

Ability from Knowledge and Art from Ability are Outdated – What now?

How did it come about that knowledge inspired skill and art?

It began at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The discoveries of science, to which German scientists and academics had made a major contribution, had been a worldwide success for a hundred and fifty years. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, there has not only been modernism in art but also scientific modernism with 22 German Nobel Prize winners.

With the science of measuring and calculating, the machine age had begun at the end of the 18th century, and crafts fell into decline. Machines made mass production possible, which devalued technical virtuosity. The reform William Morris strove for with „Arts and Crafts“ was only economically viable for a minority. This meant that attention was concentrated on industry and its continuing technical advance.

With the advent of machine production, handicrafts appeared for the production of ornamental and functional items whose production had hitherto been the preserve of the crafts. To help save the crafts and at the same time to set a standard for aesthetically responsible items from the new production methods, Schinkel and Beuth published their „Vorbilder für Fabrikanten und Handwerker“ (Patterns for manufacturers and handicraftsmen) in 1821. Until then, the potter had been the creative designer and executing craftsman in one. His store of knowledge was traditional experience. The division of labour had already begun in the factories, but now, the industrial worker took over production with no artistic relationship to the product. His knowledge of making was thus of a different nature, more specialised than the potter's. Jobs like setting up ceramic presses or grinding and polishing ceramic products came into existence, which have nothing to do with art. The division of labour advanced further, leading in the Bauhaus to the creation of the profession of industrial designer, who provided the designs that were to be executed by machines.

What remained of the crafts, the abundance of work and achievement that we see around us and that we perform ourselves, and the violence of external change – all of this has to offer purpose and value. Torn globally from the gentle unfolding of an individual life, our own habits of evaluation are in the process of dissolution and reformulation. The process of internalisation provided by craft has been swept away by the mechanisation of the technical world. It has become rare to see the potter's trade as an ideal lifestyle, and it is only found where it produces unique things. By unique, masterly expression or technique is meant, and it thus falls under the definition of art. The only disadvantage is that it is tied to function which has now been taken over by design. On the other hand, it is now free for new ideas or phantasies.

This is the answer to the question, „What now?“ We have known this answer for some time now, but we have not considered all of its implications. As the individual lives and works in an intrinsically structured social environment, it is especially what social psychology has to say that applies to him. This is a relatively new science, which studies the effects of social influences on the individual as well as the reciprocal effects on society in culture and the arts as „intellectual entities“. This centres on heredity and learning, thinking and motivation, politics and economics, the psychology of consumption and market research, i.e. on everything that matters at the interface between art and craft. It centres on cultural norms and manifestations of national character, i.e. on a whole raft of problems. One could spend one's life going into all of this, but we only want to consider the societal aspect.

Uncertainty is considered to be a permanent element of social reality. With its aesthetic problems, art stands isolated, but even when it is banal, it radiates an air of attraction and risk-taking. As art, it appears as a new centre of power with the distinctiveness of the material, an initiator of new realities.

This is not about philosophy but about forming. There are many different approaches, and what has been formed can look very different. It may be following up a random stimulus or inspiration, or may simply produce something beautiful. As art, forming can mean more and come closer to its former meaning: in the past (and even today in African societies) a work of art had a soul or „presentness“ which attracts a spiritual force. It has extended its original purpose of possessing beauty in the widest sense into the domain of ethics, to which aesthetics are sacrificed when necessary. Thus, ceramics has proved that it can be a medium for themes like ecology or a critique of society. Since Joseph Beuys, many things have become art which previously weren't. Everyone can be an artist because art is a target for creativity, and you can be creative in all things – intuitively or rationally. But art is also a target for thought. As an activity of the mind, it is equated with language. Art is language aimed at emotional effect. Kant's dangerous statement, „I had to abolish knowledge to make room to believe“, may be applied to art of the kind for which knowledge must make room. This is what is meant by art derived from knowledge and skill being outmoded. In ceramics, knowledge meant effort that only benefitted technology. Artistic development now needs more space for intellectual dialogue.

Thus we are discussing an alternative to art derived from skill. Surprisingly, we can thereby even make reference to Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who set targets for art, even if admittedly only for literature. He drew distinctions between four causes, which can be applied to ceramics. The first is the material cause, the second is form, the third is what in art comes from knowledge (the „efficient“ cause). The cause precedes the result. In the fourth case, the cause is a remote goal (the „final“ cause). In art that comes from skill, skill is based on scientific knowledge, which is not a realisation of „inner being“. It is mechanical, which becomes obvious in the calculation of forms (volume in litres) and glazes. Leibniz even presented this „nexus of causality“ in physics in the form of differential equations. This manner of thinking about cause and effect determined the development of ceramics in the 20th century; it was close to craft, with its material cause and its form. The aim on the other hand is a free decision, which gives orientation to the chosen path. Basically, the ceramist had thus turned away from science, but he cannot do without it. So he manages with the experience he needs and leaves knowledge to industry which supplies him. He has to look to self-fulfilment. As Hegel said, it is a process in which the mind gains awareness both of the diverse forms of its objects and of its self, only thus becoming what it is at the end of this process. Heidegger calls this „authenticity“.

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