

Spirit of the age

In the arts business generates an annual gross added value of 63bn EUR, putting it right behind engineering and the automobile industry, ceramics makes a pretty feeble figure. Especially in comparison to computer games, which are also counted as part of the arts in general. Neither politicians nor lobbyists can prevent the world from changing.

Ceramics suffers from the fact that its standing is diminished the further one is removed from it, because it is generally regarded as a mere craft. If it wants to achieve a higher standing in the eyes of society, it must behave as in real life. You cannot force people to love you, you have to be lovable. As art, ceramics enters into a position to which it is not accustomed: art is a state of uncertainty in which everything can be revoked. Umberto Eco called it "freedom of choice" ("The Open Work", 1962, rev. 1976), where he referred to his teacher, Nicola Abbagnano, who said, "Freedom means decision and decision means possibility" ("Possibilità e libertà", Turin 1956, English: "Possibility and Freedom", also 1956). The positive aspect of possibility is making decisions – the freedom of choice. These decisions require actions without being able to refer back to authorities or traditions. They are enmeshed in the capitalist system in which we live. Its main characteristic is the control of economic processes via the market. This is about providing for the community and not about creating opportunities for self-fulfilment. The powerhouse of this development is technological progress, which benefits industry. Parallel to this we find ceramic art in a state like science two hundred years ago. At that time, Wilhelm von Humboldt spoke of "something that has not yet been quite found and can never wholly be discovered, but which must unceasingly be sought".

Our times are marked by characteristics of retreat, loss and renunciation. But we must not impose our will on developments with old fashioned concepts, instead we must relate them to something new, which is emerging now. Then it becomes clear that we are not confronted with withdrawal or renunciation but with expansive movements. For ceramists as craftspeople or artists, this is about surviving as an unimportant freelancer and about awakening creative forces in the context of historic events. We are in an age of mobility. It prevents the intellectual provincialism of rooted people, whereas the rooted ones force those who are too mobile to respect the emergence of traditions in their environment. In ceramics, art is still active in the context of tradition. What Richard Wagner called for in the Meistersinger von Nürnberg: "Do not despise the masters and honour their art". But the influence on consumer behaviour is no longer the same as 1868. In studying sales psychology, Martin Lindstrom from Denmark came across world religions and discovered that their common pillars were symbols, history, mysteries and visions, just as they are the bases of this kind of psychology, which is directed towards success on the market. Ceramics can lay claim to this too.

With reference to culture, cultural anthropology offers us comparative arguments from its experience with various cultures. This is a young branch of science, which has only existed since the early 1970s, which combines a number of specialist areas. It deals with humankind in culture, in the world and in history. It aims to describe how humankind uses its talents in the field of creative culture, and how that rebounds on it. Cultural anthropology is not so much a science of the mind as of the soul. It would like to save the world, which is filled with continuing growth, environmentally harmful progress and uninhibited consumption. It stands before "what can never wholly be discovered, but which must unceasingly be sought". The study of this field must take human nature into consideration. This brings ceramics into the close proximity of the philosophy of life. It is related to the nature of life in its restless emotionality that is determined from within, in the untiring creativity that often flows from unknown sources and in its holistic nature. It defines itself from its history and from culture and it references outstanding exemplary figures in culture and history.

In contrast to other cultures, contemporary Western culture is unique in its emphasis of originality. It is considered to be normal that art is not judged, classified and explained by society but by experts so that it can be understood and appreciated. Since the end of the nineteenth century the greatest artists are those who break with tradition and thus, at least for a time, make their works incomprehensible to many. With this devaluation of tradition, a concept of the artist is linked, who lives in poverty and battles with the traditional idea of genius. Originality is required of art, leading to something as yet unknown. We place

such value on it because we think it is a way to achieve enlightenment and a broadening of experience. In modern art, experimental originality dominates. Artists compete to find original new solutions that can replace traditional ones. According to contemporary aesthetic standards, originality is more important than comprehensibility. And artwork may be criticised for being too easily understood. Many critics more or less consciously accept that innovations must at least partly be incomprehensible.

How can this compulsion to be original be explained? One important factor is the reaction to mass production. This leads to a devaluation of craft but also to a devaluation of all newly created art that does not conform to the contemporary style. Another factor to be considered is the dependence of the contemporary artist on the market, where supply always exceeds demand. The third element is the rapid evolution of culture. In a way, the emphasis on originality reflects the speed with which this transformation is accomplished.

