

Laws of Change in Creativity

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Comparisons between related cultures show that there are parallels between certain creative processes in making things. Cultural research formulates them as laws in the evolutionary development of culture.

Evolution, with which we have been familiar since Darwin with reference to the development of living creatures, also applies to knowledge and material cultural assets. Evolution in culture is based on learning processes, i.e. it has to do with the acquisition of skills and knowledge through which the accumulation of technology and knowledge can occur. Culture works with these means in general. With regard to ceramics, however, no such progress can be ascertained. Its high points in the past have always been the high points in craft or applied art and they derived from skill, without progress in the development of general knowledge playing a part in it. It was rather the soul which produced uncontrived works that were in touch with nature. The most famous example were the rice bowls of the Korean peasants in the 16th century, which formed a pinnacle of achievement in craft after Japanese tea masters had elevated them to their model. In the Momoyama Period (1573-1615), they lead to a further flowering in the crafts. There was nothing comparable anywhere else in the world. What was the same everywhere, however, was the decline in the relationship to nature, the chastity and innocence of creation and the rise of artistic ambition. A selection process and a continually increasing striving for social status accompanied this trend. In the mid-20th century, a transformation occurred that had its origins in California: for the first time in its history, ceramics professed to being fine art as a part of the Abstract Expressionist movement. This meant intellectual aspirations that freedom brought with it. The present-day condition can be represented in a simple diagram of creative freedom.

Comparative behavioural scientists have discovered that there are laws that govern the development of skilled crafts. This branch of comparative behavioural science is termed cultural ethology. It deals with “all phenomena and processes of material and non-material culture”. This bold definition is from the Austrian behavioural scientist, Otto Koenig (1914-1992), who founded this branch of science. He did research on tra-

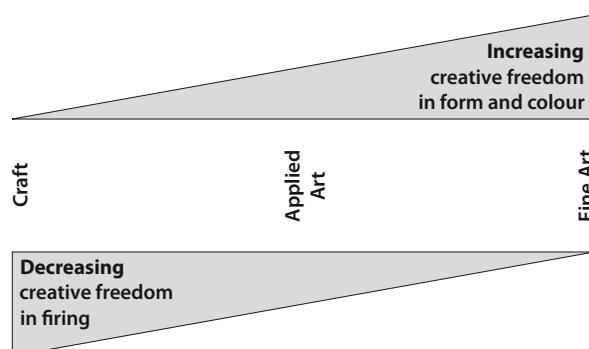
ditional costumes and uniforms and on the ritualisation of the eye motif as a protection from evil. Koenig agreed with his mentor Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) that a comparison of cultures had to be included in the study of vertebrates as humankind had evolved from the animal kingdom. Including vertebrates in a comparison of cultures avoided any risk of “elevating the special case to a law because of the brevity of the base line”. And as to ritualisation, like with animals, it is a particular form of communication. Julian Huxley (1887-1975) had observed that behaviours that were originally for the preservation of the species became symbols that served as communicative signals. He quoted nest building among great crested grebes, which attract females with symbolic signals. He stated that a change of function in the animal kingdom occurred that was analogous to that to be observed in human culture. In human society, ritualisation is a kind of supra-individual social behaviour that in the course of the development of culture had become a traditional habit. The original practical point of the activity became in both cases a continuation of acquired behaviour. The separation of natural science from the human sciences was now obsolete in his opinion.

In a different way, culture is more diverse than biology, which studies innate characteristics, whereas in the study of culture, the focus is on acquired ones. Science, which seeks objectively for laws, has to do with subjective processes. But it must separate personal from impersonal matters. Of course this is at the heart of any scientific activity, but it is particularly difficult in culture: it is the totality of the typical ways of life in a population including the mental state that supports it, particularly its values (cf. Brockhaus Enzyklopädie). In addition to this vast diversity, there are also the differences be-

tween various periods and regions. Even if we believe that everything changes, evolves, develops, it is scarcely imaginable that there are objective laws governing what people have devised, invented or created. We are confronted here with an infinity of possibilities that we do not normally recognise as such. We are familiar with “eternity” as an immobile condition that remains thus for ever. In contrast: the mobile “infinity” of time which has no beginning and no end. Then there is the diversity of appearances and character in living beings – an infinity that is continued with every birth. This has its correspondence in the diversity of cultural creations of humans, who are endowed with intelligence – an infinity that is continued in everything that they create.

Let us restrict ourselves to the material culture of the made environment in our Western world. Of the lines describing the laws of the processes of cultural transformation that Koenig defined, one in particular is illuminating for the field of culture that affects us because it reverses the principle of self determination that we lay claim to and says that we live under the dictate of laws – unconsciously and inevitably. Koenig says that when objects lose their function, they make a transition into the field of symbol, decoration, prestige or to impress, and become more variable in material, form and colour. This means that the development of such things does not occur after the principle of growing, blossoming, bearing fruit and perishing but that in culture, in place of perishing, life can continue in the sense that it has lost its original function. Continuing to live in culture, things take on a new function: symbolic, decorative, prestigious, impressive. With new impetus for material, form and colour. This can all be clearly seen in ceramics in its progress from its original purpose towards fine art.

