

CERAMICS WITH A SOUL

Towards a highest standard for ceramics

2011 Dorothy Wilson Perkins Ceramic History Lecturer
Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art
Alfred University



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Claydies: *True Feelings*, 2007
www.claydies.dk

The way I will approach ceramics today might be a little unexpected, because I will use a very broad lens and speak from a meta-level of reflection. I will touch upon deep things that might at first hand seem a bit long from ceramics, such as the evolution of human consciousness and the future of our planet: Huge issues, I know, but issues that are close to me – and more close to ceramic art than you might think – but also issues that we in the Western world have a responsibility to address, I think.

Our survival is not threaded at a day-to-day basis. We have economic crisis, fear of loosing our jobs and fear of terrorism to live with, but all in all those are abstract challenges in the overall picture. Compare with the major part of the world's population, and we are among the most lucky of the luckiest. We can gather here, nicely dressed in these beautiful and safe surroundings and talk about something as apparently_remote from life as aesthetic expressions.

This is why our deepest responsibility as human beings is to get the right proportion to our life. We must take our part of the struggle for moving forwards, from where we have the privilege to stand: At the top of society, in the most developed part of the planet. Maybe not the top in an economical sense, but concerning culture, human values, lived life and the meaning of it.

And here I would like to point to my deepest conviction: That art fulfils a very important role in society. It interprets reality, it is concerned with meaning and perception. With the deep stuff: With the meaning of being human and the creation of reality.

This is why I gave the lecture this title: Ceramics with a Soul: The 'soul' refers to the deeper level: The level beyond the conscious level of everyday life and everyday experiences. The soul is where the deepest meaning of humanness resides...

And why did I choose this image as an opening to my presentation on ceramics? Claydies, is a very interesting Danish group of ceramicists. I have put on the website, just to encourage you to check out more. But I chose this image because in many ways it summarizes one of my main points today: That ceramic art is a perfect bridge between the inner world of the artist that sees something intuitively – with the inner eye – and the outer world: The world of realities and lived

life. Because what is it, she creates, in all her naked, intuitive humanness? She creates a vessel form. She refers to the world that we live in. She never loses this human life perspective of sight.

This is what art in general is for me, and ceramics specifically, and this will be my perspective for today: That art holds an important key to understand humanness. And therefore that art has to do with the very deep issues of the meaning of life and the evolution of human consciousness. This is the contribution I think it is our responsibility to address. It is so easy to get absorbed in the humdrum of 'the art scene', its discourse and closed circuits. What I am suggesting is that we break this chain of internal meaning for a moment and use a meta perspective – or maybe more precise: a satellite's perspective, to look at life on earth and our contribution to it, right from where we stand.

Evolution Our responsibility as privileged, safe and satisfied citizens

“Ceramics with a soul”:

Touches on the deeper layer of meaning
behind everyday consciousness
beyond the established scientific paradigm

= Evolutionary perspective:
Evolutionary aesthetic, Humanistic aesthetic



Michael Geertsen,
Denmark

“A highest standard for ceramics”:

What role does it play in the development of human consciousness?

How does art contribute to the development of human life and the sustainment of the planet? And to be more precise: Where do we put ceramics? What is the role of this specific art practice within an evolutionary perspective?

Until we set that, it is my - maybe provocative - viewpoint, that art is not art: If not art questions its very reason to be, there is no reason for it to be. Then it enters the circuit of sleeping consumerism, entertainment and personal promotion that sneaks in, the minute something loses ideals: its very reason to be. Remember that ideal comes from the Greek 'idea'- aistesis- image: if there is no image, no highest standard, no purpose, things dissolve into indifference.

So, this is what I am going to set today: A highest standard for art, and for ceramics especially.

Luckily, you could say, the meaning is already out there. I am not going to propose a revolution from part of the artist. What you do is exactly the right thing. You do what you need to do. I would never suggest a kind of aesthetic scheme for 'right' or 'deep' art. You need to explore exactly the corners of whatever, that you explore.

No, my perspective is that of the critic, the viewer, the consumer, and the interpreter. What I am offering is an interpretation of contemporary ceramic art, according to human values. Not according to a scientifically approved theoretical position. In fact I had to leave academia to be

able to develop these thoughts. They are not scientific in a traditional way. What I am calling for here is another truth. It is a felt truth. It is a truth from the heart, and every of you have to consider its relevance, not with your analytical, critical mind but with a new kind of openness: You will have to ask yourself if the perspective that I am going to present resonates with you in some way. For me, that is the test of relevance: Does it resonate?

