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Beyond Gravity

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**Domain 2, Teaching and Learning
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Beyond Gravity, Ceramics in a digital culture

In July 1999 the 's-Hertogenbosch Academy of Art and Design organised in cooperation with the municipal Museum het Kruihuis and the European Ceramic Work Centre and the ceramic industry the workshop 'Beyond Gravity, ceramics in a digital culture'.

For two weeks 30 ceramic-students from the Netherlands, the USA, Great Britain, France and Spain explored the possibilities of digital designing for this art discipline that is so literally earth bound to the material of clay. In cooperation with the workshop leaders, the renowned artists in the field of sculpture and ceramics Walter McConnell, Nicolas Dings, Thom Puckey and Pjotr Müller, they experimented with 3d design programs – such as 3D Studio Max, Desk Artes and AutoCAD - digital animation, sound programmes et cetera to confront themselves with a couple of basic questions that are being raised in the contemporary world of art-making. To the students in ceramics all this was new, as well as in some extent to the artists.

As Walter McConnell put it: **“The students and the artists were considering the rapid on-slaught of new technologies and digitalisation of information and images in the culture. The questions raised considered: What is the place for objectmakers and ceramists within that development, how do they come to terms with that? Is it our place to simply ignore what goes on in that virtual space, or is it something that an artist interested in physical phenomenon and materials in real time and real space can approach as a new tool that the creative individual can use to see what it does for his work and still maintain that connection to the sensual material world? Or does one say, I can make things rotate and spin and do things beyond gravity and I can visualise things I can't see in real space, so maybe I abandon on that and from now on I work on the computer?”**

All these questions came out of a short essay the famous art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto was asked to write on this topic. This was his essay:

Handedness and Post-modern Art

by Arthur C. Danto, 1999

The idea of craft is an unanticipated product of the industrial revolution. Since everything humans did before that time was craft in one way or another, involving hand and judgment, the concept of craft had nothing to contrast with. But the Industrial Revolution robbed the hand of all its skills, building them instead into machines, leaving the hand to perform repetitive basic actions – turning a knob, tightening a nut, pressing a button. Everything that distinguished handed beings was appropriated by the machinery that turned out uniform products in quantities limited only by the capacity of society to consume them.

The handed being could ideally have been eliminated were it not for that the whole process needed consumers, with the wherewithal to buy bicycle wheels, grooming combs, snow-shovels, bottle racks, and urinals, all in profitable numbers. Craft emerged as a concept in the late 19th century as an anti-industrial ideology, which advocated returning skills to the hand, and aestheticizing the autographic quality of non-uniform products –the hand-made, the hand-wrought, the hand-sewn, the hand-spun, the hand-woven, the hand-molded. To choose the often rough and uneven craft-object over the smooth and uniform industrial object was to declare one's preference for a society radically different from the one industrialization generated. It was to will a more primitive and allegedly a more fulfilling form of life.

Craft-folk were in but not of the industrialized society, as Christians were in but not of the Roman Empire. My little list of industrial products is an enumeration of some of the better known ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, objects he selected for their absolute lack of handedness, and for being beyond good taste or bad. No one can differentiate one metal grooming comb from another by aesthetic criteria – they are all alike. So no one can have good or bad taste in grooming combs. It is rarely emphasized that Duchamp's most notorious work, *Fountain*, is a ceramic object, all the more ironic in that clay was a paradigm material for the celebration of handedness. Industrial production minimized difference and maximized efficiency: who needs a crafted urinal? (Duchamp famously said that plumbing was America's greatest contribution to human happiness.)

Much of what we are surrounded by is ready-made, like nails and screws. Duchamp's brilliance lay in putting the question of why not ready-made-art – art that could be picked up at the supermarket, costing no more than accessory for dog owners?

With this, Duchamp opened an immense gap between art and craft, for he demonstrated that painting and sculpture, through their handedness, were examples of craft, exactly like ceramics or metalwork. The real contrast puts handedness on one side, and intellect on the other. He spoke with contempt of 'olfactory artists', in love with the smell of paint. Little matter if they were in love with the smell of sawdust or of wet clay. For him, the work of art was an embodied *idea*. Many artists have displayed a contradiction Duchamp escaped, deploring industrial production in favor of handedness, but enjoying its benefits in the bathroom, the garage, and workshop.

The Industrial Revolution, transferring skill and strength to the machine, reduced the human body to a mechanical adjunct. The Information Revolution transferring computational and inferential power to the computer, reduces the human mind to a computational adjunct, stoking its memory with data. Under industrialism, differences between bodies are irrelevant as differences in minds are irrelevant in data processing.

But the latter presupposes very different kind of workers – a proletariat of literacy. Working conditions, by contrast with those in factories, are almost paradisaic – clean, silent, dry, warm. It is easy to see how Americans, queried on the subject, would choose a job in the cubicle, working with the latest technology, to any other employment. The way the computer is turned to after hours – playing video games, surfing the net, chatting with strangers – is evidence that the machine is not regarded as oppressive. Information workers remember how their parents' lives were brutalized by factory work, using their scant free time to drink and brawl. The proletariat of literacy has ample leisure to cultivate the inner self through aerobics, meditation, rock concerts, recreational sex, and travel.

