

# Dislimitation

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The history of ceramics resembles the course of events in general: it is the history of the unfolding of freedom. The crucial features of innovation are subsumed under the idea of dislimitation or the removal of constraints. To describe the state of ceramics in the world today means encountering a number of individual histories existing in parallel. For too long, the future of ceramics seemed identical with its past. But change in the world of ceramics is certainly perceptible. For craftspeople and artist-craftspeople who are able to make a good living and who are successful with ceramics, the future may still seem to be a simple extension of the past. They see no reason to reflect on the regenerative potential of ceramics. But the number of doubters who question whether their dreams of a successful and independent life in the midst of beautiful things can be fulfilled is on the increase. The disappointment at this development leads to the question of whether ceramics can generally adapt to accelerating social change under the influence of the changed economic cycle in our civilisation.

The desire for freedom as a vigorous form of dislimiting rigidly ordered systems seemed over a long period to be irrelevant to ceramics. In the Middle Ages, the guilds had been formed, with compulsory membership, dictating to the craftsman what was right and proper. The guilds developed over time, losing their prerogatives with the advent of the freedom of trade, but only *de jure*, not *de facto*. After all, potters were not merely concerned with freedom of trade: on the contrary, they still defend both what they have achieved and the honour of their trade, which are based on preserving the quality of their products by means of legally governed training and qualifications systems. As a productive craft, pottery has had to compete with other forms of production, but it has always managed to retain the ability to survive, even in contemporary economic conditions. Has pottery no urge to be free?

When the potter evolved into the ceramist other trades, besides the original potter, appeared in the ceramics industry (which is based on the division of labour) ranging from handle caster to earthenware sponger. Besides the development of such ceramic trades, many "ceramic" processes developed, up to and including modern technical ceramics, which no longer have any relevance to crafts

and trades. This development occurred not through a continual evolution in handwork but by revolutionary processes, described by Thomas S. Kuhn as a paradigm shift (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Parallel to scientific and technical ceramics, a new paradigm – a new model to emulate – evolved for craft pottery, namely fine art. Craftsmanship had developed into arts-and-crafts, but art was still often understood in its original sense of skill or excellence, as applied for instance to "the art of war" or "the art of conversation". It has only been since the nineteenth century that art has been understood in its present sense of the creative production of individual works of art. A spark of philosophy thus entered the world of the crafts, giving birth to the idea of arts-and-crafts, which then diverged from the world of the other skilled trades. The more the hand was dominated by the mind, the more ceramics was confronted with the demanding knowledge from the world of science, whereas as an applied art it was less dominated by fine art. The freedom of art that did not have to earn a living penetrated the world of ceramics. And since ceramic suppliers have now liberated potter-ceramists from the burden of acquiring scientific knowledge by supplying the appropriate materials, the latter can allow their imagination to run free. At colleges that were initially intended to train potters, the tendency is becoming apparent to do art – not in the sense of craftsmanship, which flourished from the 15th to the 19th century, nor as arts-and-crafts, which reached their zenith in the *Jugendstil* era, nor as applied art, which saw Chinese Song ceramics as the models it wished to emulate, but as fine art. Monochrome glazed vessels already corresponded to *Neue Sachlichkeit* ("New Objectivity") in fine art. But art is not static; it is insatiable in its craving for an abundance of forms and colours. This urge to create art is marked with the desire for freedom, which values imagination higher than a craft ethic. Dislimitation as disinhibition.

Characteristics such as withdrawal, loss and renunciation really do adhere to the new tendencies in ceramics. But we should not impose ourselves on developments by using conventional terminology, but we should make reference to a new vocabulary that is only now being created. Only then can we

realise that we do not have to deal with withdrawal and renunciation but with expansive movements.

This good cause is full of weaknesses, immoderacy, exaggerations. A concept of art in terms of creative invention, the dignity of the material and perfect skills leading to artistic sovereignty is still current. But parallel to this, an individual desire to create art is becoming increasingly widespread, which only superficially takes notice of origins, completely rejects traditions and views chance as a productive partner who removes the burden of invention from the artist. This makes traditional values pale into insignificance today like in the extravagant examples from the world of fine art. Pictures of Coca-Cola bottles or stacks of cartons for Brillo pads from the supermarket can only be sold successfully in the art market by people who are famous anyway. Ceramists cannot keep up with this. Ceramics remains an art form that produces objects with subjective sensitivities and individual production practices. It would defeat its own interests were it to follow the *nouveaux réalistes* who (like Joseph Beuys) as advocates of a stale and shabby reality wanted to liberate humanity from the compulsion to consume by a withdrawal of consumption.