What I am trying to establish here is a way to perceive ceramic art and read its message. You could call it a *'Humanistic Aesthetic'*, or an *'Evolutionary Aesthetic'*. This lecture is about applying a whole new viewpoint to ceramics, offered from a deep engagement with ceramic art, and an engagement with human progress and values.

As I state this point, you will know, that what I will be putting forwards is a vision and an ideal. It's a tool to see ceramics from the satellite perspective of evolution.

Evolution is becoming

Future is the natural extension of this moment

Ceramics offers experiences that transcend the worn out paradigm of reality

Martin McWilliam, UK



Evolution, as I speak of it, has to do with becoming. So, the question is: Where are we heading? Where do we want to be heading? This last question: Where do we want to be heading, is quite crucial. We need to understand, that we are not just passive passengers on board a planet, which is moving in a direction we maybe really don't want to know! We create our own future! Every thought and every action plants a seed to be harvested in the future. Future, therefore, has to do with here and now, with our belief systems and values. Evolution, in this sense, is the natural and organic extension of this moment to the next. And also, it is important to note, in the term of 'evolution' is a built-in expectation of progression and improvement. The history of humankind has been one long striving for progression. We expect the future to be better, and we build it from the moment we have.

This is where ceramics comes in: To me it seems as if humankind is going through a deep crisis of it's own values. Material improvements, moral, social and economic improvements are now showing their real flipside in social inequality, terrorism, war and ecological exhaustion. So: Is next step backwards, back to a romantic fantasy of simple living in small, local communities? - Or is there something that we don't see?

How can we restore an image or an ideal for a future without regressing? How can we put a seed in the here and now, that we would wish to harvest in the future?

My answer is that by looking at ceramic art from a new perspective, we can find indicators that offer a vision for humanity, that we strongly need. Ceramics simply offer experiences that transcend the worn out paradigm of reality. This paradigm has proved itself to be unbalanced and unsustainable. Ceramics helps us see what we cannot see!

Evolution is becoming

Future is the natural extension of this moment.

Ceramics offers experiences that transcend the worn out paradigm of reality

If.....

.... we embrace the unknown!



What we need to embrace is the unknown. Envisioning the future from the existing moment is not a way forwards. We need to look in other directions. We need to risk a leap of faith, in order to restore the vision of a future, truly sustainable.

In my viewpoint, this is the true role of art in general, if it has any place in society at all. It is not a new phenomenon that art has struggled with finding its role in society. This has been a philosophical and art theoretical discussion since the very beginning of art as a modern, independent practice.

My contribution to this discussion is to ask how art can serve society; serve humanity now, in this exact historical, political, philosophical, religious reality that we live in. How does art serve us?

And the answer is simple: By questioning this reality! By pointing beyond. By pointing to what we don't see. By pointing to what we don't understand. By stripping our minds right open: By pointing exactly to what is unseen by the modern, rational paradigm. Bridging this world to the depth we can't define. But we can sense it. We can sense something. This is why artists are usually very sensitive people, and this is why art has the capacity to move us, who contemplate it. Art is about sensing the unseen, the unmeasured, and the indescribable. Art IS this membrane between this reality as we cognitively, rationally, collectively have defined that it is – and the 'beyond' – the 'something else' – the unknown, that still communicates to us through the calling of art. Art simply exists in this wider reality. Art simply cannot adapt to the codes of our reality: It doesn't have a well-defined place as e.g. this glass, this chair or this laptop. The only way we can cope with it is to disarm it by calling it 'art', or deal with it as leisure. I mean: Think about it! It's weird: We have an enormous bulk of phenomenon that we just call 'art', and then everybody knows what it is and where to put it in our cognitive mind and in the land map of society. But what does it mean!!!

But what I suggest is that we take it very seriously. Art has a calling, and that calling is exactly what it does:

The calling of art:

- **Art** resists definition
- **Art** awakens our evolutionary calling
- **Art** expands our conception of reality

... by being outside the order!



