy's Curios* are continuous with his previous work, such as the two-dimensional works. He had a few previous shows that focused on these works, and others, like "Happy's Curios," have included pieces as compliments to the ceramic works. These two-dimensional drawings are related to the surface decoration of the wares

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[48] Price, interview by Joan Simon, "An Interview with Ken Price," 104.

[49] Price, "Ken Price: A Talk with Slides," 31.

Figure 19. Ken Price, *Tamed*, 1988. Painted ceramic, 10 ½ x 14 x 13 in.

Figure 20. Ken Price, *Hairless*, 1997. Painted ceramic, 15 ¾ x 18 ½ x 14 in.

and the designs of the rugs and posters. Both before and since the five-year period of production for *Happy's Curios*, Price has very rarely employed two-dimensional surface drawing on three-dimensional vessel forms. It has been overshadowed by and is contrary to his interest in marrying color with form, but it may also be that representational imagery is too literal. This would be consistent with the fact that he does not often show his two-dimensional work, and with his overall discomfort with the *Happy's Curios* project and his choice to never repeat a project like it again. Abstract forms are not so easily read and don't run the risk of revealing too much, or committing the artist to any particular statement or viewpoint, as a project like *Happy's Curios* does.

Another aspect of his work that initially seems adjunct to his ceramics but that he had employed consistently, particularly through the 1960s and 1970s, is the lavish attention paid the base of or box that contains the ceramic piece. This practice recalls Constantin Brancusi, whose work he admires, and who was also interested in folk arts. Though he claims it was not conscious, he had certainly absorbed the influence. Works such as his "Specimens" from the mid 1960s were ceramic forms in the style of his so-called egg forms, that were then somehow nested or contained in a box that was as much a part of the work as the ceramic object itself. (Figure 21) This tendency repeated itself, large and small, in Happy's Curios, with its carefully planned wooden units, shrines, and the periodic boxes and cases throughout the galleries holding individual objects such as the *Inca Self Portrait*. (Figure 4)

Price's use of color, industrial paints, and other media outside of clay and glaze demonstrate his remove from the mainstream of studio ceramics in the United States,

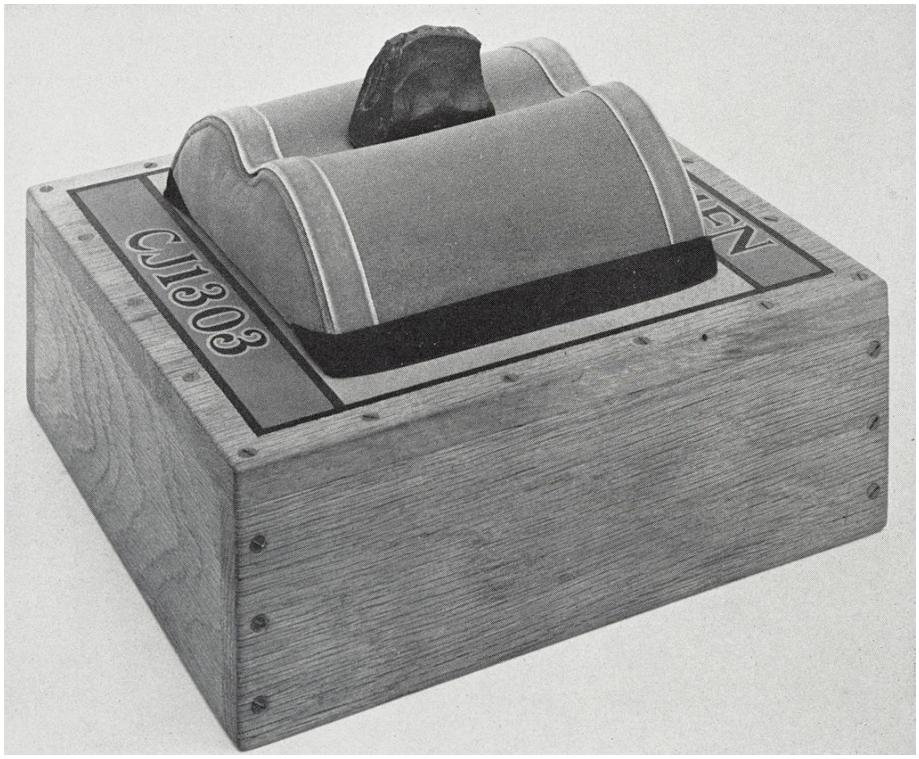

Figure 21. Ken Price, *Specimen CJ1303*, 1964. 12 in.

which had been dominated by an ideology towards which he was largely antagonistic. The country had long operated according to the "Alfred tradition," named after the State University of New York at Alfred where Price earned his MFA in 1959. Founded in 1900, and the oldest university ceramics program in the country, Alfred had promulgated the emphasis on classical form, restraint, craftsmanship, and truth to materials. Another significant influence was British potter Bernard Leach, who in the 1940s introduced potters in the United States to Japanese aesthetics, with its spontaneity and asymmetry. The craft world embraced this new sensibility, but Price viewed the tradition as entrenched classicism and increasing academicism. Adherence to the Alfred aesthetic and "crafts-dogma hell" frustrated him greatly.[50] He has voiced his dissatisfaction with the

[50] Price, interview by Drohojowska-Philp, "A Life in Clay."

teachers in the universities at that time, potters such as Laura Andreson at the University of California at Los Angeles, Carlton Ball at the University of Southern California, and Otto and Vivika Heino at the Chouinard Art Institute, all schools where he took classes. While each had his or her own approach to ceramics, they espoused restraint, the idea that form should follow function, and truth to materials.

While formal connections between Price and his predecessors are not readily apparent, similarities to their philosophies and interests do appear in his work and thought. Throughout his career, Price incorporated the more conservative values and lessons of American studio ceramics, but did not consider the pursuit of these to be an end in itself. Like the cup form, they were a framework, through which he could explore his own creative and expressive ideas. The legacy of American ceramics reveals itself in his work and principles through such qualities as his expert craftsmanship, though he emphasizes that craftsmanship is not the goal, but the means to achieve his expressive needs—content over professionalism. Critics constantly refer to the excellence of his technique, as Tuchman commented in the "Happy's Curios" catalogue, his cups "are patently made to be held—they feel better to grasp than any cup I've ever held."[51] From *Happy's Curios* one can also see that he does not reject the history of ceramics and its traditional forms: vases, cups, plates, bowls, etc. Neither does he reject functionality, for while the objects included in the "Happy's Curios" exhibition were always destined for display rather than use, he brought each one to full functional resolution. He also shared with many of these potters an interest in Japanese culture and ceramics, which he counts

[51] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, 11.

among his important influences, even in *Happy's Curios*, where the death shrines' vertical side posts support a projecting lintel, related in form, if not overall feeling, to Shinto shrines. (Figure 22, Figure 23)

Other ceramists had similar ideas and interests as Price, such as Glen Lukens, who had taught the generation of Price's teachers, including Carlton Ball. Lukens had an interest in early Native American pottery from the New Mexico region, and in an article from 1936 he quoted Santa Fe novelist Mary Austin, saying that Native Americans had "for more than a thousand years trained the mechanism of the consciousness so that what they now do takes place independently of the conscious intelligence," a philosophy he deemed fundamental to creative practice.[52] His summary of their pottery practice sounds similar to what Price was interested in with the Mexican folk artists, and what Price said, many years later: "now I think of technique as a highway to the unconscious – of having enough technique to accommodate ideas as they flow in."[53] Paradoxically, that traditionalism and conservatism of American craft ceramics, towards which Price was antagonistic, was inherent in the Mexican folk art that he admired. It was within that very conservatism of form and style that he recognized and sought the looseness and freedom of their art. A significant aspect of what inspired him to do *Happy's Curios* could be found in ceramic lineage of his own academic training, however his interest only asserted itself in the context of a tradition foreign to him. Granted, he was holding the two traditions to different standards, one in which traditionalism via academicism was denigrated, and the other in which traditionalism as authenticity was honored. Be that as

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[52] Glen Lukens, "The New Craftsman," *Design* 38, no. 2 (November 1936): 39.

[53] Price, interview by Drohojowska-Philp, "A Life in Clay."

Figure 22. Ken Price, *Death Shrine 2* (detail), 1972-77. Mixed media, 82 x 55 x 48 in.

Figure 23. *Ginkakuji - Temple of the Silver Pavilion*, ca. 1482-90 BC, Kyoto, Japan.

it may, difference can be useful for seeing the familiar in a way that brings enhanced meaning to it, though sometimes it is revealing of truths that one would rather not see, as is the case with *Happy's Curios*.