In contrast to biology, then, there is no extinction of species but instead a transformation. It is often said that pottery is dying out because industry has conquered the market and is competing for the potter's livelihood. It is certainly true that working with glazes that the potter has developed himself, particularly with



glazes made from ash and rock, has become rare. A hundred years ago, art glazes were the optimistic showpiece of applied art, ignited by Bernard Leach's Potter's Book. Open air firings had more friends than they do today. Saltglazing suffered the worst fate. All these cases have gone the same way as the apple. The market has reduced the number of varieties to about half a dozen. Varieties people were particularly fond of and that are no longer commercially available can only be found in private gardens. This is precisely what is going on in ceramics. Not that the potter's craft is dying out. It must forgo certain types of production. What is still worth doing and still rewarded is targeted at people who can appreciate it. They only appreciate it if it is of superior quality.

The American journalist Bill McKibben described "The End of Nature" in 1989. With regard to making, the concept of nature has changed. Its laws are increasingly accepted as something that is simply the way they are. The ceramist is generally no longer permeated by them. They used to be the potter's personal experience and the basis of his self confidence. When art becomes the ceramist's priority, his interest is focused on success, no longer on the experience. The public may find throwing, bonfire firing, paper kilns, raku and crystal glazes interesting but all that lies beyond societal importance. The destruction of nature is spreading in modern contemporary society. As McKibben says, "We have finished with what defined nature for us". We can state for ceramics that the last century raised the ceramist's consciousness of nature to a relative high point. Relative because it did not go beyond experience. Anything that went further became fine art, and through research, technical ceramics went its own way, which achieved unsuspected importance. It no longer has anything to do with aesthetics. In applied art the experiment ended not in research but in an increased creative freedom. In this field, an experiment for the purposes of research is a sampling of experience and does not lead to new territory as true research does. It is rather the freedom of art that beckons with new areas of experiment.

*I would so like to tarry,
But the wagon rolls on...*

A Berlin pharmacist made this poem from the 1870s popular ("Hoch auf dem Gelben Wagen"), a song expressing that you cannot halt the passage of time. Walter Scheel sang it when he was president of West Germany, expressing wisdom appropriate to his high office. Tradition is being at rest. But there

is no time for this. There is not even time to finish your sentences. ASAP! There is no longer any time to find the lowest common denominator for the present, and it would anyway be in vain. Church, children, the kitchen (a German expression describing a woman's traditional role), Romanticism and Enlightenment, Baroque and Jugendstil. Something always remains. Everything turns up again in diversity, but above all it is the unexpected and the unprecedented that determines the course. At TEDGlobal conferences, ideas are presented and rewarded with substantial prizes if they are worth disseminating. "TED" has to do with technology and design, but with entertainment too. That is our present day, governed by the internet. The zeitgeist is hiding behind all the abbreviations and acronyms.

That is the difference to the irreversible extinction of species in nature. Culture rejuvenates itself, but it needs death to do so. Like with people, death is genetically programmed: "It is necessary", as Manfred Eigen says, the director of the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen, "because regressive developments that may proceed from a mixing of the gene pool must be excluded in evolution." Art and nature, which seem to flee from each other, are subject to the same laws.

The philosopher and culture researcher, Peter Sloterdijk drew lessons from 2,500 years of cultural history and came to the conclusion that in the process of the world, after the hiatus, more energy was released than could be harnessed under forms of civilisation that were capable of being passed down. According to this, the impulse that initiates the hiatus is a law of development in accordance with which culture grows upward "like a continually growing tree of human consciousness" (Schlegel). To adduce a further example from ceramics: when Chinese porcelain was to be reinvented elsewhere, the natural raw materials were not available in the Middle East, nor were the kilns or the experience with firing. And they certainly were not in the West. The impulse from this hiatus led to Persian potters inventing faience. If the diversity of species in culture now has to accept hiatuses, the spirit of invention is called upon. And not just the imagination, because the present day is not satisfied with merely continuing the past in imaginative variations. The skilled craftsman can no more elude digital, mobile information and knowledge society than the applied or fine artist can because they live in this society, which is subject to fundamental societal transformation. It

is not science or psychology that describe humankind in this society, its behaviour and its motivation, its friendship, its loyalty, its love and what it does, but the economy. And that is calculable because everybody only ever thinks of their own advantage. Every single individual is programmed in today's advanced capitalism by everything being a commodity. It is a question of moving with the times to sell everything as dearly as possible: one's products, one's knowledge and skills and oneself. Frank Schirrmacher says that not only crises can thus be calculated in advance but a whole society can be simulated in a computer.

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