Sidsel Hanum,
Norway

Those three are closely interlinked. Let me explain:

To resist definition is what I just mentioned: That art does not have a well-defined place and a clear function in reality, simply because it does not adapt to the codes of reality. It can only be recognized as a 'piece of art'. It does not fulfil any other function. Which means: It does not belong to logic, systematic, familiar, recognizable order of things. Art has no order! In fact, just by being 'art', it breaks the order! It guaranties that something is outside the order!

With very broad lenses, this can be called a de-constructive role, since this has to do with banging the door open to a reality beyond agreed conventions of reality. Breaking or least shaking the well established paradigm of reality and showing us the reality beyond. This has been the role of most art in the 20th century

Deconstruction is a very important and very, very sane function in a democratic society. We owe a lot of our mental and societal freedom to modernism, postmodernism and deconstruction, the way it continuously questioned the dept of reality. But: I think there is more to that! (Which will, as you will see, be central to ceramics)

For what comes after deconstruction? Where are we heading as society? What does the specific art piece want after deconstructing and breaking down? Does art just merely destroy, or does it build up?

This is where we turn to the second point: Art's ability to wake what I have labelled our evolutionary calling. As stated in the first point, art represents the unknown, the unseen: All that cannot be rationally explained and categorized in the material reality. Art reminds us, that there is a reality beyond.

In my opinion this is the absolute backbone essence: Art is a window directed towards all that we cannot normally see and perceive. And that is the evolutionary perspective! It's not just to open a window to a view that is nice to look at. No: There is a calling in it. We want to expand. Why are we here today? Why do we dedicate ourselves to work with art or engage with art – this strange – non-being in the rational world, if it was not because we thought it was important? Even if we are

only engaging with art because it stimulates our minds or because we contemplate its beauty – there is a calling in that: there is something higher – deeper that art represents – that we feel the need to engage in. That is an evolutionary calling! A calling to standards that are higher than what we normally can perceive or experience in our everyday.

And if you are now thinking inside your self that this is beginning to sound evangelic, I would say YES: You're perfectly right! Art sets a higher standard – it calls us to expand into deeper layers, deeper experiences, and that definitely has a similarity to spiritual or religious transcendence. The role of the artist today is to keep the door open to the 'beyond', to the 'much more'. To the depth and profundity of life. Not to a religious truth: But to the vast space of becoming – of heading somewhere we cannot see, but only feel. Art – and especially ceramics materialize that!

And I really, really think we need it!

If we stay in this horizontal mode of developing though developing the material world, this is what we get: the state of how things are: The world as it is today! Instead, we need the calling to new levels of consciousness. This is the leap of faith that I am talking about: the realization that art makes us receptive to impulses from the world beyond rationality. Beyond the cognitive level that we have reached so far. That is evolution.

This is where we can state the third point: That art expands our conception of reality – it expands reality by stripping our minds right open. There is this movement to transcend: Out, or in or down – the evolutionary impulse – that makes reality expand. There is this movement of the artist sensing an impulse, an inspiration, an idea and putting it into a tangible, real physical form. That is the closest we get to connect, in a physical way to things that are beyond our cognitive mind. Art IS that deep reality, materialized!

This is why ceramics is so extremely important. Ceramics is the only art form that is so intensely interconnected with the material world. Ceramics is radical materiality. Both in its material aspect: That it is earth, ground, soil, formed into something very, very tangible and sensuous. But also because it both historically and in its actual form is closely interlinked with the world of human life. This means, it contains both a vision and a reality. In this search for the unseen or the unknown, ceramics can guide us, because it fully embraces and materializes the unknown. Ceramics is, you could say in this world, but not out of this world.

By being this very physical, material art form, ceramic art simply has a special place in the evolutionary line of thought. Ceramics plays an important part in 'stripping the mind open'. Which means that it is an important contribution to the development of human consciousness.

This development takes place through three different ways, that ceramic art communicates with human consciousness: Now I'm moving from the satellite's perspective on art and ceramics and into a much more detailed level. What I am going to show now is how ceramics actually affects us with its evolutionary drive.

How does ceramic art drive evolution?

Points of access to the human consciousness:

- body – senses
- Emotions – feelings
- Mind – thoughts



Martin Kaldahl, Denmark
Vase, 2000

As I stated, evolution is about expanding the human consciousness. And to access consciousness, we have three main portals: The body – or the senses – the emotional level of the feelings – and the mental level of the thoughts.