Duchamp was a prophet in showing the possibility of handless art. The practice of art became a conceptual exercise, leaving the hands clean. Think of how Duchamp dressed as a dandy, by contrast with the Abstract Expressionists, their workboots and overalls crusted with talismanic paint – as if they were aborigines!

There cannot be conceptual craft, if craft had handedness as part of its essence. But perhaps handedness is not as important as the critics of industrialism presupposed, in seeking through the handicrafts a return to pre-industrial ways of life. Perhaps the distance between art and craft will soften as the crafts become more conceptual. Indeed, that has already begun to happen, as artists recognize the poetry of use, and draw referential inspiration from the forms of historical cultures. Handedness after all, was also corollary to modernism, understood as fidelity to the material conditions of the media. Handedness and handlessness alike are corollary to Post-modernism, understood as meaning that everything is open to artists. The post-modern era of ceramics, under which handedness is merely one concept of many available to the ceramist, has only just begun.

The workshop leaders used this text to formulate assignments the students could work on. Piotr Müller worked with a group of students who developed an improvised series of claymations (animated clayfigures) that were digitally filmed. Nicolas Dings asked his students to search the internet for interesting images and to manipulate them with the computer and to print them in silk screen technique on ceramic cylinders as a group piece. Walter McConnel went into the far more conceptual ideas of his students who used the computer as an instrument to get deeper into the meaning of things, to explore information. Students for example came up with the combination of using riverclay creating the form of a large, dark flat tomb-stone to comment on the monumental St. John Cathedral in the town of 's-Hertogenbosch. Thom Puckey and his students tried out several experiments with the computer as a communicator and translator of ideas: for example sound into concrete form. In every aspect of the workshop there was an ongoing relationship between the mental and the physical aspects of the creative process. Working on the computer resulted in working with clay and plaster, but also the exploration of the material led to experimenting in modelmaking with computer aided design programmes and cad-cam techniques. An intriguing work of art, brilliant in its simplicity was a work by Maria Johansson who photographed every participant of the workshop, selecting only their eyes and

putting these into a series of film, for the moving image she wanted to present. She made a clay mask of a kind of phantom face, which she attached to a computer screen. Through holes in the mask all the eyes of the workshop participants beamed at you, one after another.

Several experts on digital designing were asked to give lectures on the subject, to instruct the students in using the computer programmes et cetera. As inexperienced as the students and the artists were, at the end of the two week-workshop period there were a lot of fine results to show.

The Dutch ceramic artist Jeroen Bechtold who designed the logo for the international art fair the Ceramic Millennium of the Ceramics Art Foundation that was held in July 1999 in Amsterdam was one of the lecturers. He said: **"It's wonderful nowadays to be involved with computers, because the real, actual world is quite limited to gravity: therefore you can not do certain things. And I always have these crazy ideas on things that should be possible like cups that float or stand on just one point. Through the computer I am suddenly able to make pictures of my thoughts and making pictures of my thoughts is already the first step into realising them in the actual world. That's what I am aiming at: to make things that make sense in both worlds, for there are two worlds!"**

One of the workshop students, Christine Pitch, made such a picture of a thought by computer designing with Desk Artes an object that was rapid prototyped by TNO Industries in Delft on the last day of this workshop. During an excursion to Delft -where also the oldest ceramic factory in The Netherlands was visited, the Royal Porcelain Factory, famous for their Delft Blue- TNO Industries presented this prototyping technique (a kind of three-dimensional waxjet printer) to the students and Christine was surprised with the physical shape of her design that she only had seen on screen. This conceptual piece of art which she gave the title 'Wilhelmina', in real time and space suddenly seemed to be useful for a curious purpose: an armpit sweat collector.

The working process of the students, artists, lecturers and assistants was filmed by Andrea Boada Páramo and with the help of another student, Martijn Verhallen, she digitally edited the rough material into a video documentary that was presented at the Ceramic Millennium in Amsterdam in the week following the workshop. The presentation of the Academy consisted of the video documentary and a cd-rom display of ceramic art works made by students. This cd-rom was designed by graphic design students Onno van Sabben and Marieke Gemkers. Between the presentations of internationally famous ceramic galleries this presentation looked oddly out of place, because except for the rapid prototyped armpit sweat collector of Christine Pitch there was not a concrete work in sight in the fair-stand of the Academy. Despite this the Academy got the highest attention for this experiment in the field of ceramics.

