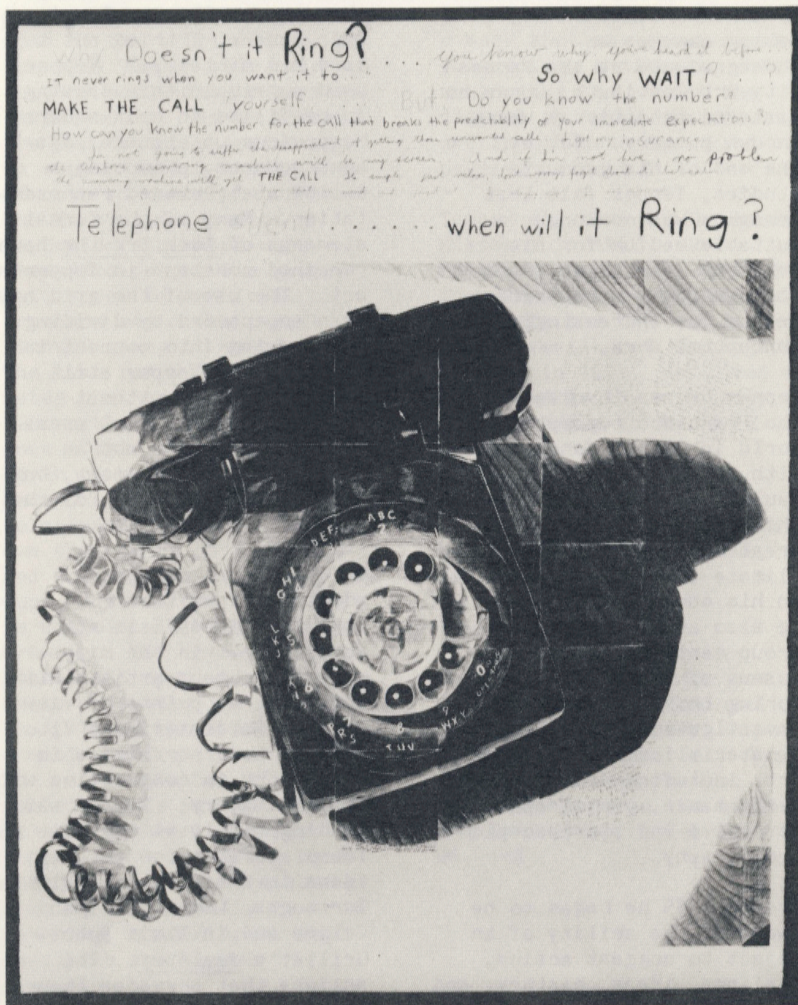


Irvin Tepper
MATRIX/BERKELEY 64

University Art Museum
Mid-August - mid-October
1983

Why Doesn't It Ring...?, 1980



Irvin Tepper's ceramic cups and intensely rendered drawings are alive and endowed with feelings. The texts written on the drawings of the cups are stories told from the point of view of the cups themselves. They are thus endowed with reason and individual spirit; they are animistic.

Throughout his career, Tepper has relished the expressive power of an object. His first experience in object-making came as an undergraduate at the Kansas City Art Institute, where he mastered traditional wheel-thrown pottery. But by the end of his graduate studies, Tepper felt that ceramics was no longer a suitable medium for his concerns. He began to use photography as the primary medium for increasingly conceptual work.

Tepper became involved in the San Francisco conceptual art world in 1971. Conversations with artists Terry Fox and Paul Kos as well as with philosopher James Friedman created an intellectual climate that sustained Tepper in his conceptual orientation. He also associated with the group centered around the Museum of Conceptual Art. During this time Tepper investigated a variety of dematerialized approaches to art, including video, performance, photographic narrative and stereoscopic photography.

Around 1975 he began to be aware of the ability of an object to suggest action, feelings, ideas, history, and especially to generate a powerful "phantom presence" of persons who either owned or used that object. Tepper's first drawing of a

cup, Idea Drawing for Flawed Cup, used this idea of the powerful object. This drawing brought together the disparate elements of his earlier art: ceramics, narrative and an awareness of process. In the drawing, Tepper writes: "I started this drawing because I noticed the handle was put on crooked. At the time I figured the guy who worked in the factory was thinking of something other than his job when he put it on. Drawing each square, I tried not to make his mistakes." Tepper used a grid in this drawing. As he filled in each square, he covered up all the adjacent squares, producing a deliberately skewed representation. Many of the formal elements of Idea Drawing have remained constant in Tepper's art. The use of the grid has been superseded by dividing the drawing into concentric circles, but Tepper still draws each area without reference to adjacent areas. He aims to create not an optically unified image, but a fractured evocation of the object.

In retrospect, Tepper's adoption of written narrative in 1975 is not surprising. In the mid-seventies, many artists with such diverse points of view as John Baldessari and Vito Acconci used narratives in their work in conjunction with visual imagery. Tepper was reading widely at the time and found confirmation for his ideas in the novels of William Burroughs, Louis Ferdinand Celine and in Alain Robbe-Grillet's Jealousy. The anxiety that pervades these writers' texts is a major theme in Tepper's drawings and has influenced the rough look of the drawings themselves.