As you can see, each of them represent a function of the human consciousness; body – feeling – thought, or senses, emotions and mind. And the point is: "What happens, when we stretch these to their absolute limits?" When we fully experience their depths and heights. Senses, emotions and mind are the tools of consciousness, or the way the consciousness experiences reality, and also the way consciousness expresses reality. So. What does the ceramic artist express, and what do we experience? And how does this affect human evolution?

One by one I will explain how they influence our way of perceiving reality, and thereby our way of evolving as humankind, imagining a possible future.

Evolution through the SENSES



Katrine Køster Holst,
Denmark/Norway
Thrown # 1, 2008

1. That ceramic art communicates through the senses is a very obvious fact that hardly needs to be explained. From its very digging in the ground, clay is handed, touched, manipulated (manipulated). No other artistic medium is in such an intimate contact with the artist as clay. Clay is radically alive when manipulated by the artist, and no matter how aesthetically or conceptually sophisticated the result, the sense of creation remains.

The Danish/Norwegian artist Katrine Køster Holst is a very interesting example. During the last couple of years she has developed a way of working that combines a radical, material handling of

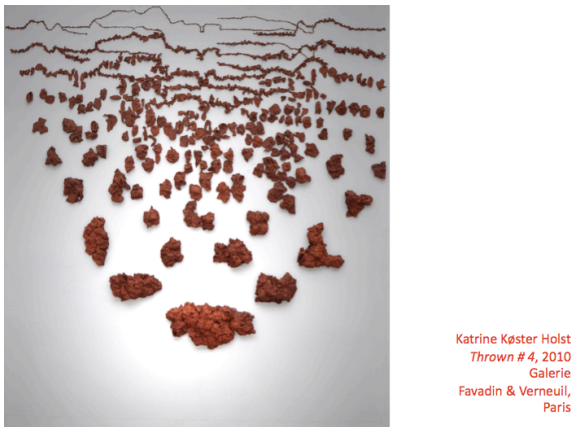
clay with the uncontrollable processes of the material and a conceptual approach that sets up very strict rule for the visual result.

She has developed a series of exhibition projects called "Thrown", and basically they are structured and carried out the same way:



Katrine Køster Holst
Thrown # 1, 2008

The artist simply positions herself physically in front of a wall with the throwing wheel, throws a vessel form at the wheel, just to smash the form directly to the wall. She throws with left arm, eyes closed, just to hit the wall as randomly as possible. After having thrown and smashed all in all 170 pounds, the pieces are carefully dried, gathered and fired in the oven.



Katrine Køster Holst
Thrown # 4, 2010
Galerie
Favadin & Verneuil,
Paris

In different installations the artist has invented different conceptual frames for how to arrange the pieces. In this project "Throw version 4" that was on display in Paris last autumn, she measured up a grit and arranged the pieces according to the weight of the individual pieces.



Katrine Køster Holst
Thrown # 4, 2010
Galerie Favadin & Verneuil, Paris

The artist herself says about this process that: *"During the work process I sense my body and my movements. This creates involvement and a sense of being present in the moment; partly because of the physical activity, but also because of the thought that all my actions leave traces, that are directly expressed in the clay."*

She is radically in contact with the material; handling it with the whole of her body. She is radically present in the moment – but: the same is transferred to the spectator: There is no doubt that the result holds a direct openness to the act of creation. We are left here with the traces of intense processes. First, the process of throwing and smashing. Second, the process of arranging the pieces in this elaborate grit system. These traces of action and the result are highly activating a sensuous, bodily response. In fact, there IS nothing more than action. There is no form to recognize, the thrown form has aggressively been smashed. What is left is the result of a process, arranged as an image. This is not for the brain to contemplate the meaning of this action. This is dialoguing directly with the senses, the body and the room.



It is also interesting to note that Køster Holst differs between a radically aggressive, you could call it, approach: throwing and smashing, but followed by an extreme care in the re-arranging in a grit that comes to be a very beautiful pattern. The coincidental form is taken very seriously: It is not just a de-construction. The re-construction follows. The building up again, in a new visual form.

What does a project like this mean, in the context I have set up?

Here we see an example of how ceramics are able to create an extremely sense based experience. Køster Holst does not allow the normal codes of meaning creation to influence her work. We don't

get any hints of normal categorization, or the familiar world of things: Random, abrupt forms arranged according to mathematic rules. This means that we as spectators are presented to a very intense sensuous stimuli that we cannot categorize as meaning creating. We have to leave it with the visual and sensual impact. How is this meaning creating?