But developments diverge, flowing in countless different directions. There is no "mainstream" that could re-converge and form the predominant stream of art. It is up to ceramists like us to find our own appropriate path in all of this. But with passion alone we cannot fill the gaps left by the absence of a theoretical basis. Dislimitation in a global context meets competition. The specifically European dimension ought to be a competitive advantage. However generally you try to put it, it is impossible to steer the present towards a standard for quality or style. Things are far too much in flux for this. One can only try to inseminate them with visions and opinions. Apollonian severity and rationality will continue to battle with Dionysian chaos - with sporadic reconciliations like in the battle of the sexes. Nietzsche had already discovered this in his first work, "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music" in 1872. He had hoped that profundity could be returned to humanity and to life. And that would be a specifically European contribution.

## Dislimitation as a ubiquitous trend

Dislimitation is the central problem of the present. It penetrates into all areas of life, forming the basis of innumerable changes. Slow evolution becomes immediate availability. Organically grown differences dissolve. Our small world loses its limitations in a global context.

With regard to art, we see that ceramics overcomes its limitations and enters into the world of fine art, but art is also dislimiting itself from within. The dislimitation of art has taken place in a number of stages since the Renaissance. The view that one should read in the book of nature to arrive at art (as expressed by Bernard Palissy in "Discours admirable de la nature ..." in 1580) was the typical opinion of a Renaissance artist as a reaction to the mediaeval contempt for the world. For them, the whole of nature was a book that could be read in terms of mathematics. "The imitation of the perfection of nature can give perfection to an artificial work", said Johann Christoph Gottsched in 1730 in his "Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst ...". But ten years later in the Enlightenment, this theory collapsed. Beauty was no longer the absolute characteristic of things themselves but the special quality of a certain form of subjective cognition, of sensory perception. Seeing became realisation - crossing the first traditional border in art experience: recognising the world as an infinite, mysterious whole without limitations, only indirectly perceptible through symbols and thus as expanding consciousness. Subjectivising the experience of beauty had however also led in a further sense to a dislimitation of the arts with regard to each other, as well as between art and not-art, finally leading to a loss of the fullness and clear delineation of the concrete object. At some European art schools, virtual art has taken over from the classic productive arts. It is a relic of the metaphysical soundness of European modernism.

If dislimitation is to be described as a general trend, then this is also true in the field of sociology, in particular with regard to the dissolution of the limitations to employment established in industrial society as well as freelance work and leisure.

The dislimitation of employment is interpreted as the subjectivising of work \*). In the field of freelance work, subjectivity is characteristic of ceramics in the form of creativity and intuition. It is directed towards self-motivation and the autonomous discovery of purpose and meaning, which is to say that a dislimitation takes place with regard to purpose and motivation, with the aim of self-fulfilment.

But freelance ceramists, like freelancers in the industrial world, actively have to establish relationships with their customers. They bind themselves to professional standards and are subject to the individual surveillance of colleagues. A reputation that has been earned, which manifests itself for instance by working for highly respected customers or galleries, or in awards or publications, may lead to customers or the media seeking to make contact with the maker on their own initiative. In contrast, acquiring customers among unknown clients is slow and tends to be unpromising.

Freelance ceramists have infinite space for creativity. As a rule, they see more potential in their occupation to keep learning something new than wage or salary earners. Their point of reference is first and foremost recognition within the professional community. The professional ethic of the true freelance ceramist corresponds to that of the crafts as well as to that which is characteristic of the classic professionalism in the industry.

Leisure in the sense we mean when we speak of ceramics as a hobby is characterised by freedom, independence, spontaneity, fun and above all by the absence of any concrete usefulness; i.e. it is an end in itself. Leisure is the other side of the coin to regular work. It stabilises mental health, going far beyond merely providing a change. Ceramics has a leisure value in that it is an end in itself, this being a feeling of creating something that provides concrete empirical access to the object of knowledge and also in the end allowing us to experience the wonder of nature and the arts, with which we are dealing. The longing for happiness is only superficially satisfied in this process. A significant portion of one's own individual longing remains unsatisfied in the form of striving for more skill, experience and knowledge, for the dislimitation of one's own abilities.