

Ceramics – The Whole Truth

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Being tied to one material cannot be art – this is the argument of the academies of art in denying ceramics the status of art worthiness. It is true that ceramics derives its uniqueness from its link with nature, to whose material laws it is subject. But this is not the whole truth.

Nature is not only an object that is suitable for creation. It is the reality that humankind finds itself in. In these terms, nature is the given and tangible basis that lies in ceramics in contrast to everything that, generally and thus also in the academies, is understood by the term art.

The reality of ceramics is not exhausted in the visible world but leads far more into the deeper reality of cognitive thought. This kind of thinking is a question of development and is approaching being able to determine what a ceramic artist experiences and creates.

You can shape something from a lump of clay without the slightest awareness of the universe that you have taken a step into. Our diverse and varied world has evolved from simple origins that were exclusively geological. The scope of ceramics between simple and sophisticated is infinite, as it is in fine art. But the relationship between subject and object is special. What is special is that nature with its cognitive content is the object. So-called 20th century applied art was important in ceramics not because it followed on from a sense of euphoria for technology, as an expression of the times, but because it made a crucial contribution with the insights of science, which superseded metaphysics. Science also leads to an overall understanding of elemental and fundamental things, thereby making the methodology and problems of the subject into a unity of knowledge and skills.

The euphoria for technology was the breeding ground for the willingness to accept technological knowledge. It has remained latently present even today

whilst another attitude began to dominate, which had already begun to develop in the history of the western world in the 19th century. Through Sigmund Freud, people began to understand their own actions in a different way. They learned that inside us, drives and forces rule of whose power we had hitherto had no inkling. In an entirely new way, Freud revealed the pleasure and the terror of human nature. Right up to the present his teachings and those of his pupils have remained as bitterly controversial as Darwin's. The birth of psychoanalysis was a moment of happiness for the art world too, for from then on, discovering what human nature is all about became the artist's lodestar. They began to describe semiotically, in patterns, the complex processes of life that could unlock a whole area of phenomena. And ceramic artists repeatedly find analogies for this, which they are able to express thanks to their raw material. This is a heuristic principle – one that serves to find new insights – in the interpretation of ceramics in the same could originally be found in Japanese bowls. This basically resembles scientific research, but as Gerhard Richter put it, as “a different form of thinking”. Bernadette Baumgartner's boxes inscribed on the inside are this kind of ceramics, “Hidden in the weakness of pride, humility sings its little song”. Insight on a pathway that spirals its way up the paltry tree of knowledge. As it develops, virtues emerge as if on the tablets of stone.

By the end of the 20th century, technology had been reduced to superficial significance, which became ever thinner, to the advantage of inwardness, of the soul. We are seeing a stampede for psychology and how it finds its way into ceramics. Ceramic artists see themselves with different eyes today than they did in the past, when it was all about mastering various activities and knowing about cause and effect. They are pondering ways of optimising their life and their work. Measurable phenomena are not as important as unmeasurable ones. And whereas