Evolution through the SENSES

Intense sensuous stimuli that we cannot categorize as meaning creating

= A sense based expansion of reality

We RELATE to reality from a new place

When we cannot categorize this experience adhering to normal sense stimuli, what is left is this engagement of the senses that creates a connection between the self and the world. We engage from anew, and from this place we have the possibility to expand our perception of reality. We are not left with a bunch of totally meaningless sensuous stimuli – but they are just meaning creating in a way that is unfamiliar to the mind. This means, simply that we experience a sense-based expansion of reality, but an expansion that we are utterly engaged in: It's our senses, our bodies that are involved: We relate to reality from a new place.

Just compare this experience to the most familiar way of engaging in the Western world: The many hours most of us we spend passively in front of a screen every day, where reality is already packed, digested and presented in a ready form to us: We don't use the senses to relate and orient ourselves, and it doesn't expand our reality in any way.

With a project like Køster Holst's, simply reality is expanded from the point of our senses.

The second way I mentioned was through emotions. It would definitely be possible to find these aspects in he work of Køster Holst, but instead, let me point to another emblematic example of a Scandinavian. Let's take a look at the work of Marie Hermann, which is exactly on display here at the museum. I have chosen examples from an earlier project so to put the current exhibition into context. But of course it is important that you note that my reading is just as an illustration of a point – it is not an in-depth reading of Marie Hermann's work.

Evolution through EMOTIONS



Marie T. Hermann, *Shades of Days*, 2011

Here it is: To me it is this sensation of BANG! This is so utterly beautiful, and it touches deep emotions in me. You don't really need the words here. It's perfectly self-contained. Just looking at it, to me, is completely breath taking. It's pure beauty – hard to express differently without analyzing. Just to stay with the immediate feeling, to me this is a direct expression of beauty. Just look at the way the branch is curved – just a perfect curve....

Something that takes your breath away, plays with your emotions. 'Beauty' is an adjective that you ascribe to something, yet it is an adjective that is highly corresponding with feeling.

Even though Marie Hermann's work is very abstract, very perfect, often very symmetric and geometrically installed, it is impossible to keep at a distance. It is very distanced, yet very, very intimate. For every perfect abstraction, there is an utter aliveness; an amorphic form, a suggestion of function, or just a curve, a silhouette, a gentle touch of colour or a lack of a rim that drags you into its reality, as a silent, distant spectator.

" ... Invite the reality of human life, but don't depend on it..."



Stillness in the Glorious Wilderness #2
2010

Every piece or every installation seems as a whole in itself – actually they don't need the outer world or the spectator. They are complete in themselves, materializing in the most beautiful way the balance between presence and absence, as Glenn Adamsson puts it, in his discription of her work: Between precision and human touch, a geometrical humanness, you could call it. Just look at the relation and rhythm between the objects: No one can be missed. Nothing can be missed. It's whole and complete in itself. Every piece is unique but it never stands alone. It is part of a

greater whole. And this greater whole, by its very direct functional references still keeps the door open to human life. The functional forms keep expectations open – they invite the reality of human life, but don't depend on it. (Adamsson)

In this way, Marie Hermann creates a space that holds a very important position: " ... Invite the reality of human life, but don't depend on it..."

What does that mean in the context I have set up??

Evolution through EMOTIONS

Beauty is an **emotional pull** to unite with the object – melt into its reality:
= Expanding!

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804):
Experiencing 'something greater': **The sublime**
breaches the categories of our mind:
= Expansion of consciousness
WE CONNECT!

First at all: Beauty. Beauty is like a direct pull. Beauty has the effect that you just want to melt with the object. It's like a law of attraction, a desire both to own and to give yourself to the desired. In this case there is just a whole world, you want to melt into. It is this pull to unite with reality that the artist sets up. This is a very, very privileged position! The artist really has us in the palm of her hands. Melting together is the same as becoming part of something bigger than yourself. We open ourselves to a perspective of something beyond. Beauty cannot be explained. It has to be experienced, because in the experience you sense that something is greater than the reality of our normal everyday consciousness. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant that defined human consciousness in the latter 17 hundred (1724– 1804) called this experience an experience of the sublime, and here he points to a very, very important aspect: The sublime, the something beyond breaches the categories of the mind! Something sublime simply does not fit into our normal scheme of mental categorisation. In other words: It strips the mind right open!