As a ceramist, Price was still rooted in the history of his medium, but he was also participating in and responding to the larger context of the mainstream art world. His moment in ceramics was certainly not the first to engage the medium for creative purposes other than formal craft. To varying degrees, important figures in Modern art, artists like Gauguin, Chagall, Braque, Picasso, Miró, and Léger, worked in ceramics and, while clay was not their first or principal medium, they considered it to be a serious artistic endeavor. The connection to famous Modernists did not serve to free the medium from the general perception that it was a lesser art. In fact, while there is increasing attention paid to these parts of their oeuvre, they do not factor heavily, if at all, into their legacy as handed through surveys of art history. The reframing of history to include the non-traditional arts media happens as the field of contemporary arts has expanded to include non-traditional media, a change that Price had been part of.

In the contemporary art world of California, Price was part of the Otis group that had a major impact, not just on the ceramic arts, but on the vibrant art scene springing up around Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, of which Price was also a part. The Ferus group, which included artists like Ed Kienholz, Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, and Robert Irwin, among many others, had a major impact on galvanizing what had been a relatively sleepy and diffuse art scene in Southern California. Ferus focused principally on painting, but consistently showed the works of artists working in other media. Ken Price had three solo

shows at Ferus between 1960 and 1964, and also participated in group exhibitions there. The fact that he was a part of this group, at this particular moment in California, afforded him a freedom and level of respect in the art world that would not have been there at other times or places in the United States. The distance of California artists from the art hub of New York, and of ceramists from mainstream art in general, created conditions for artists to work in a more open field, receptive to different paths. Still, they were not entirely disconnected from larger art world trends.

In a general sense, Price's break from studio craft was akin to early developments of postmodern trends, which were moving away from modernist essentialism in which the object must reveal its function and materials through its form. While the aesthetic of Price's work was very different than many of the other artists of his time, he shared conceptual ideas with many, and found solutions to his own problems through related processes. One of the more immediate relationships is to Claes Oldenburg, *The Store* (1961), and Price's own desire to open a curio store. While this may have partially factored in his idea for a curio shop, the correlation was largely superficial. On the other hand, The Factory, the studio of Andy Warhol (whose first solo exhibition was at Ferus Gallery in 1962), bears a stronger connection with Price's own attempts to emulate the folk pottery factories, and his willingness to use pre-fabricated pieces and employ others to make the work, albeit on a much smaller scale than Warhol. In Warhol's first solo show, held at Ferus in 1962, gallery curator and director Irving Blum highlighted the soup cans as commodity by placing them on a shelf, a choice recalled in "Happy's Curios." Price's detachment from the importance of the hand of the maker is uncharacteristic of

the romantic view of the studio craftsman, and also relates to minimalist art. He would have been well aware of minimalist ideas through his friendship with fellow Ferus artist and Taos transplant, Larry Bell, whose work was included in the historic 1966 minimalist exhibition, "Primary Structures," at the Jewish Museum in New York. Although the baroque quality of *Happy's Curios* seems at odds with the minimalist aesthetic, Price was also interested in seriality and repetition. His interest in these had much to do with process and how it informed the creative experience, and in that way connected him to post-minimalist work. The feminist movement in art in the 1970s embraced craft media, albeit with fundamentally different concerns, and one year after "Happy's Curios," Judy Chicago's ceramic installation *The Dinner Party* (1979) exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Also following Price's exhibition was the popularity of neo-expressionist painters like Julian Schnabel, whose canvases were pastiches of previous painterly styles, sometimes incorporating pottery shards into his imagery. *Happy's Curios* may have been, as craft theorist Glenn Adamson suggests, the first postmodern ceramics, with its pastiche of ceramic styles and histories detached from their original meaning.[54]

Price shared in the general climate and attitudes of the art world in the 1960s and 1970s, however his work on *Happy's Curios* was formally dissimilar to previous works and movements, with its focus on ceramics and functional vessels, and its heavy Latin American influence. This connection, however, was complicated, as his use of those forms in the project both exposed and perpetuated attitudes that served to marginalize craft and folk art.

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[54] Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 54.

CHAPTER III

HAPPY'S CURIOS AND ITS INSPIRATIONS

Price has often said *Happy's Curios* was made as an homage to Mexican folk pottery, but he acknowledges that much more than that country's ceramics informed his project. This chapter will offer a formal analysis of the influences on *Happy's Curios*, considering those referenced in the exhibition catalogue and in interviews with the artist, as well as suggesting other unnamed sources of inspiration. It will also contrast his production process with those of the Mexican folk potters whose processes he was emulating. Within the range of Mexican folk arts, Price most frequently references ceramics from Tonalá and Oaxaca, however he also speaks of experiences in border towns like Tijuana, and the color and character of the towns and landscape of the southwestern United States. Present in the shrines, and as well as his interest in cultivating and embracing accident as discovery, is his great respect for Japanese pottery. He drew from all of these sources loosely, and freely interpreted them, although it is possible to identify specific inspirations in some of the pieces in the exhibition at LACMA. An examination of how these sources are translated in *Happy's Curios* will highlight how Price's show engages the taxonomies of folk, craft, and fine arts in relationship to the issues of cultural representation and appropriation.

Mexican folk pottery from Tonalá and Oaxaca are the inspirations Price most often mentions, and also the most obvious. (Figure 25, Figure 26, Figure 27) Although there are recognizable formal similarities to pottery from these regions, not all of his styles can be traced to those places, or indeed, any one region. The scope of his interest in

Mexican pottery includes the shops where they were sold, like those in Tijuana, which he references through his curio shop plans and his exhibition design at LACMA. The influence of the southwestern United States was from both the natural and the cultural landscape, such as the indigenous ceramic traditions, and aspects of Mexican culture that persisted in the area, such as the roadside shrines, iconography, and even a local business.

"The Sleeping Boy," a store in Taos, factored into his project in several ways. It is no longer in business, but when he moved to Taos in the 1970s, the proprietor supplied the shelves of the store with a stockpile of 1950s ceramic wares from Tonalá and Oaxaca.[55] (Figure 24) This would likely have stirred up Price's memories of the wares and shops from Tijuana. The idea of a shop, which the name *Happy's Curios* reflects, is also significant. He often casually refers to the entire project as "the Curio Shop" or "the

Figure 24. Stephanie Barron, *Untitled,* n.d.

[55] Price, "Ken Price: A Talk with Slides," 27.

Curio Store." The term *curio* has been in common use in the United States and Mexican border areas throughout the twentieth century, and is still used today, so it is not unusual that he would choose that word. The historical origins of the term, however, are interesting and pertain to this project. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a curio as a decorative object that is unusual in some way. The word *curio* first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century and derives from *curiosity*, the emotion that such an object would heighten.[56] The cabinet of curiosities or *wunderkammer*, a room where such objects were collected and displayed and the precursor to the modern museum, dates back to the Renaissance. The objects in such rooms were highly varied, ranging from natural artifacts to art objects. They were objects that often defied categorization based on contemporary European standards due to unfamiliarity with the material and creative output of non-European cultures. There are reverberations of the Renaissance cabinet of curiosities in Price's "Happy's Curios," in part because of its location in the museum as successor of wunderkammer, but also because of its wide assortment of objects of a culture other than the locally dominant one. Here too the objects defy contemporary logical understanding. In this case, the confounding of sensible categorization on the part of an analytical viewer is not due to the fact that one doesn't know the cultures, but because one cannot know the cultures, since they are collected and reprocessed through Price to become something new. In his book on craft theory, Glenn Adamson makes the point that just as colonialist curios on display were (violently) decontextualized, so too are the ceramics in Happy's Curios transformed from their humble and functional origins to a "spectacular

[56] Merriam-Webster, "curio," http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/curio (accessed February 8, 2011).

commodity," reified by their presence in a museum and rendered non-functional in their displays.[57]

Sources of Form

To illustrate the formal relationships of the *Happy's Curios* project to Mexican folk ceramics, an analysis of *Unit 4*, a white painted cabinet with shelves of equal depth supporting four rows of four cups each, will provide a clear comparison, since the graceful brushwork on those cups clearly related to decorated pottery from Tonalá. (Figure 25, Figure 26, Figure 27) However, when one examines Price's work next to an example from Tonalá, it becomes clear how little direct borrowing of the iconographic elements there is. For example, the scalloped edges of the typical Tonalá style flower are transformed into rounded blooms bobbing on thick stems, looking like something between an eyeball and a peacock feather. Some have crosshatching, which is typical of the *petatillo* (crosshatched) style of pottery from Tonalá, though Price executed his in black rather than white, and exaggerated its size.[58] His decorations retain the vegetal imagery typical of Tonalá pottery, as well as the natural color palette, with slight differences, utilizing yellow in addition to the traditional green, black, white, and red. What Price has done here is perhaps just what he set out to do: he familiarized himself with the manner of decoration so completely that he was able to fluently create his own language. The cups read like cups from Tonalá, but the patterns and forms of the vessels are Price's own. Like their decoration, they are reminiscent of Tonalá pottery, but do not

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[57] Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 54.