All of Tepper's cups have been cast from the Flawed Cup mold or an enlarged version of the same shape which he created in 1981. He developed a technique of pouring alternating layers of colored (usually black and white) porcelain. After delicate sanding, the porcelain becomes translucent and reveals abstract forms between the cups' layers.

The cup that is pictured in Heart Cup was cast from the mold of the original cup. At the time Tepper made this cup, he was ending a personal relationship. As he sanded the cup, heart shapes began to appear within its layers of colored porcelain. For the first time, one of Tepper's fabricated cups seemed to generate a powerful, specific emotional presence and dictate what kind of story it would tell. The text for Heart Cup narrates the story of a friend "whose thoughts were on a love affair that had ended, never to be regained." A second story describes the relationship between Tepper's own experience at that time and the process of making the cup. Just as the narrative is disjointed, so is the drawing. The checkered tablecloth upon which the cup rests does not line up with the grid of the drawing, creating a fractured view. The representation of cup and tablecloth is further skewed by a large heart shape which Tepper has arbitrarily laid over the cup. The resulting drawing is extremely touching, combining strong narrative and visual elements.

Tepper, like many artists today, is not aligned with any one medium. His allegiance is to concepts and to

the cross-fertilization that results from working in many media. He endows his creations with a powerful presence, so that they suggest experience rather than empty perfection. "In the process of making art I like to know my mistakes as well as my successes. If my art is too perfect, then the viewer is missing a lot of experience, a lot of life, like if you shut out the world to reach a goal. My idea of powerful art would be a book that was about someone contracting a disease, which would give the reader the disease and make him die. Art should have that kind of powerful effect."

Tepper was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1947. He received his B.F.A. in 1969 from the Kansas City Art Institute and his M.F.A. from the University of Washington, Seattle in 1971. He lived in the Bay Area for a decade before moving to New York in 1982.

Paul Schimmel, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA.

Note: This exhibition was organized by Paul Schimmel and originated at the Newport Harbor Art Museum. All quotes are taken from an interview between the author and Irvin Tepper, February 26, 1983.

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Works in MATRIX:

DRAWING AND CUP SETS

All cups porcelain, 3-1/4" x 3" diam., saucer 5-1/2" diam.

Heart Cup.

Drawing: 1979, pencil on paper, 41" x 29-1/2".

Cup: 1978.

Lent by Joseph L. Parker, Jr., Tulsa, OK.

Complaining Cup, 1980,

Drawing: pencil on paper, 20" x 22-1/2". Lent by Dan and Jeanne Fauci, NY.

He is Thinking...I'll Get Even...Just Wait, 1982.

Drawing: pencil on paper, 22" x 30". Lent by the artist; courtesy Morgan Gallery, Kansas City, KS.

Cubist Confusion, 1982.

Drawing: white charcoal on black museum board, 32" x 42". Lent by Earl Millard, Belleville, TX.

DRAWINGS

Confidence Man, 1978-79, pencil on paper, 14" x 11". Lent by Kenneth Cowin, NY.

Hat Magic, 1979, pencil on paper, 23" x 30". Private collection, CA.

Why Doesn't It Ring...?, 1980, pencil on paper, 71" x 57". Lent by Daniel Cowin, NY.

Study for Big Ear/Big Mouth, 1981, white charcoal on black museum board, 4 panels, 32" x 42" each; overall 64" x 84". Lent by Dan and Jeanne Fauci, NY.

Ready to Serve, Waiting to Go, 1983, white charcoal on black museum board, 62" x 84". Lent by the artist.

CUPS

All cups porcelain, 5-1/2" x 5" diam.; saucer 8" diam.

Ruth's Cup, 1981. Lent by Ruth Braunstein, S.F.

Judy's Jump Cup, 1982. Lent by Martin and Judith Schwartz, Armonk, NY.

Daniel's Cup, 1982. Lent by Daniel Jacobs, NY.

Tex Talks Back, 1982. Lent by Dr. Howard Kottler, Seattle.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

James Manolides Gallery, Seattle, '71, '72; de Saisset Art Gallery, University of Santa Clara, CA, '73; And/Or, Seattle, '74, '75; Site, S.F., '79; St. Louis Museum of Art, Missouri, '80; Kunst-museum, Bern, Switzerland, '82 (with Ursula Schneider).

Selected group exhibitions: Museum of Conceptual Art, S.F., Second Generation, '75; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX, American Narrative/Story Art 1966-77, '78 (cat.; traveled to UAM, UC Berkeley); New Museum, NY, Stay Tuned, '81 (cat.).

Selected bibliography about the artist:

Keller, Kathryn. "Irvin Tepper--Documents and Video Tapes," Artweek, Nov. 24, '73.

Brown, Christopher. "Looking Through Drawing: Irv Tepper, SITE," Artweek, Oct. 13, '79.

Loeffler, Carl E. & Darlene Tong, eds. Performance Anthology (S.F.: Contemporary Arts Press, '80).