

# Creative Destruction

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It started with the social sciences, for whom Joseph Schumpeter coined the expression “creative destruction” in the early twentieth century. Schumpeter was born in Moravia, and after important periods in Vienna (as Minister of Finance) and Bonn (as a professor) he found an influential position at Harvard University in the USA. In 1983, for his 100th birthday, the “Schumpeter Renaissance” reached its climax in the USA. It was also in the eighties that Peter Voulkos presented his wilfully pierced and slashed plates and vases in the USA, reminiscent of the German wedding custom of smashing crockery to bring good luck: this is also a symbolic destruction leading to a new life. Peter Voulkos demonstrated the creative destruction of traditional ceramics in the manner of Schumpeter. This theory of innovation, which had originally only been applied to society, expanded beyond the social sciences to become a general principle of historical development. Schumpeter saw the reason in the progress of rationality. He said it removed the constraints of “sacred or semi-sacred tradition”.

Creative destruction as practised by Peter Voulkos in ceramics was a decision of intellectual ceramic artists at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. They did not want to be imitators of the European ceramic tradition that stemmed from immigrants from Britain and Germany, or of the Japanese tradition represented by Bernard Leach in England. It was a decision in favour of an independent, American, tradition-free art in ceramics. It did not touch craft potters, nor did it supersede the decorative work of applied art either then or now. Nevertheless, this kind of ceramics that had developed out of creative destruction took hold of intellectual ceramic art all over the world. It changed the way people looked at things and it changed their consciousness by a higher level of information and increased ceramic diversity besides applied, i.e. decorative art ceramics, which still considers itself to be art. But it is a form of art that continues the tradition of pottery in a manner that it considers to be more aesthetic. To this extent, this view follows the traditional one that is only prepared to consider painted ceramics to be art, starting with ancient Greek vases and going on to artist ceramics in the 20th century. Within ceramics itself, symbolic content only gradually begins to emerge along side the decorative

surface, thus establishing the connection to fine art. This kind of ceramics demands for itself a certain perspective.

How far does fine art enter into applied art? That is to say when does manual skill become art? These questions harbour firstly the problem of terminology and secondly the problem of defining art. Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon equates applied art (“angewandte Kunst”) with craft (“Kunsthandwerk”). The term applied art was coined as a demarcation from production for purposes of trade. The products were often labelled “handmade”. However, both in Meyers Lexikon and the Brockhaus Enzyklopädie, craft (“Kunstgewerbe”) is considered to be a part of fine art. This categorization is strongly contested by applied artists. So when does creative activity start to be art? The simple answer would be, when it is considered to be art in its respective period. In our times, art is subject to the condition that it provides not only an aesthetic but also a high level intellectual experience – in the case of fine art, being free of regulation – by possibly even expressing something which cannot be put into words, or at least only inadequately. It thus makes reference to the enigmatic nature of our world. This definition of art, which of course has to rely on the receptivity and willingness of the viewer, stretches far into the territory of ceramics and excludes neither decoration nor spiritually charged Japanese bowls, or other works in the language of the material, but each time it is dependent on artistic quality, which is simply the transfer of the character of a personality onto the work.

If we consider the transition from craft to art in ceramics from the standpoint of an evolutionary, cultural historic process, it appears to us as a mutation. But actually the desire to create artistically in clay has always existed. In this case it has merely broken out in a contemporary form of expression. – this might be one way of looking at it. Since the nineteen-sixties, development theory has put forward a new concept of the world, as expressed by the Nobel prize winners, Manfred Eigen and Ilya Prigogine in terms of continual change, but not as a result of mutation and selection, rather based on the self-organising systems. This theory, like Darwinism, claims its validity in the transition from inanimate to animate material and from the biosphere to the intellectual sphere.

In the economic process, which is borne by private initiative, the pair of terms “creation – destruction”, in the sense Schumpeter intended, is appropriate to both theories, i.e. that of mutation and that of self-organisation. Whereas according to Marx, the growing social opposition of the classes finds release in revolution, in “creative destruction” the capitalist process possesses the tendency towards “developing permanently rising levels of prosperity, which, if it does not lead to the neutralisation of all social differences, it will at least to their reduction”. Schumpeter’s ideas finally led to a socially acceptable form of capitalism, which we call the social market economy. Under this system, competition is allowed to govern without restriction, and the influence of the state on the business community is kept to a minimum. But private initiative finds its ethical limitations, both inwardly and outwardly. Outwardly through the damage inflicted on developing countries, and inwardly in the uninhibited egoism in the exercise of power, exploitation of the weaker and passing burdens on to others. Nowadays, internet crime can be added to the list.

All this shows how ambiguous freedom is. Ceramists in East Germany could not really appreciate the freedom that was held up to them as the advantage of reunification. Many of them had to give up pottery. Freedom, prophesied Aldous Huxley in his volume of essays “Brave New World Revisited” (1958), a follow-up to his “Brave New World” (1932), would come to an end anyway. Social and technical advances and refined methods of psychological manipulation suggest that in an affluent society, in which riot, poverty and illness had been overcome as freedoms from something, the end of freedoms to do things like religion, art and humanity would arrive in a fraction of the time estimated. Perhaps their creative destruction through a spread of rationality will lead to a better society. Then Hegel would be right when he says that history was striving towards a climax, when a final, rational form of society would be victorious.



Peter Voulkos „Symbol of Destruction“, vessel 1981, h 100 cm