Beauty, then, has this extremely important function to pull us towards something that our mind cannot grasp. We just have to surrender into the reality of something 'beyond'. This is, indeed, a widening of our cognitive perspective. An expansion of our consciousness.

What we are called into with the beauty of Marie Hermann's work is a reality that is self-contained, yet very, very communicative. As much as her work is abstract and distant, it also remains connected to this world. Pots, vases, functions, rims. A universe of form that we recognize, but still cannot put into the usual mental categorization. The categorization is suspended, so to say, which means, the mind cannot rest in its familiar recognition of reality. A new universe has emerged, and you are there, but silent. You don't define. You listen.

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That means, as I pointed out a moment ago, that the work "Invite the reality of human life, but does not depend on it...."The self-contained beyond still wants you to be there but does not wait for you to define it.

That is a very, very valuable human experience! This allows us to connect to a reality that is bigger than the existing one. And please note the wording: "Connect". We connect – we build a bridge, we don't totally throw ourselves into and get lost into a 'beyond': We stay in our world (in the ceramic pieces symbolized by all the familiar references in form), and from there, we connect to something wider than the existing. This is the point of expansion. It's not "This is one reality – our known reality, THE reality" – and "That's another reality – the sub reality of art: No. We form part of the same reality, the artwork form the actual, physical bridge. It is the materialization – the evidence - that human consciousness IS able to expand – and does so!

Emotions, in short, mean engagement – actual bridging, actual melting together with – or pulling away from, if it's a negative emotion: but the emotion indicates a relation: We have tuned in to an object, or to a reality, and the emotional response is the actual evidence that the bridge between you and the artwork has been created! This relation is essential because it means, we are moving to somewhere else: We are still us – sensing the recognizable reality, but at the same time we connect to another. We see and sense things, we were not able to see before.

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Now we have to physical level of experience, and the emotional one, so let's move to the last one; the mental one – the level of our thoughts.

Evolution through the MIND



Anders Ruhwald
B-shelf, Glazed Earthenware, 2007

Anders Ruhwald is the last of the three ceramic artists that I've chosen to mention today. Please remember that the point that I am making with these three artists: The way ceramic art expands the human consciousness by way of the senses, the emotions and the mind. These points could equally be made about all three artists, or about any other artist. In reality we always have sensual, emotional and mental responses at the same time – just remember that I am only using this examples because they are illustrative...

This example here is quite seminal for his work in the way it shows he is at the same time concerned with objects, space or context and meaning. The context in which his work exists is always present; as you can see here symbolically with the vase and its shelf. What he tells us here is that an object never exists independently: The meaning of the object is created in the context! This puts the spectator in a quite active role: The spectator is the one that perceives both object and space and has to synthesize into meaning. And that is – as you will see – a mental activity:



Entering the exhibition space of Anders Ruhwald clearly marks the entrance into a logic that transgresses the familiar reality. Our predefined concepts of reality are put out of use: We are left to the premises of the artwork, we do not control the situation, but are totally dependant of the context, as we are totally surrounded by and nearly controlled by the exhibition. The will of the subject seems to be suspended; the object controls the situation. This is not our world. - Or is it, we could ask?

The reflected image of the spectator in the shining walls situates us as a perceptive subject; as a physical body exposed to sensuous impressions, and a mind trying to get a grip on these impressions and recapture the control; to understand, so to say, having in mind that knowledge and understanding equals control and power.

This is essential: Ruhwald continuously builds up environments around his objects; curtains, walls, reflections; physical devices that situates the subject in the perceptive situation. Environments, that function as openings and increase the tension in the way we engage with the object. When we are pointed out as physical, perceptive subjects, we enter a dialogue with the object. The balance is changed, and the object is no longer just speaking its enigmatic presence to us. We perceive according to our perceptive ability, and from this dialogical point, the object enters an existence as a thing.