[58] Isabel Marin de Paalen, *Alfarería Tonalá*, Jalisco en el Arte (Guadalajara, Mexico: Planeación y Promoción, 1960), 30.
The word *petatillo* derives from Nahuatl and refers to the crosshatched decoration.

Figure 25. Ken Price, Works in progress, n.d.

Figure 26. Ken Price, *Unit 4* (detail), 1972-77. ceramic and painted wood, 66 ½ x 23 x 20 in.

Figure 27. Pablo and Javier Ramos, Tonalá cups, 1991.

duplicate traditional shapes. Formally, the style of *Happy's Curios* seems to represent a literal and figurative re-processing, in which his engagement of process contributes to the overall look as much as his aesthetic choices.

Like *Unit 4*, most units are internally consistent in their decorative style, but where *Unit 4* only contains cups, others have a greater variety of vessel forms. *Town Unit 3* exhibits variety in form and is the only one that exhibits variety in its decorative style. (Figure 28) One row of cups is very like those in *Unit 4*, however the decorations on the rest of the pieces—vases, cups, bowls, and plates—are similar to each other, but very different from the Tonalá style. Apart from the previously mentioned cups, all are painted with simple, pictorial designs on a smooth, creamy white ground that covers the pieces

Figure 28. Ken Price, *Town Unit 3*, 1972-77. Ceramic and painted wood, 70 x 39 x 20 in.

inside and out. Illustrations of cactus landscapes on the vases along the top shelf appear nearly identical, however there are slight variations in the designs and vase forms. The cactus motif repeats on the bowls and plates, but each shelf down moves progressively from the natural to human landscape, with the plates sitting flat on the bottom shelf dominated by a scene of a town. The variations between designs are not immediately apparent, but the progression from nature to man indicates the care and intention with which he planned and assembled the units. With regard to formal sources for *Town Unit 3*, apart from the Tonalá cups, they are more ambiguous. The shapes of the vases relate to lidded jar shapes from the Talavera tradition, however the shape is too generic to make a definitive connection. Furthermore, the vast amount of white space on Price's pots is inconsistent with the complexity of design and horror vacui common to the Talavera style. The emptiness and representational imagery are more suggestive of designs from Patambán, Michoacan, while the townscapes pictured could be connected to Mexican votive paintings. (Figure 29)

Figure 29. Votive picture, n.d. Olinalá, Mexico.

Decoratively, the effect of *Tile Unit* recommends itself more closely to the Talavera tradition, though for it too, one could find a multiplicity of sources, like a Rorschach inkblot. (Figure 30) The surfaces of this wooden unit are covered in colorful glazed tiles that could reference the tiles so closely associated with the Talavera tradition, but with the intricate patterns abstracted into brightly colored spots. Other pieces in that unit are patterned with freeform drips, splatters, and splotches of glaze, and while it could be "Mexican-Jackson Pollock" as Maurice Tuchman writes in the catalogue, or perhaps Seurat, much more likely that he is drawing from Mexican styles. A few of the pieces correspond in style to *Unit 1*, and to *Vase with Green Handles*, for which Price was certainly working from the *chorreada* or drippy style of glazing popular in Oaxaca, one of the regions in Mexico that he frequently spoke of.[59] (Figure 31) *Tile Unit* represents the array of varieties of the chorreada pottery, from runny drips to large blotches. Price plays up the colors to an optically dazzling effect, together with the confusion of spatial recession and the fractal qualities between the tiles, plates, and planters. He has made conscious and deliberate aesthetic decisions that go beyond borrowing or reprocessing, and yet even describing the unit, with its vibrant color and play, sounds like a description of the "color" of Mexican culture. Tuchman's comment seems to somewhat miss the point, orienting the show towards a contemporary art world and Price's historic association with the Otis group that was often labeled as Abstract Expressionist. While it is not wrong to say that Price's work was related to contemporary art trends, such relationships, as in this project, were rarely obvious.

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[59] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, 10.

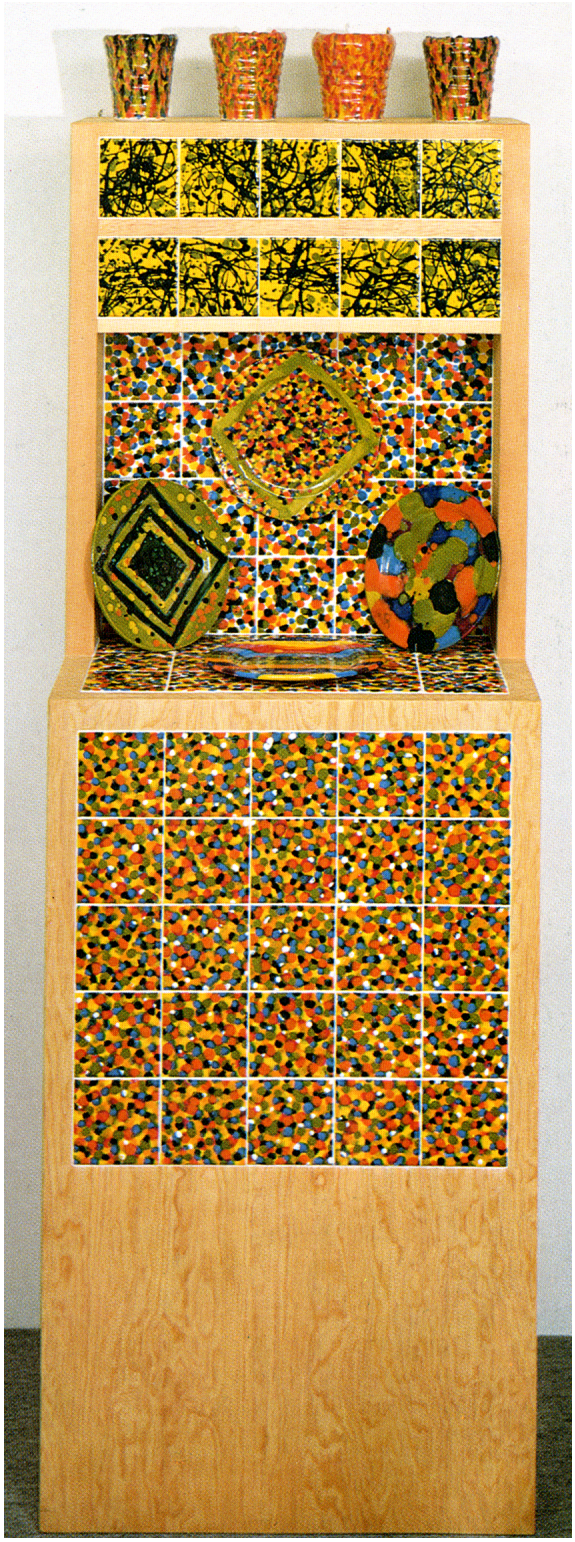

Figure 30. Ken Price, *Tile Unit*, 1972-77. Ceramic and wood, 69 ¾ x 24 ¼ x 20 ⅛ in.

Figure 31. Ceramic Tea Set, 20th century. Oaxaca, Mexico.

Even with his veneration of Mexican folk art, Price's installations stop short of saying that each ceramic piece is art, framing them as "units" of similar objects and focusing on a single object only in a few cases. One of the few pieces that stands alone, showcased in a lighted niche, behind glass, and flanked by carved Solomonic columns, is the *Inca Self-Portrait*. (Figure 4, Figure 32) In isolating and elevating the piece, Price confirms the generally accepted qualification of ancient, courtly arts, like Incan art, as high art. This underscores the issues with conventional application of taxonomic labels in art. Part of the way in which it does so is in its own application of the historical load in these categories. *Inca Self-Portrait* is a stylized figure jug, whose neck is the head, painted with eyes and a mouth, a protruding bulbous nose, and handles for ears. On the belly of the jug is a rough circle of glaze (in contrast to the rest of the unglazed pot) and an abstract geometric shape, out of which projects a penis. Though Price names the pot as Incan inspired, it also suggests the erotic pots of the Moche or Chimú cultures, ancient

Figure 32. Ken Price, *Inca Self-Portrait*, 1972-78. Ceramic, 8 ½ in.