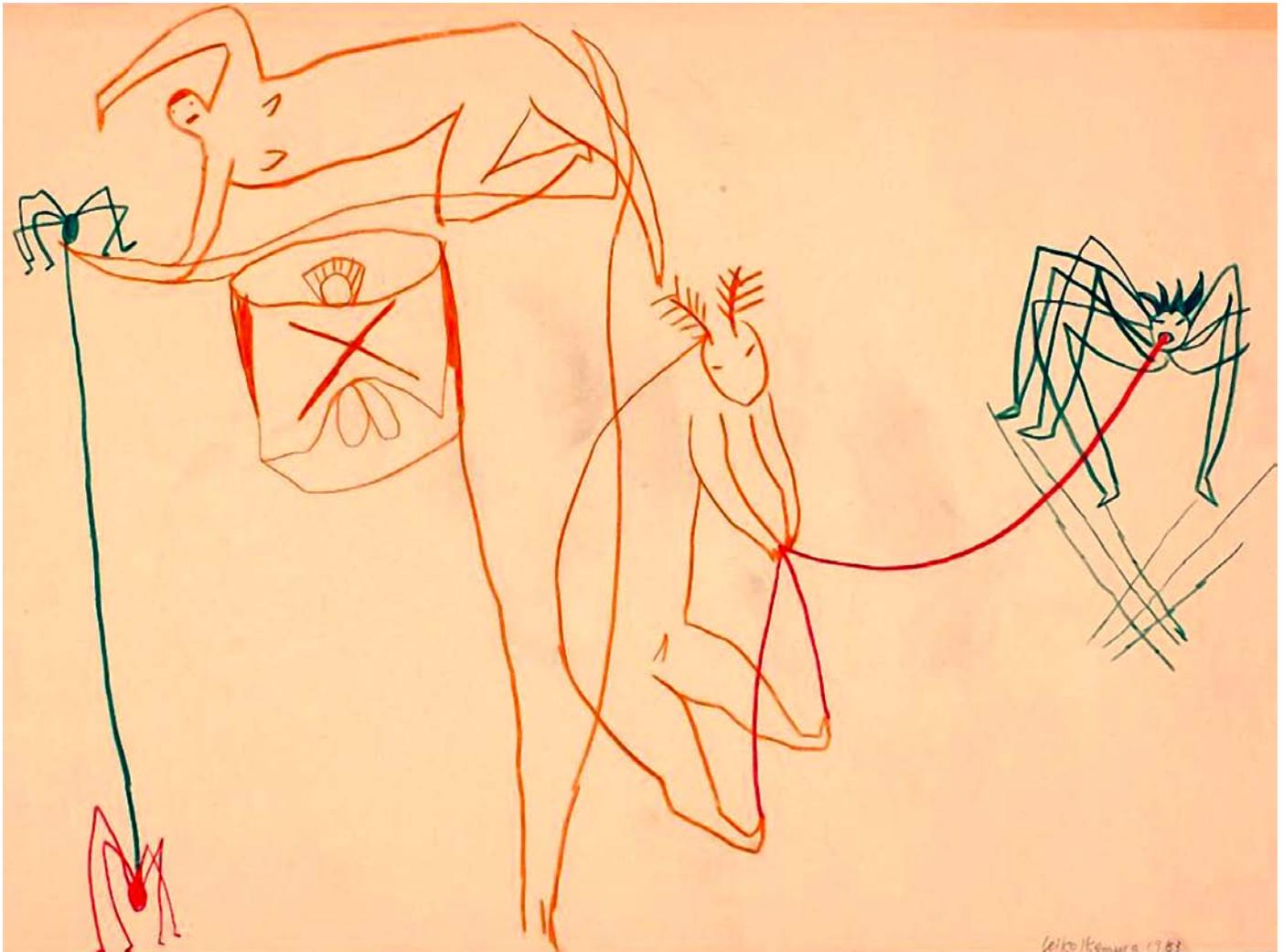
in nature, the processes run in one direction that aims to preserve the existence of its exuberant diversity, for the inventive and imaginative spirit diversity consists in individuality.

So that this can come into its own, new characteristics have developed that have taken over the limelight against the kind of art that depends on knowledge and skills. Art is now supposed not to be desired or admired by anybody, and certainly not to be needed, but to be witty and original. As an attraction, it is to compete with other attractions.

This also means a new understanding of tradition. Leiko Ikemura, who has caused a stir in the art world with her ceramics as well as with her other work, has represented this in a drawing: while tradition in the popular sense drifts by, “Fragile Being”, awakened from meditative silence, moves forward freely to a higher plane.

Currently, in ceramics we find ourselves in a position similar to painting in the Renaissance. It only became art after and because it had admitted its allegiance to philosophy. But today, art all around us is on the road to nowhere. In the dynamic of development, idealists have little chance of success. If you want to find the whole truth about ceramics, you have to start looking.

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Drawing by Leiko Ikemura, Untitled 1983/1984. Leiko Ikemura has taught for over twenty years at Berlin University of the Arts. Until the end of April of this year, she exhibited at Berlin Museum of Asian Art under the title of "Korekara", or "From Now On". The exhibition had the subtitle of The Serenity of Fragile Being, in which death as a new beginning in the cycle of life always resonates. Previously the Tokyo National Museum had shown a retrospective of her work. One of her haiku runs "Dreams swallow every night, start a journey to find your soul, to give it colour, to wake the gods." (© for the drawing: Kolumba, Cologne. Photo: Lothar Schnepf)

Going beyond the interpretation of meaning, the picture shows something more – something we see in contemporary ceramics, and in fine art in general, that it is immaterial for the meaning whether the work has been executed with meticulous precision and is clear and beautiful, or if it slapdash. Not only is this immaterial, beyond its communicative purpose it also has an expressive purpose that is more emotional than a personal style. Among other things, this is one of the differences to creative crafts. In the formal distinctness of its work, one

has to admire the skill involved. Thus the skill in still lifes and genre paintings, and the academic art of the 19th century were the art of their times and are worthy of being admired. Art history, which studied them, had been projected onto these works from the outside. Modernism was at a loss with its definitions of content, form and symbol. Its philosophy came from within, from the artists themselves, who spoke out through manifestos, which had not existed previously. Ceramics is in a similar position today.

A degree of democratisation may be accorded to modern art in the sense of the freedom of imperfection. It is like the imperfection of the physiognomy. It promotes empathy because the observer transfers feelings onto the work being observed.