

I CAN DO BETTER

Creative Dissatisfaction

Gustav Weiß

In no other field of the arts is there a greater sense of togetherness than in ceramics. It is like a family business, a company in which people not only just do their job but is also concerned that the whole enterprise is sound and it will continue to be so in future.

The world of art and craft ceramics has two faces. One is shaped by the principle of life succeeding. This principle is represented by creative individuals who are concerned to delight society with beautiful things. It advocates peace of mind as a pleasing feeling and continual accompaniment, which corresponds to a natural human desire. No impetus for change in the future can be expected from this principle.

The other side is represented by the principle of progress. Thinking progressively has been typical of the West since the Enlightenment. After the events of the last century, in ceramics it is based upon the conviction that ceramics is able to achieve more than people think it can. A conservative view of ceramics led to it being scrapped from the curriculum of most art schools.

This stimulated people's ambition to prove that this was not a fair assessment. The decision stemmed from the backward-looking views of the decision-makers, but what remained unrecognised and unspoken out of ignorance was the fact that art academies were out of their depth with ceramics if they wanted to exhaust all the possibilities inherent in it: at first sight, ceramics may be a way of producing art with many variations that is limited by the material, but beyond that, like no other field of art, it leads one to challenging thoughts about the whole and the general.

This is why in this context progressive thinking has as its basis the motivation to prove that intellect and imagination can fulfil the culture of things with new ideas and new life. Intellect and imagination come from the mind. The intellect enriches, the imagination fulfils with joy. Intel-

lect and imagination are concerned with what happens and exists around us. Which means some people say, "I can do better". This not only means better than others, of course or better than what already exists, but better than what I have managed before in giving form to an idea.

What of tomorrow?

The principle mentioned first, of life succeeding, finds success in a sense of satisfaction. This is the sign of a fulfilled period of time. In old age, a person justifies their existence with contentment. Without it, they would be unhappy. They no longer compare what they have done with others' works, to be spurred on, nor with images from their imagination that are waiting for fulfilment. They leave it to the younger ones, who are inspired by the conflict of generations. They are dissatisfied with the status quo. And it is dissatisfaction of this kind that I believe belongs to art. Creative dissatisfaction.

It was not always like this, but it started elsewhere, a hundred years ago when to achieve innovation Joseph Schumpeter called for the creative destruction of the "restraint of sacred or semi-sacred tradition". This idea has become a general principle of historical development in disciplines going far beyond the social sciences, including in art.

Ai Weiwei took this idea up and drastically presented his critique of society with his art performance, when he demonstratively dropped and smashed a two thousand year-old vase from the Han dynasty. Drawing a line under the past changed into a protest against what it has become.

The came Pussy Riot with their "punk prayer" in the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, for which they went to prison. And in St Petersburg, Petr Pavlensky insisted that it was art when he wrapped himself naked in barbed wire outside par-

liament, sewed up his mouth and nailed his scrotum to the cobbles in Red Square to express his dissatisfaction with the status quo. But creative destruction lacks a positive incentive. It is only a negative definition.

Creative dissatisfaction is different. It demands and inspires. It liberates to achieve a more productive state of self awareness. It is a preliminary stage of satisfaction.

Satisfaction in the world of art and craft is based on recognition and complacency. But this occurred through historical and political narrow thinking – even an exhibition of German ceramists in London in 1968 was a sensation that people spoke about for years.

A sense of satisfaction also came about because self-fulfilment was considered to represent a high quality of life because it is an independent creative activity with its flexibility, autonomy of action, and freedom to organize one's time. But this kind of small-scale satisfaction implies complacency.

Anyone who says of themselves, "I can do better" may mean with this that they can go to the limits, and thinks about how they can be overcome within the compass of their own abilities. Thinking creatively enhances experiential value.

We find haute couture dresses – or elaborate imaginative teapots made by ceramists – are meaningless, valueless artworks, elevated beyond any appreciation of art. Similarly, we accept it as an expression of the will to create art when an artist's statement says that the dialogue with clay leads the artist to a balance between expansion and contraction. This is like humus in the soil. In itself inedible, it brings forth the loveliest fruit, rich in vitamins, nourishing, with healing properties.

Neither in craft nor art is it enough to achieve a private, subjective sense of satisfaction through making something. It is also about a contribution to society. With the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius wanted aes-

thetic industrial production to educate people to have to a better understanding of art. As a result, industrial design developed as an alternative to handicrafts.

Potters felt called upon to add quality to industrial products, but they refused to give up their tradition. They felt far more that they were the polar opposite of the destruction power of the industrial system. This still frequently claimed. But the fact that the private sphere cannot be socially as relevant in the complexity of modern society as thinking in the broad terms of social problems is often overlooked. This led to the emergence of workshops with team work. There is a division of labour in industrial design anyway. Team work and the division of labour lead to a larger store of knowledge.

What distinguishes craft, art and industrial design from one another? For all of them, what Oscar Wilde said about being dissatisfied is true: "Discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation". It is often claimed that art differs from craft in that the latter only aims to achieve skilfulness. But a level of skill is also a prerequisite of art, and it is required everywhere, in politics or in business. Craft also does not differ so much from art through its bond with tradition as through its relationship to society, with which it lives in harmony, whereas the attitude of avant-garde artists constantly brings them into conflict with society, as the art performances in China and Russia prove. In addition, the public shows little inclination to learn the language of the contemporary artist in order to understand them, while at the same time elevating them to the status of heroes. None of this is true of craft, which is comprehensible to the public, nor for design. Craft differs from design in that it is autonomous, whereas design in the sense of industrial design as it is understood in our part of the world is governed by economics and market research.

And now from craft to art. We remember this historical process during the Renaissance, when painters and sculptors were still considered artisans, but today, craft becomes art in a different way than it used to be because the work becomes art through quality. Artisans who see their craft intellectually will become dissatisfied with the monotony of repetition. They become artists without making themselves dependent on the art business as soon as their work is perceived emotionally and intellectually by others. It is subjective experience in the perception of the recipient that lends the work a special aesthetic value, and wherein its value as art lies against other, less accomplished pieces. And philosophy also credits itself with participation in the process of creation. It is immaterial if the piece has been traditionally made or whether it is a figuration that is free of it. But it is not a question of what the artist says in their statement but it is about the information contained in the work. But because objectifications form the everyday world, in which countless individuals pour out meaning into the world, it is not enough to demand meaning to distinguish between art and not-art. Or beauty, because as with people, you can be moved, entranced by beauty without knowing what it looks like behind the facade.

The consequences of dissatisfaction in art are simple and subjective for the individual as long as they are based on insight. In contrast, the movements in art in the 19th century that led to Modernism are complex – because dissatisfaction in society as a whole made people want to tear down the bridges to all tradition. All the misery of life at this time in Paris, the birthplace of Modernism, is portrayed by Wolfgang Pohrt in a slim volume, *Der Geheimagent der Unzufriedenheit*. Balzac. Rückblick auf die Moderne ("Secret Agent of Discontent. Balzac. Looking back at Modernism"), Berlin, 1984.

The artist strives to achieve a renewal of art analogous to industrial production. A radical, revolutionary transformation in the creative process as well as in the goals of art came about. This was "Modernism".

And today, there is now a second Modernism, which is no longer satisfied with the first. In is an uninterrupted state of becoming driven by creative dissatisfaction.

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