Peruvian civilizations that predated the Inca. (Figure 33) Additionally, it resembles more humble ceramic jugs found in Mexico, produced for tourist consumption. Pulque jugs from Metepec are very similar, with their more stylized round bellies, and necks that are modeled to be the head of a person or animal. (Figure 34) The basic form of this "self-portrait" is repeated, with different details and glaze, for pots on the *Indian Unit*, and on *Death Shrine 3*. (Figure 35) Even this object, its supposed Incan inspiration (mis-)named, remains ambiguous. Its formal and symbolic attributes can be tied to other sources than what Price named, and the repetition of its form in other parts of *Happy's Curios* prevents it from becoming a fixed and stable icon of high art of antiquity. The wooden columns

Figure 33. Moche erotic figural vessel, ca 500-700 A.D., Peru.

and frame around the *Inca Self-Portrait* showcase window recall eighteenth century mission altar screens, such as those of Mission San Jose in Laguna or San Francisco de Asis near Taos, both in New Mexico, Price's state of residence. Whether or not Price was referencing church altars typically classified as folk art, the rusticity of his frame and columns have a folk sensibility, in contrast to the formal display of the Incan-inspired pot. With such ambiguities, Price dances back and forth between fixing objects within traditional expectations, and then unsettling their placement by repeating them elsewhere in form, if not name, creating an environment that challenges what labels exist, subtle or explicit, and what they communicate. Also interesting is his choice of an erotic figure referencing a civilization, once with great power and influence, but that was destroyed by Western colonial expansion. Price styles himself as the Incan, whose erect penis could be seen as Price's raw, personal potency, that has been rendered impotent, sealed behind the glass of the mainstream museum. This may be a fair characterization of Price's feelings

Figure 34. Pulque jug, n.d. Metepec, Mexico.

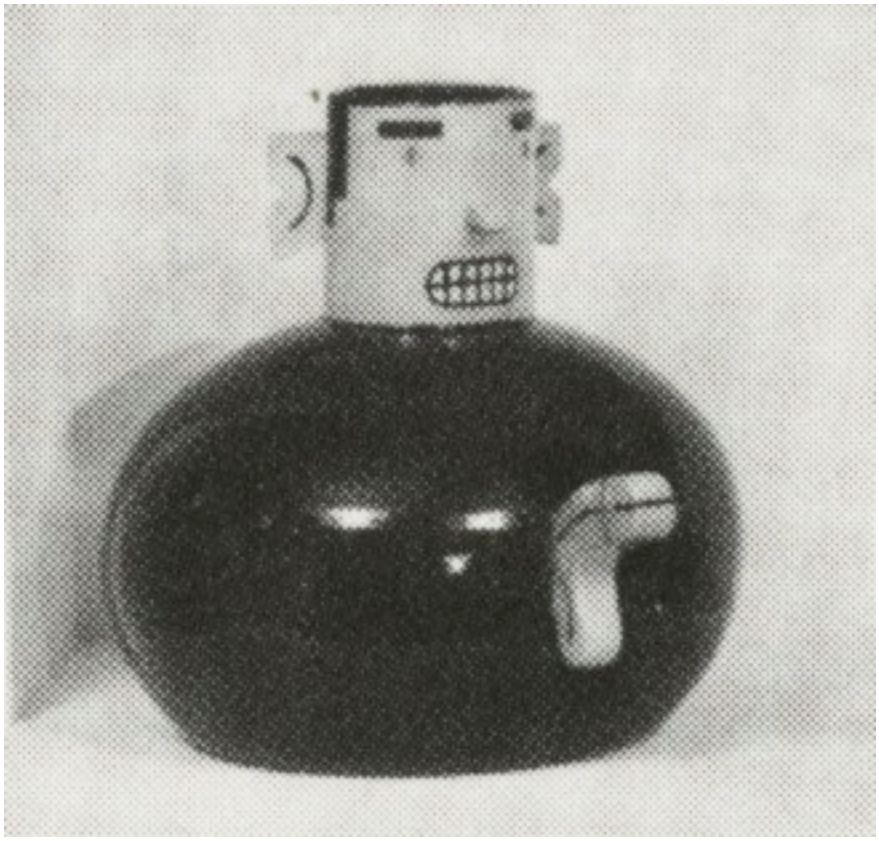

Figure 35. Ken Price, *Inca Crank Vase* from *Indian Unit*, 1972-77. Ceramic, 9 in.

about the project, or about the art world in general, but there is a conflict in it as well, with Price as the progeny of Western colonialism, and himself is a colonizer, taking for his own purposes what belongs to someone else.

As this selective survey of pieces from "Happy's Curios" demonstrates, there is little overall coherence of Price's style or styles, either within the units or in relation to outside influences. With so many possible sources, the entire effect could be read as a careful construction of the reality of the curio shop or tourist shop, where so much work ceases to be comprehensible in any systematic way and regional variations are less important than the ready availability of aesthetically pleasing and exotically satisfying objects. It comes across as inconsequential that the *Indian Unit* references Pueblo ceramics of the southwestern United States, or that the *Inca Self-Portrait* derives from South American cultures, in light of the poster and large wool wall hanging at the entrance to the exhibition that are emblazoned with "Mexican Arts," blanketing multiple cultures under one banner. (Figure 8, Figure 14) In doing this, Price may have been critiquing the tendency to lump arts together under one artificial category, without recognizing the vast differences between them, commenting on the historical tendency to do the same with all traditional craft media. Ultimately, however the show seems to reinforce it, as numerous other pieces produced for the project are emblazoned with the words, "Mexican Arts." While paying homage to different traditions of Mexican folk artists and indigenous arts of the Americas by interpreting and synthesizing their designs, aspects of his show also undermine his respect and perpetuate the marginalization of such arts through the application of an artificial category not designed to acknowledge cultural

complexity and diversity. This is one of the pitfalls of labeling or categorizing objects, as the information in the label essentially tells others what they are seeing, such that they may not look at what is actually there or question what is being told and the authority of the voice that is telling it. The impulse to categorize and label objects stems from a desire to make sense of (and control) one's environment, but it creates a feedback loop in which the taxonomy that was created to bring order to knowledge begins to dictate and limit what can be known about the object.

A Comparison of Process

While Price greatly desired to have a culminating collection and public display of the work, the initial idea for what became *Happy's Curios* was not oriented toward the product, but rather towards a process. In terms of process, it was not a simple thing for him to negotiate the type of role-play he had set out to do, and in fact seems somewhat presumptuous. He was an established artist from the United States, equipped with some financial stability and the equipment and purchasing power necessary to keep him going, at least for a while. In contrast, most potters from a place like Tonalá needed income from their work on a day-to-day basis, usually as a supplement to their farming income. Clearly, the motivation and need was different. Price's fascination with Mexican folk art began in the 1950s, and at least up until the 1960s potters in Tonalá were collecting and preparing their own clay and glazes, primarily hand molding their pieces, and using a wood fired kiln.[60] The nuts and bolts of the process were also fundamentally different,

[60] Marín de Paalen, *Alfarería Tonalá,* 28.

with Price using purchased materials (though he had, until recently, made his own glazes), a pottery wheel, and an electric kiln.

Tonalá is now a suburb in the Guadalajara metropolitan region in Jalisco state, in central-western Mexico, however in the 1950s and 60s it was an isolated, and culturally conservative small town. In the mid-1960s highways increased accessibility leading to greater urbanization and population growth in Tonalá, and the 1970s saw the introduction of high fire kilns through the efforts of some highly skilled and ambitious potters from outside the community. The pottery with which Price was most familiar would have come from before this time. Tonalá was, then, a major pottery-producing center and had been since at least the seventeenth century.[61] Tonaltecans sustained themselves through a combination of agriculture, which was poor in the area, and pottery, which they produced primarily during the off months for agriculture. About half of the families in the town made ceramics, and each pottery was a family enterprise. Occasionally a family pottery would use hired help, but family members did most of the work. They were responsible for nearly every step and every material used, from digging and preparing the excellent local clay, making their own brushes, to building their own kilns. Potters purchased some prepared paints and glazes, or their constituent ingredients, rather than relying on local, raw materials. Goods were sold at weekly markets, where their wares were distributed to clientele from Guadalajara and beyond, while they in turn obtained industrialized goods brought from Guadalajara. (Figure 36)

[61] Ibid.

Figure 36. Tonalá market, ca. 1960.