But humankind is adaptable. Alongside creativity, adaptability is one of its fundamental characteristics. It permits individuals to "shape themselves" in the way required by experience of life. They must set themselves goals, and if it does not work out, they must correct them, for there will be a "morning of creation" at any moment. They grow stronger in the pursuit of their goals. In the creative self-perfection they are aiming at, they are creators of their selves, thereby becoming creators of culture.

Freedom is always limited by fate. History, geography, society are our fundamental heritage. Individuals are to some extent moulded in advance and have to work with their own potential. But they must not expect any recommendations or rules from others on how to live their lives. It remains the task and the problem of every individual. Everyone is given certain tools that enable them to develop creative designs and that enable them to invent, devise, evaluate and decide. These tools are the sense of reason that has emancipated itself from any dependency. In its interaction with creativity, it is a promising possibility to pursue a path that sets a process in motion.

But not all possibilities are exhausted by everything staying as it is except for its artistic standards.

But it is also necessary to view critically the tendency of ceramics to move towards fine art and to justify its existence against mass produced goods by individuality. In contrast to industrial design, but also in modern art, individuality means to us something personal or characteristic, which belongs to one person alone. Personality needs no style, because that would be something that also belongs to others. In modern art, style is made by the market. It needs stars. They have their moments, but sooner or later, they no longer deliver. Then new stars emerge. If ceramics gives itself up for lost and is absorbed in this kind of art, it will lose its personality. When choosing a profession, "directional properties" are revealed by predisposition. Anyone choosing ceramics, understood as an artistic challenge, has chosen the unity of art and technology. They see themselves in a vast cultivated landscape to which not only the USA and Europe belong but the whole world. In it, history is the fundament of all values. It is distinct from a kind of art that, in disjointed transformations, today fights consumption and tomorrow offers concept art for consumption, which elevates a hiking trail on a map as art, or from a kind of art which turns pictures upside down. This is a conflict in art, which emerged with the Bauhaus. Gropius wanted to educate society with good design. But he employed artists who denied any relationship between the artistic image and reality. This led to design conceived as human rationality, as a corrective to the mechanical rationality of the industrial apparatus. It obeys sales psychology and market research. On the other hand, the individual art of ceramics developed as a form of production which is fundamentally different from industrial production, but on the other hand is no less dependent on the scientific conditions. It follows the ideals of inner disposition. And "free" art remains entirely free of all this, but is dominated by the international art market.

This was the transformation within the smaller area within which ceramics is normally located. But there is more, and the large-scale transformation that society at large is going through also affects ceramics. Politics finds itself confronted with the demand for greater participation of the populace. Conflicts arise in which

historically given conditions between social groupings are the cause. As social conflicts they are of great importance for change in society. The diagnosis is: communicate better. On a large scale and on a small one. And then we finally cotton on: we are in an age of communication. Problems are solved when we take something new from a different level, which previously had nothing to do with us and use it for our own ends. The Neocraft movement from Halifax for the renewal of ceramics appeals to our self-confidence so that ceramics is not absorbed in any old art form. This has not led to any communality or communication yet. In contrast to Katrin Schober in Hoisdorf, Northern Germany, and a number of others. They exchange views with ceramics friends via Facebook.

They talk about their work, their problems and their successes. This can be stimulating and may turn out to be motivating. If success follows, the standards will be raised, making higher demands on one's own performance. Communication can be a force with a dynamic motivational effect. All of this was the reason I have set up a Facebook group. And I appeal to you all: join in the Facebook group "Keramik"!

With 550 million "friends", Facebook has become a phenomenon for the whole of humanity. It is not really intended to forge and maintain human relationships. Critics thunder that private space is abused for mercantile ends. But it is up to every individual how much they reveal. Ceramists from all over the world can participate in the "Keramik" group without revealing their address, telephone number or any other personal details. But new friendships can be formed and the vision of the founders of Facebook can be fulfilled: the world will become a better place. With regard to ceramists, it can help to develop, reinforce and spread a sense of community. Through shared interests, sharing and passing on information, perhaps joint activities, a sense of belonging can be built up in the social unit of ceramics. Social psychology speaks of empathy. What it means with this term is the development of the concept of the other person's interests. The ability to put yourself in their position. Zuckerberg says, "If you look at it from this angle, it makes our lives richer."

This kind of communication, which runs parallel to social change, did not previously belong to our cultural norms. We are normally under the forming influence of our specialist training, which did not foresee anything of this kind. It was aimed at developing knowledge and skills, and it is still hard for us to see anything in it which does not only enrich our lives but which may be an aid to our work.

It would be foolish to fight these developments. What matters is being a part of the development yourself.