I was asked to give a lecture on the educational principles of the Academy and had a discussion with the director of the New York State College of Ceramics of Alfred University on the differences in approach of our institutes. This is what I stated:

**How to keep space empty?
No limits, but opportunities**
by Alex de Vries 1999

Ceramics is that bowl you make with your hands. Not the clay itself, but rather the notion that you can create a shape from a thought, an idea. The content of ceramics is emptiness, the space you enclose and where you can put your thoughts. It is the same with all forms of sculpture. Sculpture that fills space and therefore reduces it, gets in the way, ruins the view, takes away the room to think and breathe freely. Good ceramics, good sculpture, good art opens that space: an immense void that remains unfilled, so that you as the viewer can fill it for yourself, give it your own meaning. How to increase that space is the dilemma of art, because every artistic object suddenly becomes a beacon in space. The trick is to prevent it from becoming a barrier, or from separating itself from its surroundings. And that is exactly what happens so frequently in all the different disciplines of art: the choice of separatism, the choice of being valued for the self, of being judged separately from the surrounding space, separately from other disciplines, on special merits of the individual technical particularities and the accompanying content complications, on the limitations you set yourself. It is a restrictive manner of thinking that must be completely rejected because it concretizes segregative

thinking in an elitist manner that is objectionable on moral and ethical grounds. Don't expect a plea on behalf of the politically correct view that one form of art should appreciate and respect the other, for that is an impossibility. If you choose one, you automatically reject the other - because you've found something better. It's fine to specifically not want something, as long as it originates from the conviction that you want to achieve communication that gives direction and is not a withdrawal into and onto itself.

Artists have to take a position in order to be able to overview the space they have to offer and this position has to be expressed literally and figuratively. Thinking in disciplines, which is nurtured in so many art forms, even in ceramics, means you often have to cross an enormous sea of limiting conditions in order to reach a small cramped island. Your visit, your curiosity and interest are experienced as an invasion, occupation and threat. You come from the outside, what are you doing here?

The bowl that you make with your hands is the archetype of ceramic shape and clay is not used, except in a certain faith where we are made of dust and will return to dust, where we are made of clay into which life has been breathed. The earthenware bowl is an object that offers an aesthetic solution to the functional problem of the handbowl- which leaks as a sieve. There is no simpler shape that catches the emptiness for you, that can be filled with whatever you wish and that you can drink empty to your heart's desire. The simple use of this object has therefore received an artistic significance and has created a spiritual space you can fill until it overflows and from which more continues to flow. That's the way that ceramic island in the ocean should be perceived, as a vessel from which the sea has been poured, which invites us to sail, fish, traverse, dive into, swim in. The possibilities are endless.

Art education should be based on that involvement in the surroundings rather than on the involvement with the self. All achievements belonging to a discipline, whether it be ceramics, painting, audiovisual arts, or computer-controlled design, only receive significance when they are related to the considerations in respect of content made from the viewpoint of the artist or designer.

The most important material used by the potter are the broken pieces of his own unsuccessful work. The broken pieces represent the mistakes that he will not make anymore. He will make new mistakes and drop and smash a lot more work, but this will be different, better. In order to organize a new space, you need to have a good foundation and that is what the pieces are for. The house you demolish is the foundation for the new one you are going to build. In order to create space, you must first know what you are going to knock down.

In Den Bosch, Ceramics is a flexible, or autonomous, degree course. The academy is called the Academy of Art and Design and that is in fact the only name in art education that still ought to be officially recognized. To that end, the Academy in Den Bosch has, for the time being, added 'and other media' for each discipline, but that has come into existence out of a sense of defence. You should not defend, but rather invite adversaries to sit around a table and negotiate. Painting and other media, Sculpture and other media, Ceramics and other media: they are all names that emerge out of a traditional, contorted way of thinking in disciplines. Luckily, in practice sculptors do graduate from the Academy now and then with a painting major, because painting for a sculptor is simply another media available to him in this type of education. This way of thinking and working is concretized by the Academy in conjunction with the local surroundings, with the existing artists' initiatives and the new ones taken up by the newly graduated students as well as museums, in particular Het Kruithuis, music and theatre podiums, businesses and industry such as Cor Unum, and last but not least the European Ceramics Work Centre (EKWC). With the objective of being a facilitating research and expertise centre in the field of ceramics, the EKWC has the makings of that cramped island way of thinking. In practice, just the opposite has occurred: artists with all kinds of backgrounds within the EKWC have come to understand the possibilities of ceramics, thus creating an enormous space for themselves conceptually speaking. More than ever, ceramics allows itself to be moulded by this in terms of its content, and that drying clay on the hands of the artists leads to a new source in their heads being tapped. New techniques arise, new images, new ideas, new times, different skills, extraordinary opinions, more space. No wonder the Academy

happily and frequently asks these artists to be visiting lecturers and give the perspective of ceramics a panoramic appeal without being drawn into vanishing points.

Only by having a cohesive view of art and design in all its expressions and technical disciplines can arts education develop into teaching that has a permanent understanding with its surroundings and that raises artistry to the level of being part of a larger whole - not encompassing, but creating. In order to create, you need a tool. And hands formed into the shape of a bowl are an excellent tool. But at the same time you can do so much more with your hands – it's all a matter of thinking. And like every form of art, ceramics is mainly that: the space in your head that knows no limitations, but opportunities. Seize them.

For further information please contact:

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