This brief description of Tonalá and its community demonstrates the distance between these potters' reality and Ken Price's reality. How, then, did Price purport to be working with the same process? He purchased all of his materials, worked alone or with a hired assistant, used a wheel, and came from a position of privilege as a formally educated white male in the United States. In fact, in interviews he rarely mentions their living reality, and he does not romanticize it. Instead, he talks about them engaged in repetitive productions with basic tools, observations that acknowledge something of the conditions of their lives, but speak as much or more of their working process. It was, above all, the working process in which Price says he was interested, and how those processes engendered their decorative style. He believed that by engaging in certain ways of practice, he would be better able to approach his work with the same spirit. Further, it is evident that process, for him, was also not about technical duplication, since the pieces

he produced were variously wheel thrown, molded, and prefabricated ceramic blanks, while potters from Tonalá made mostly mold formed pieces, sometimes hand built, but never on a pottery wheel. It is true that other producing centers in Mexico at that time did use a wheel, but it was not the norm. Finally, his relationship to the market was entirely different. These Mexican potters would pack up and haul all of their wares to market (on their back, by donkey, truck, or bus), and sell at very low prices. Sometimes the purchaser was another individual buying for personal use, but often it was someone buying a quantity of pieces to take to an urban market, where they would charge much higher prices than what was paid the potter. Price, on the other hand, had greater knowledge of and control over the prices and destinations of his pieces. Finally, even concerning process, he worked quite differently from the potters, as he did not spend an entire life-time producing the same kind of cups, owl figurines, or jars. He produced great quantities of work during this time, but he varied them, and for him, a series might consist of as few as four pieces turned out with a similar form and decorative design. In the end, Price's project moved a little closer to the conditions of the Mexican potters than he would have preferred, giving up his studio and therefore sharing his home space, kids and wife, with his ceramics, and with money being tight and a more desperate attitude towards moving his wares in order to earn something for them. Still, the gulf between them seems vast.

These differences might be justifiable by recognizing that the material and social conditions of Mexican potters was not the part of the process in which Price was interested. As Tuchman writes, "he determined above all to make a body of work true *in*

spirit to the folk/cottage industry sensibility."[62] He was not actually trying mimic the apparent qualities of the makers or their work, but rather to access the machinery of the industry, which amounted to the unselfconscious, high-quality production of repetitive forms. His references to "authentic folk patterning" and the anonymity of the artists who "considered themselves to be factories" reveal his own participation in categorizing folk artists, whose work he admires, as paradoxically not being artists, even as he pays homage to their art. This is consistent with his display technique as well, which celebrates an idea more than individuals as producers of unique art pieces. What Price considers authentic is "the character of their stuff [which] didn't change for centuries, right down to the mid-1950s."[63] Tuchman goes on to say that Price "is sensitive to the final irony of his work as well: that he, like the well-meaning cultural societies that try to save local craft traditions, freezes these traditions, making them less authentic while keeping them functioning."[64] There is an apparent contradiction in Price proclaiming that they did not change for centuries, and Tuchman explaining that a frozen (unchanging) tradition is less authentic. In a practical sense, Price is not freezing the cultures so much as he is commemorating them, but his comment perpetuates the idea that in order to be authentic, their tradition must not change, in other words, it must be frozen. This has been a critical topic with regard to Mexican folk art and tourist art, as viewed in critic Ken Johnson's complaint about the Mexican government's policy of promoting and commercializing traditional folk arts, which resulted, he believed, in "simulations that no longer function

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[62] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, 8. [emphasis mine]

[63] Ibid., 7.

[64] Ibid.

as spiritual glue."[65] Price, in some ways, adheres to this in his repeated statements, which sound like both assurances and defenses, that these family potteries were not making art for the tourist trade. He is reiterating that in, order for the objects to be valuable, they must be somehow culturally or spiritually significant to the makers, or at least to the makers' countrymen. The reality is that whether these potters were selling their work to American tourists or to urban Mexicans; they were engaged in the economics of it, and were somewhat divorced from any real connection to the end product. Yet Price, who realized this, still placed value on it not being a tourist good, and on the product not changing. He and Johnson represent an attitude that demands that objects conform to outside expectations, which in this case primitivize the producers of folk art by thinking of or representing them as unchanging. Participation in the modern world violates expectations of the identity-less folk.

Price's imagery reflects and ambivalence about the role of identity and authorship in this project. One of his iconographic inspirations in *Happy's Curios* derives from the stereotypical imagery of the sleeping Mexican, as seen in the name and sign of the Taos store, The Sleeping Boy. (Figure 24, Figure 37) Price uses this stereotypical imagery of the sleeping boy on a few ceramic pieces and on the large rug that hangs in the entrance to the exhibition, making the icon one of the first things visitors see. The image of the sleeping boy is very common, and is also known by the more disparaging description of the lazy Mexican. I only mention this to acknowledge that association, but this was certainly not what Price intended to evoke. What this imagery does suggest is anonymity,

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[65] Ken Johnson, "With the Folk Being Globalized, What is Folk Art?" *New York Times* (August 16, 2002).

Figure 37. Fruit crate label, n.d.

the face always hidden under a hat. Some pieces picture men, and a few women, in various landscapes or townscapes, but none shows his or her face. Like so many elements of *Happy's Curios*, the meaning is ambiguous, shifting between the validation and critique of commonly held assumptions. Here, folk artists and remote cultures are anonymous, but the artist here is Price, and so it may be his own face he hides. Perhaps it is a reflection of anxiety, or even shame, that developed for him around the project, or a desire to have a presence but without defining himself. Even the title of the show, "Happy's Curios," denies him authorship, though his presence is still there by virtue of it bearing his wife's name. It is as if, in his approach to Mexican folk pottery process, he is also always turning away and not owning or facing what is in his project, and perhaps after all it is about laziness, referencing his own lassitude when it came to establishing his own position.

Among admirers of folk arts, many idealize or even fetishize the so-called primitive lifestyle and craft processes of rural or indigenous groups, and understand them only insofar as they represent that aspect of arts that is remote, anonymous, and traditional. Price was an admirer of folk art, and in the sum total of *Happy's Curios* as it was exhibited at LACMA, there are hints of conforming folk to its traditional definition,

but in terms of Price's own practice and commentary on the project, he does not seem confused about what interests him in the pottery. He may be reticent, but he communicates a clear focus on the pottery for its technical concepts and formal qualities, not as a cultural signifier. While recognizing Price's ideas behind the project, it is important to separate artist intent and understanding of the work from institutional context, where location and viewer provide additional meaning. What Price meant is one thing; what his work communicates in an institutional context and how it is received is another thing, as the next chapter examines.

CHAPTER IV

HAPPY'S CURIOS: THE ART AND THE INSTITUTION

Price's "Happy's Curios" exhibition is a useful case study for examining how contemporary art institutions, inclusive of museums, critics, scholars, and audiences, understand the categories of folk, craft, and fine arts, and what characteristics of object or maker serve as identifiers of those taxonomies. This chapter will examine the "Happy's Curios" exhibition in order to bring to light certain museum practices, including those of LACMA, with regard to how different types of objects are classified, and will examine the critical discourse surrounding this exhibition.

A history of the development of LACMA as an institution reveals, unsurprisingly, that the institution has long grappled with how to categorize objects, as any museum must. The decisions that that the museum made in its past are illustrative of the confusion that exists, and the multiple ways that objects are understood. At the time of the "Happy's Curios" exhibition, LACMA in its present form had existed for less than twenty years, though it had a longer history as one division of the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science, and Art, which was established in 1910. The Art Division had no collection of its own, but sought to build one that cut deep in time and was broad in scope, with a "proportionately equal representation of the various creations of art in any one epoch—sculpture, painting, and the many branches of decorative arts."[66] It is clear from this text that preference is given to sculpture and painting, demonstrating the conventional primacy of fine arts media in valuing the arts.

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[66] W.R. Valentiner, "Acquisitions of the Art Division of the Los Angeles County Museum, 1946-1950," *Los Angeles County Museum Bulletin of the Art Division* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1950): 3-4.

The internal divisions into history, science, and art would have required the museum to consider what was proper to each department. It was not always consistent, perhaps due to specific donor requests or other restrictions. Based on quarterlies that the museum began to publish in 1941, it appears that the museum assigned two-dimensional imagery from around the world, such as painting, prints, or drawings, to the Art Division, along with most European and American decorative arts. Costumes were distributed to both divisions. Most other non-Western objects, including metalwork, textiles, and unspecified "ethnological materials" were collected or exhibited by the History Division, with the exception of certain Eastern objects, such as Chinese porcelains and ancient Siamese bronzes. These categorizations demonstrate the museum's consideration of both culture and material in determining the proper place for acquisitions. Medium was a primary factor, as conventional two-dimensional works, regardless of culture of origin, belonged to the Art Division. In the 1940s the museum opted to abolish the divisions with regard to their public programming, although internally the divisions remained. In 1961 the Art Division was established as an independent museum, and in 1965 moved to its current location as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It brought with it the collection it had amassed since 1910, as well as the same goal for breadth and diversity that the Art Division had laid out at its founding.

Since the museum's mandate is written towards embracing a broad range of arts, LACMA's collection and exhibition history includes cultural, material, and conceptual diversity. Museum publications that highlight works from all areas of its diverse collection hint at the complexity of how different objects are categorized and offer a

sense of how LACMA itself conceived of these categories. The 1965 handbook shows a collection organized by culture, era, and medium.[67] A 1975 book on the museum's collection is organized by geography.[68] LACMA's mandate to work with "a broad range of cultures and historical periods" ensured a varied collection that did not lend itself easily to any sensible categorization, as the objects tend to straddle many different areas. LACMA was not an ordinary art museum by most standards, as it embraced such a broad range of visual media as art, more than many other contemporary art institutions. It held major exhibitions of art from non-European backgrounds along with modern and contemporary arts and crafts, however the latter were organized around author, as with the exhibitions by Price, while the former were not contemporary and were centered not on author, but on culture.