Evolution through the MIND

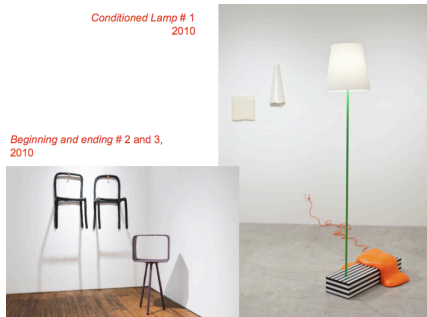
Immanuel Kant: Aesthetics is the bridge between the subjective reality of the mind and the objective world that can be sensed
 = A glimpse of reality BEFORE it is conceptualized and formed by the mind



Anders Ruhwald
 Social Piece of Furniture # 2
 2005

This model of meaning creation is fundamental for the aesthetic field as such. Here we find a direct relation back to the way Kant defined aesthetics as the turning point of the theory of knowledge; as the bridge between subjective reality produced by the mind, and the objective, sensuous world which in the principle we could know nothing about. For Kant, the aesthetic field guaranteed a glimpse into the objective reality before it was formed into conceivable concepts by the mind. The art object guaranteed a relation between mind and physical world; a reconciliation between subject and object.

Ruhwald's objects quite precisely embody this philosophical turning point. The black spot in Kant's theory of knowledge was the '*Ding an Sich*'; (eng.: '*thing in itself*') the object as object when not perceived by a subject. What was the thing in itself?



Ruhwald's ceramic objects are indispensably connected to vaguely defined functions that serve as markers of meaning. Meaning for the subject, which recognizes a hint of familiar form in the 'chair', the 'lamp' or 'TV'. But still, the objects resist transforming totally into a 'thing'; they resist being conquered by the power of the perceiving subject. Even though we are as close to functioning reality as a 'lamp', it's a 'conditioned lamp': its not in itself – and its just one in a series. This is also another interesting aspect to note: Ruhwald works in series, so: The object is never just 'it'. We can see it is a lamp, but there is still a very big "But?"

His work contains a predestined relation to the world of 'things', at the same time as they keep an openness and resistance to the predefined and culturally learnt concepts of the mind: We simply cannot conceive these objects and their inner logic; we can get a glimpse, but we cannot turn them into things. Simply, they refuse to be denominated by the mind.



This is what I mentioned as the calling of art: To refuse definition and to strip our minds right open!

The works of Ruhwald are very good examples of the way our mental capacity is stretched, in order to re-gain control in the situation. The environments are so complex yet familiar, that the mind really pulsates between transcending and including: Which means: Surrendering to the unknown and transforming into recognition, or between stretching and recognizing.

This essential question mark to the nature of things is what I call a "Mental expansion of the human consciousness"...

So now, we have the sensuous, the emotional and the mental aspects of human consciousness represented. Most often these three levels merge, as you can see in the current exhibition of Ruhwald and Hermann here at the museum: Senses, emotions and mind are all activated, and all levels are stretched. But what is very important: – They don't repeat a pattern we already know! And it's this newness – this stretching – that makes it evolutionary.

Note that this is a re-formulation of the modernist dictum to MAKE IT NEW. Make it new: Yes! Walk a path or explore a corner where no one has stepped before. But do it with the intention to expand the limits of human consciousness: To make us stretch our minds and integrate a new reality!

...

The examples I have given here are in order to make a clear point. It is important to say that an artwork can never be boxed like this in reality: All artworks have components of all aspects. Exactly this makes it even more effective: All artworks have a physical, an emotional and a mental side: Reality is expanded from many angles!

What is very specific about ceramics, that we don't find as clearly in most other art forms is, what I mentioned in the beginning of this lecture: That ceramics is radical materiality. It is an extremely physical thing, all the same as it points directly to the unknown. In every piece of ceramic art there is, as I mentioned initially, both a vision and a reality.

The evolutionary potential of ceramic art

It is both VISION and REALITY:

It is physically present, often functional and familiar:

Creates awareness of HERE AND NOW that suspends mental categorization. THIS is the point where the we can **transcend the given**, and the expanded reality becomes a condition.

Bente Skjøttgaard, Denmark
Purple white cloud no. 1002
2010



This point: Vision and reality is very important, and it will form the basis for how I perceive the role of ceramics in an evolutionary perspective.

By being a physical object – which is what differentiates ceramic art from most other art forms – that very often touches upon familiar forms from our everyday, recognizable reality, ceramic art creates an extreme awareness or presence in the HERE and NOW. Ceramics is a vision IN a reality. Physically present and (often) familiar in form, the ceramic object stays in this world – it is not an image, a sound or an abstract, time based experience – it is a thing: A thing, that creates a relation. A relation between the spectator and the vast space of what I called 'the unknown' – the *beyond* mental categorization.