LACMA has organized or hosted relatively few exhibitions devoted to folk art. One could argue that the wording used in its current goal of collecting "*significant* works of art" predicts (or precludes) this. Two years before "Happy's Curios," the museum staged an exhibition called "Grass" (October 1976-January 1977), which focused entirely on folk art forms made with grass. In this regard it was like many craft exhibitions, in that its organizing principle was material, not culture. However, in addition to pieces that easily fit into the category of folk art (or craft, with their evident exceptional skill), the catalogue included images that suggested an ethnographic perspective, thereby extending folk art to the realm of material culture. That same year the museum hosted a show

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[67] Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Illustrated Handbook of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1965).

[68] Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *A Decade of Collecting, 1965-1975: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, April 8-June 29, 1975* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1975).

organized by the Brooklyn Museum, called "Folk Sculpture USA" (July-August 1976). Pieces from this show dated from the eighteenth century to as recent as two years before the show itself, making some of the pieces truly contemporary, which is not typical of most of the craft exhibitions at the museum. Since those exhibitions, LACMA has not does not appear to have held any major exhibition of works that would traditionally be considered as folk art, tacitly acknowledging the validity of the folk art category by it's selective exclusion.

As an independent institution, ceramics had always been included in programming at LACMA, having given exhibitions devoted entirely to contemporary, antique, and ancient ceramics since 1938. The museum held several exhibitions by ceramic artists like Price, Voulkos, and John Mason, and although Price was ambivalent about the museum's impact on art in southern California, he certainly benefited from the exposure afforded him by shows at LACMA.[69] Price's first show at LACMA was in 1966, with the painter Robert Irwin. In her catalogue text for that show, Lucy Lippard characterizes Price as an exception among ceramists, part of a small group with Voulkos and his protégés that managed to break out of the restrictions of ceramics as craft. From this position privileged to him by critical esteem, Price later brought craft, together with symbols of folk and non-Western art, in "Happy's Curios."

Having the "Happy's Curios" show at LACMA had the effect of changing the nature of his project with regard to his alleged intent; raising questions about the nature of medium, culture, and display; and revealing prevailing attitudes through the critical

[69] He suggested that the opening of LACMA formalized the Southern California art scene, robbing it of its unbounded vitality; cynically questioning "what are you going to do next, blow this place up?" Ken Price, Interview with Ken Price, Smithsonian Archives, 46.

responses to those same questions, in part by their omissions. Price's intent through most of the years of his production of wares for *Happy's Curios* was to open a shop, rather than have an exhibition in a gallery or museum. With a shop, the culmination of his efforts would have been more consistent with the rest of his project's relationship to its formal and conceptual sources. Unlike the museum setting, it would have echoed the experience of the wares in their final destination to a similar degree that his process echoed Mexican folk potters. A shop would also have created a different relationship between viewer and objects, since as a site it would not so readily have conferred legitimacy on the project. In such a situation, it would have invited a different kind of discourse, and possibly a more productive discourse. The art museum itself is a label applied to works, and therefore by siting "Happy's Curios" at LACMA, Price's objects are given to be art—museum-quality art. That is not to say that the viewer does not have his or her own agency to question such a label, but once given it affects one's perception. As it was, the exhibition at LACMA was a success with the public, based on the fact that the museum extended its run three times. Bernard Kester's review of the exhibition characterized it as joyful, upbeat, and "Happy," which is likely what made it so popular for a general audience.[70] It was colorful, comfortably familiar but with enough difference to still be novel. In a shop, the location, without the status of the museum, might led viewers, and critics, to consider more carefully what Price was doing in the project, why, and to consider the what implications it might have. In other words, it would have provided more space and

[70] Bernard Kester, "Kenneth Price" review of "Happy's Curios" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Craft Horizons* 38, no. 3 (1978): 57.

opportunity, free from the cultural load of the museum, for viewers and critics to question all aspects of what they were seeing.

In "Exhibiting Intention," Michael Baxandall outlines three principal agents in public art exhibitions: maker, exhibitor, and viewer.[71] In either the curio shop or "Happy's Curios" at LACMA, Price would seem to be both maker and exhibitor, since he played a lead role in planning. However, the museum itself also factors as an exhibitor. It is a place that has developed as an ostensibly secular site for "spiritual transformation and restoration," presumably in the presence of the transcendent artist-genius, and therefore giving inherent worth to the objects within it.[72] In addition to historical associations, certain display techniques have developed that, according to Carol Duncan, further sacralize the gallery space. Although Price was responsible for the overall installation of *Happy's Curios*, since it was essentially an environmental sculpture, dependent on the total experience for its success, he was working in tandem with the museum institution, and within practical and conceptual restrictions as well, such as which and how many galleries, and how to display the works. He used a combination of traditional exhibition strategies together with specific tactics designed to evoke the curio shop that he had originally planned. The show is unmistakably museological in character, with the white space around the units that displayed Price's wares and the white box of the gallery, both of which communicate that they are works of art. The design of exhibitions has a voice that; through wall tags and supplemental texts; plinths, pedestals, and vitrines; lighting,

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[71] Michael Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 36-7.

[72] Carole Duncan, "The Art Museum as Ritual," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 479.

grouping of objects, and so forth; directs and manipulates the experience and understanding of art. Baxandall notes that design elements themselves are labels: "a label is not just a piece of card, but includes the briefing given in the catalogue entry and even selection or lighting that aims to make a point."[73] The effects of such display choices are evident in pieces like the *Inca Self-Portrait*, as discussed in Chapter III. Additionally, Price's choice to isolate the units, not the ceramic pieces, signaled that it was not the individual object that Price elevated, but the idea that the units stood for. The ceramics and their wooden shelf, taken together as one unit, stand for the seriality associated with folk art by the repetition of decorative style internal to each unit, as well as the variety of forms in which it is made. Price was showcasing the quality and characteristics of folk art using formal museum strategies. At the same time, he was still attempting to evoke the Curio Shop. The display of wares on thoughtfully mismatched wooden shelves, the variety of the pots, both in form and decoration, the shrines and wall hangings that were part of the show, all recall something of the tourist shop that he would have grown up with in southern California, and seen during visits to Tijuana. He did not, however, aim to reproduce the experience completely.

Far from being a jumble of goods, the units were situated with ample space around them and were not meant to be browsed. The units insistently prevented any contact by means of low wooden fences surrounding them, keeping viewers at an arms length. (Figure 10) In an institution like LACMA, it was unlikely that Price was genuinely concerned that viewers would confuse their experience with a trip to a souvenir

[73] Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention," in *Exhibiting Cultures*, 37.

shop, so the fences then made a very deliberate point. This folk art *is* art. In "Happy's Curios," Price explicitly denies the functional, and the viewer's expected experience with Mexican folk art as accessible and functional. He offers instantly recognizable (though inherently different) objects assembled together on shelves, but isolated and distanced from the viewer and from each other. To some extent, Price participates in a history that bases class hierarchy in art on an object's degree of functionality. Emphatically denying use in his formal approach of elevating, isolating, and highlighting them suggests that functional folk forms have to be neutered of usefulness before they can be art. However we should not disregard the fact that, although the objects explicitly deny their function, they also explicitly reference their function: they are still cups, plates, and vases. And although in the studio Price distinguished between those that were for use and those that were for display only, it was important to him that all be fully resolved from a functional standpoint.[74] As with the *Inca Self-Portrait*, Price's projection of categories onto objects is constantly shifting and unfixed.

For Price, function provides an important level of meaning to pottery. Critic John Perrault argues that in addition to function, culture—the collective beliefs of a group of people—provides another level of meaning in craft, and that without function and culture there would only be the meaning of the artist's hand.[75] The "Happy's Curios" pieces do not fully realize either function or culture, with their artificial stripping of use through the enforced distances, and artificial manufacture of culture. For "Happy's Curios," culture is an important aspect, since its partial conformity to fine art standards throws into relief the

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[74] Price, interview by Joan Simon, "An Interview with Ken Price," 102.

[75] John Perreault, "It's Definitely Global But is it Art?" *Ceramics: Art and Perception* 47 (2002): 78.

differences in exhibition practices as they relate to culture. Additionally, the content of the show appropriates and conflates elements of cultures to which Price is only indirectly connected, though this is barely acknowledged. Instead the catalogue treats the *Happy's Curios* project itself as an ethnographic study of a remote culture, photographically documenting the artist, his habitat, the work in various stages of completion, planning drawings, and simulating a cultural artifact with an installation drawing for the exhibition printed on vellum. There is even a primitivistic topless female with a wooden skull dangling between her breasts from a string around her neck. The images of finished, individual pieces is overwhelmed by those oriented towards process, emphasizing how important process was to the project. The images and all the working drawings (signed and dated), also serve the purpose of reassuring viewers that there was a complex, creative process at work, reinforcing his status as artist genius, and taking care to show that the project was not mere copying of Mexican folk art.

Although the project relies on the appropriation of the art forms of other cultures, the museum text and critical responses do not address the issue of appropriation beyond acknowledging the sources. Analysis was mainly reserved for Price's intent, which critics interpreted as exhibiting the utmost respect for Mexican culture. A few critics dismiss parts of the show as tacky or kitschy and others defend against negative reactions that describe the show as exploitative or mocking.[76] Price refers to personal experiences with negative reactions, such as a visit from local silversmiths who were "prepped" to be hostile towards what he was doing. He believed that the men's displeasure came from the

[76] Muchnic, "Curios from the Home Folk"; Hilton Kramer, "Ceramic Sculpture and the Taste of California," Art View, *New York Times*, sec. D, December 20, 1981; and in Price's defense, Peter Schjeldahl, "The Most Beautiful Show in Town," *The Village Voice* (May 17, 1994).

perception that he was stealing and attempting to pass the work off as his own original.[77] Though Price understood how his work might be misconstrued, he expected and intended for viewers of an installation of his work to clearly understand the reference. He acknowledges that, out of the context of the exhibition, the pieces would be understood, as he phrases it, "a Mexican death shrine made by a white guy in a city that has a large Mexican population."[78] In this case, he refers to a piece that was in the collection of the Chicago Art Institute, which he expected that, for the reason discussed, would not be on view in the foreseeable future. In some instances, critical writing on "Happy's Curios" demonstrates a degree of insensitivity to the relationship between the category of folk art and marginalized cultures. Critics pick up on the "decorative clichés associated with tourist wares" but also point out that Price brings sophistication to the work.[79] Implicit in that is that the Mexican potters are unsophisticated, which is consistent with common expectations of folk art. In the catalogue, Tuchman is particularly severe in his appraisal, saying that comparing Price's work to a Mexican potter's work is akin to comparing a Degas dancer to a "dimestore ballerina."[80] Not only is the comment derisive, but it contradicts the spirit of Price's homage and the level of his appreciation for the work that he referenced. These examples again demonstrate that there was little official concern for the representation of folk and culture in this exhibit. Given that the exhibition appeared after a decade in which identity politics came to the foreground in society and art, it is

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[77] Ken Price, Interview with Ken Price, Smithsonian Archives, 101.

[78] Ken Price, "Ken Price: A Talk with Slides," 30.

[79] Kester, "Kenneth Price" review of "Happy's Curios" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 57.

[80] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, 10.

surprising that there was not a greater reaction than what is only hinted at by the critics. Their own failure to address the matter of cultural appropriation, whether in defense or critique, is perhaps attributable to it being overshadowed by the much more familiar and safe dialogue over art versus craft.

Discussions of Price's work never get far without bringing up the art versus craft issue in some way, which is indicative of how the art world still views ceramics. No matter what one does with the ceramics medium, it is always attached to its craft history. In the case of Happy's Curios, this is not an unfair connection, since Price is clearly referencing the history of ceramics as pottery, which Tuchman sums up in the first line of the catalogue: "Happy's Curios is a work of art about pottery."[81] Most critical responses repeat this refrain and expound on it to varying degrees. Critics are nearly unanimous in their appraisal of "Happy's Curios" as belonging to fine art. Peter Schjeldahl is the lone dissenter on this, insisting that it does the work a disservice by calling it art. His review clearly communicates his respect for "Happy's Curios," but draws the line at calling it art, instead suggesting that art is a moot point in this work. He writes that Price "sneaked his pottery into the museum as art, winning a place for it there as craft."[82] Still, he acknowledges "art" as part of the total project agenda, and his comment captures the conceptually nebulous quality to *Happy's Curios* that makes it such a provocative topic. In this tension between art and not-art, function and not-function, and the regrettably overlooked culture and not-culture, the project calls for a consideration of what

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[81] Tuchman, *Ken Price: Happy's Curios*, 7.

[82] Peter Schjeldahl, "Ken Price, Los Angeles County Museum" review of "Happy's Curios" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *Artforum* 17, no. 3 (1978): 79.

constitutes fine art, folk art, and craft. Ultimately, whether the show was successful as art or craft, it revealed the institutional body's discomfort in directly facing the matter of culture and medium as related to creator, medium, and subject matter. "Happy's Curios" was the product of a ceramic artist always tied to his craft associations by the critical world, but who had achieved acclaim in the fine art world, and who then turned around and gave the institution a folk art curio shop. Price, too, tried to avoid the issue directly, but through the show he exemplifies a general ambivalence and unease towards the acknowledgement and application of the taxonomies of fine art, folk art, and craft.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

"I did what we did in Vietnam at the end—I called it a victory and got the hell out."[83] Price considers the *Happy's Curios* project to be "a failed installation piece," fraught with problems. The show at LACMA marked the end for him, and he returned to exactly what he was working on before it began. Despite it being an anomaly in Price's career, and despite his own feelings about it as unsuccessful, it is worth focusing on because of the questions raised by its positioning within his ceramics oeuvre, his life and career as an artist, and within the larger institutional context, questions which call attention to the ways in which artists, critics, and viewers are conditioned by taxonomic definitions.

Price was privileged in his position because, unlike the Mexican folk potters whose practice he emulated, he was able to remove himself from his experiment in folk pottery practice at will. Glenn Adamson respectfully refers to it as a "daring hypocrisy" inherent in the project, it is a hypocrisy that Price is uncomfortable with, as evidenced by the ambivalence present throughout *Happy's Curios*.[84] Price sought to honor Mexican folk pottery, but he also cast the work and makers according to traditional definitions of folk art and artists. His relationship to craft was similarly divided. He was the product of a tradition that had been marginalized by the fine art hegemony, but that had also played a role in maintaining its own rigid border. Tradition has been a friend and foe to ceramics, giving it a rich history and an intimate human connection, but it has restricted free

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[83] Price, interview by Joan Simon, "An Interview with Ken Price," 104.

[84] Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 54.

expansion into other uses and means of expression. While ceramics and other studio crafts have made important breaks from traditionally imposed expectations, they have come more than a half century after painting and sculpture began to take great strides away from traditional strictures. Art institutions, out of habit and tradition, still exhibit uncertainty about how to approach art objects that spring from craft or folk art histories..

For Price and many of his contemporaries, views were changing towards the craft media, in no small part by their own activities; however, they were (and are) often saddled to the history of the medium of ceramics as a marginalized craft, which affected their reception in the art world. The ambivalence present in Price and *Happy's Curios* and the nature of critical response to the show are symptomatic of a discomfort with the categories that this thesis has returned to, and which Price's project integrates—fine art, craft, and folk art—and how they still inform the ways in which different objects are treated. It is not without reason that we use these categories, but it is always worth examining how and why. *Happy's Curios* was largely without a hierarchical agenda, intending to honor the ceramics of Mexico, but it also inadvertently perpetuated the marginalized, otherized status of the work of such potters. Similarly, interested critics have been particularly prone to perpetuating the sense that crafts media is still somehow apart, by virtue of material alone. Many art critics have been concerned with the opposition of fine art to the areas of craft or folk art, some wishing to uphold it and others to dismantle it. Even for people who do work that seeks to sidestep or dismantle it, like Price, deeply ingrained assumptions continue to support it, such that when the inherently unstable boundary shows signs that it is shifting, the reaction is to rush to point out the

disturbance. This has the result of keeping attention focused on the fact that there is an opposition, which may distract from other issues raised by projects like *Happy's Curios*. Such pitfalls are, in some ways, useful to the project as I have framed it, for their illustration of how insidious taxonomic associations can be, even with the best of intentions. *Happy's Curios* is a microcosm of the art world, exhibiting a range of cultural objects within the fine art, folk art, and craft taxonomy that artists, curators, critics, and audiences interact with, which viewed together can help to illustrate the necessity of carefully considering why and how we understand those objects and the relationship of our understanding to their classifications.