Ceramics creates an extreme awareness of the HERE and NOW – an ability to sink fully into the moment and be fully aware, which means not drawn into already established patterns of thought: Here we are offered a possibility for seeing the world anew. Sinking into the moment, but not

drifting away and losing ground: We are talking about an expanded condition. Not something else, something alien to this world, but something bigger!

This is an important point. Here we find a very precise example of art's great potential to transcend: when contemplating an art object, as in Marie Hermann's example very clearly, we suspend all other activity, and we are simply aware: We don't want to eat it, own it, run away from it: We just want to be with it: That is a contemplative awareness: And when resting in basic awareness, the filter of codes weakens: Art can grab your attention and suspend it! From that moment you can really transcend the given.

That's what ceramics wants us to. That's what ceramics makes us do: It extends the realm of perception beyond the limits of physical senses! It expands awareness, and thereby expands our perceptions into higher frequencies.

Remember what I mentioned in the beginning of this lecture: That evolution is always an extension of this moment into the next: Of the seed planted in this moment, harvested in the next: Ceramic really holds an important position in the cultural field of the future, because especially this art form stretches our minds to its limits, including all the capacities of our conscious mind: Body, emotions and mental activity.

Ceramics, in a very tangible way, transcends our everyday consciousness, by being everyday, transcended! It bangs the door open into another – still not mentally categorized reality – but: As a very important point: Does not close it again behind: We are not left free floating in a space we cannot perceive: The object is real. The 'here and now' is real. It's just our brains that need to adapt. This means that ceramics are a part of the evolutionary perspective by expanding our consciousness into still more advanced states.

Precisely this point is the dynamics of all evolution: Transcend and include, transcend and include. Or you could say: Transcend, expand, include. The artwork transcends the realm of human consciousness, which is expanded, for thereafter to include the experience into the collective pool of human experiences. Which means we are ready to transcend *again*, and thereby move forwards.

Towards a highest standard.....

- In the individual experience the collective consciousness is expanded.
- Ceramics can move forwards towards changing conditions in society because it helps us imagine reality beyond where we are
- Ceramic art keeps the society in touch with the deeper layers of meaning **by materializing meaning in and out of the physical world**

Anne Tophøj and Steen Ipsen
Denmark
Extrodus, 2011



In this way it is very important to note that ceramics – and here we could talk about art in general – does not merely mirror society, or is an expression of culture, as it is often said. Art creates

culture. It creates our collective reality, because it constantly stretches the borders of our conscious mental capacity.

Now maybe some of you would think that how can I talk about the collective consciousness moving forwards when it is the little me having the experience. To this my answer would be that the collective is formed of nothing but the parts. So every time the self experiences something new and thereby grows, the collective grows.

So now - as we are heading towards my final remarks – I would like to pinpoint, that this is how ceramics actually can move towards changing conditions in society! By being unbound of cultural, societal conventions – by challenging the cultural conditioning – we find an extremely important potential in ceramic art: Here we find the seed that we need to plant: To understand an artwork I must to some degree enter its horizon, stretch my own boundaries, and thus grow in the process: Which means that the fusion of horizons is a broadening of the self! It is a broadening of my consciousness, and thereby of the collective level of consciousness. The artwork feeds the imagination and helps us imagine reality beyond where we are.

This is my last and most important point: A society that is able to dream is moving forwards being in touch with meaning. Meaning is created by narration and creation of alternatives, of greatness, of beauty, of something that strips our minds open and is beyond our conventional reality.

And it is this ability of a society to dream, collectively that moves it forwards. If there is no dreaming, there is only the flat, two-dimensional world of materialism, and the physical reality of agreed conventions. That's the reality that ceramics engages with, comments and moves forwards: Exactly the physical reality of the material world. That's always the point of both departure and return for ceramic art. It's always moving in and out for the physical world. And this is what makes this practice very potent, compared to other art forms: Ceramics questions reality very near to us, and it engages all aspects of our consciousness (body, mind and feelings) – thus expanding our ability to connect to deeper levels of existence.

This is, in my viewpoint, the highest standard of ceramics.

THANK YOU!

Printable version of the 2011 Perkins Lecture, Alfred University, November 1st.

PowerPoint slides have been added to the text.

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