The Taxonomy in Today's Institutions

More than thirty years after the "Happy's Curios" show, Ken Price is still working in ceramics, though it has been a long time since he has done work referencing the vessel, or even his beloved cup. Nonetheless, contemporary critics, almost without fail, identify him as a key individual in bridging the art and craft divide. In 1997 Peter Schjeldahl archly dismissed these categories relative to Price, calling them "blah blah," as if the matter merited no serious words, and writing "it's as if he crossed a bridge and burned it, then buried the river."[85] While that may be true internal to Price's art practice, the same cannot be said of the rest of the art world in relation to his work. In 2007-2008, LACMA included a 1997 piece belonging to Ken Price, *Echo*, in the exhibition "SoCal: Southern California Art of the 1960s and 70s from LACMA's Collection" (August 2007–March 2008, curated by Carol S. Eliel). (Figure 38) The wall label for this piece reminds viewers

[85] Peter Schjeldahl, "Ken Price's L.A. Edge" *Art Issues*, no. 48 (Summer 1997): 79.

that the object is clay, but that Price is not using it for craft. "Price uses clay not to create conventionally functional objects but to engage with the formal and conceptual concerns of painting and sculpture."[86] By pointing out that it is not craft, the museum curators may be responding to a concern that viewers' preconceptions will dismiss clay as not-art, and they are trying to proactively reframe the piece by explaining that this is not the case. Although viewers may still harbor the preconception that clay art objects are in some way inferior, by explicitly engaging craft in supposed "concerns of painting and sculpture," the label actually serves to fix its marginal status relative to the traditional fine arts media.

Figure 38. Ken Price, *Echo*, 1997. Acrylic fired on ceramic, 12 x 26 ½ x 17 ¾ in. (Collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art).

[86] Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Collections," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=113275;type=101 (Accessed June 8, 2010).

While craft has factored heavily into programming at LACMA, folk arts have received little attention outside of exhibition catalogues.[87] For example the show "The Road to Aztlan: Art from a Mythic Homeland" (May–August 2001) included a variety of art: pre-Columbian, colonial, Chicano, and contemporary—high status works, either by contemporary reputation or great antiquity, and did not venture beyond what LACMA showed, customarily. The catalogue, on the other hand, was far more generous in its scope and included contemporary Pueblo textiles and Mexican ex-votos, suggesting that the objects were interesting and relevant to the exhibition, but did not merit wall-space in the museum.

Other recent shows historicize craft forms from non-European cultures, such as "Tradition as Innovation in African Art" in 2008 (January–November 2008, curated by Polly Nooter Roberts), whose most contemporary artists date from the early twentieth century, and "Pueblo Pottery 1800-1900" from 2010, to name just two. Contemporary studio ceramics, more strongly associated with authorship, has a strong presence at LACMA, but when the exhibit centers on a culture, particularly non-Western, the museum shies away from more contemporary works. Antiquity helps to erase identity and individuality, and fixes a culture as unchanging. Text on the Pueblo pottery show reinforces this further, saying that the production process "has been followed for centuries: digging the clay, gathering organic materials…"[88] The language is explicit about traditional production, and grammatically communicates through the use of present

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[87] This may be partially due to the fact that the Craft and Folk Art Museum has been operating just down the road from LACMA since the 1960s, and would be redundant, although it has not deterred the museum from exhibiting craft.

[88] Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "Exhibitions > Installations," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, http://www.lacma.org/art/ExhibInstallations.aspx#pueblo (Accessed June 8, 2010).

perfect continuous tense that their explanation of the production of pieces, the most recent of which dates from 1900, is valid to this day. An exhibition of contemporary pieces, without the protective distancing of age, might force an appreciation of Pueblo pots next to ceramists like Ken Price, which would then challenge the different standards applied to exhibits based on author versus those based on culture. Looking only at old objects, one avoids facing the problem of sensitively evaluating objects from a different culture, without appreciating them primarily for their otherness.

More recently, the questions of what we can call fine art, or folk art, or craft art, has been inverted with institutions like the Craft and Folk Art Museum (CAFAM) in Los Angeles, or the Museum of Contemporary Craft (MoCC) in Portland, Oregon. Both places show work by contemporary artists, and that may lead viewers to question what the criteria are for calling something craft or folk art.

An example of an exhibition that raises such questions was "Elusive Matter" at MoCC (November 2009 – January 2010). It pointedly challenged the traditional craft definition, which, as curator Namita Wiggers wrote, "in most cases, is understood to be a category of objects created through the transformation of raw materials by hand."[89] Instead of offering the viewer tangible, hand-made objects, the exhibition featured films (a medium not associated with craft) by three artists, Lauren Kalman, Mark Hursty, and Jane Aaron. The showed, respectively, a rough gilded tongue "case," molten glass dripped into water, and animated pieces of paper. (Figure 39) MoCC claimed these films as craft because they were about the transformation of objects, however the question

[89] Museum of Contemporary Craft, "Elusive Matter: Jane Aaron, Mark Hursty and Lauren Kalman," Museum of Contemporary Craft, http://mocc.pnca.edu/exhibitions/1281/ (Accessed February 4, 2011).

remains, why locate these non-objects in a craft museum? The easiest answer would be their media—metal, glass, and paper—since the objects referenced in the films were arguably not the result of highly skilled craftsmanship (saying nothing of the skills of the artists). In a further inversion of craft expectations, Jane Aaron's film, the medium least associated with craft, was closest to delivering a traditional craft product. Her production process involved the highly skilled manipulation of the "material" of her medium—light —and was presented to the audience as light, unlike Kalman and Hursty, who started with metal and glass and ended with film. Additionally, it was self-referential in that it was about light (as objects), just as *Happy's Curios* was in part, ceramics about ceramics. This shake-up of expectations continues the same project as *Happy's Curios*, in which the body of work challenges categories based on medium and their relationship to the institutional site.

Figure 39. Lauren Kalman, *Hard Ware (Tongue Guilding)*, still, 2006. LCD/DVD player with looping DVD; Approximate running time: 2.5 minute.

CAFAM also holds exhibitions that challenge conventional understanding of the categories that constitute its name (*Craft* and *Folk Art* Museum). At CAFAM, *folk art* encompasses a wide variety of cultural phenomena, not strictly limited to material objects. Exhibitions like "Ancient Gods and Modern Politics: Mithila Painting" (April–September 2009, organized by the Ethnic Arts Foundation), which featured works on paper by women from poor, rural communities in India, might seem to participate in the use of *folk art* as a euphemism for *the Other*. However exhibitions such as "The Fool's Journey: The History and Symbolism of the Tarot" (January–May 2010, curated by Robert M. Place) suggest a different agenda, as they turn their focus on material culture that is not specific to a marginalized culture. The exhibit also defies the folk/craft expectation of bearing the direct mark of the creator's hand, as does another show, "Myth and Manpower: Graphics and the California Dream (September 2009–January 2010, curated by Bill Stern). This exhibit included mass-printed fruit labels together with United Farm workers union posters. Even more recent, "Borderlandia: Cultural Topography by Einar and Jamex de la Torre" (September 2010–January 2011) provides an interesting contemporary counterpoint to Price's show, with the de la Torre brothers' primary media being blown glass sculptures that are unabashedly Mexican in their iconographic references, which encompass ancient, religious, folk, pop, and so on, but whose work is claimed without question by fine art institutions. (Figure 40) One apparent difference is that the de la Torre brothers are Mexican-American, and therefore their borrowings are more comfortably justifiable than what Price did and could make for an interesting comparison with *Happy's Curios* on the basis of institutional responses.

Figure 40. Einar and Jamex de la Torre, *Nazcar Dad*, 2010. Blown glass and mixed media, 24 x 14 x 14 in.

Institutions like MoCC and CAFAM use these labels in their names because, as problematic as the categories may be, they serve as useful shorthand for referencing certain sets of objects. In addition to the previously mentioned examples of exhibitions that challenge the conventional labels of folk art and craft, these museums provide a venue for conventionally understood craft and folk art objects, such as functional ceramic pottery or traditional, community-based arts.[90] The exhibition of artists and works that could be easily located in the foremost fine art institutions, together with conventional craft and folk art, which would not be in those same institutions, is similar to what

[90] A notable exception to CAFAM's focus is regional American folk art or so-called naïve art, which does raise questions about a continuing impulse towards focusing on folk art as culture belonging to the Other.

"Happy's Curios" did in being formally being a folk art show in a major museum. Each of these, *Happy's Curios* and LACMA, MoCC, and CAFAM, to varying degrees, placed objects and concepts pertaining to the fine art, folk art, and craft taxonomy into the same context and, in these contemporary institutional examples, explicitly within the same category. Aspects of their choices require deliberate consideration of why and how objects are made to occupy their institutional spaces, not only for what they mean to say, but for what they do *not* mean to say. It may be helpful to find and answer the unasked questions, but it can be equally as illuminating to examine why a question has been suppressed. In the end, evaluating all objects by the same standards is not the objective, but rather, recognizing and evaluating the standards themselves and how we use them, even as we evaluate the objects, is what there is to gain through these museums and through projects like *Happy's Curios*.

APPENDIX

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