

“There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in”ⁱ

By Erlend Geirssønn Høyersten

I live next to a bell tower. Actually I live in between two of them - a church and a city hall. The city hall bells strike every quarter hour. The sound of the bronze bells is soft and inviting. Every hour they strike the number that corresponds to the time of day. Even if I’m aware of what time it is I still count every single stroke.

I have often wondered why I count the bell strokes.

The church bells sound harsher, more aggressive and lack the chiming quality of the city hall bells, but they fill up every room with the sound of ore and history, of hard labor, of politics and faith. Occasionally I crack open my balcony door to allow this mighty sound to really grab a hold of the walls and myself. I didn’t grow up near a bell tower, so it’s not a matter of nostalgia. Possibly there is melancholy at play as the bells have been here long before me and will continue to be so long after I am gone. When the bells strike I sense the vast scale of history echoing throughout all the bells that have sounded all over this world. That particular feeling offers me a strange and comforting sensation of belonging.

Maybe this sensation is connected to my work as an art historian or the culture I have become a part of and have absorbed, or maybe I have inherited it in a different way - biologically like instinct and sometimes behavior. I don’t know, but I’m compelled to think that some things and phenomena are recognizable across history because they are, to some degree, connected to the collective human experience, to what creates society and civilization.

Ceramics is such a phenomenon. Ceramics is a broad term for products fashioned from burnt clay. The history of ceramics is quite overwhelming. The earliest known example of ceramics is Japanese, approximately 10.500 BC. Wondrously, the principle of burning clay occurred through different techniques, independently on different continents and has been the most favored and wide spread material for every day objects and cultural artifacts throughout history.

You can hardly enter a cultural or historical museum without seeing ceramics occupying a central position. It is almost impossible to visualize the varying civilizations that grew to life and found their demise around the Mediterranean, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and South and North America without seeing the ceramic objects they created, their shape and décor. Some even think that the decoration of functional ceramics (vases, bowls and troughs) was the first step towards art, as we know it today. On one hand, ceramics was a part of everyday life, on the other hand a central object in religious rituals. Ceramics and man was, and is, one.

When considering the evolution of the human civilization, you need to include ceramics. Many historians will therefore assess the discovery of burnt clay as the genesis and the condition of any civilization. Ceramics came long before bronze, iron, metal alloys, glass, paper or plastic and other synthetic composite materials. And in that context it shouldn’t be forgotten that the world’s oldest known writing

system, the Babylonian cuneiform, developed in the second half of the 4th millennium BC, was written on clay tablets which were eventually burned.

Today the material, which has shaped our every day life for millennia, and therefore in many ways created us, is such a matter of fact that we barely register the stoneware plates, the porcelain cups or the pottery mugs we might use every day. As is the case for many other things, we take them for granted and forget to truly notice them. But when order is disrupted, when something deviates, then we take notice. And when artists use clay, we recognize it and contemplate. Instinctually.

I grew up in a home with a lot of ceramics, have seen much in my native north and in the rest of the world, in museums, galleries and markets. Ancient and new, for use, for visual enjoyment and as art. I like it. I appreciate the duality when I hold a ceramic object in my hands; the feeling of solidity and fragility. It can easily break apart, but its ability to overcome the passage of time, compared to glass, textiles, wood and metals (with the exception of precious metals), is superior. It is fascinating. It can be ancient but appear pristinely new, which possibly fascinates me even more.

I become enchanted by the classic and the recognizable, but also enjoy the breaking and disruption of tradition that offers up something new, just as you thought everything had been done.

But here I am in Denmark, facing a piece by Rose Eken. A major ceramic artwork, an installation even. What it is precisely is arbitrary; even as I see it before me, clear as day. I see it for the first time in an art gallery, which tells me it is art. But the mere impracticality of these objects makes me arrive at that conclusion as well. Not because I am an art historian or a museum professional, actually I am convinced that most people growing up in the western culture-sphere would conclude the same. It is artful. And it is obviously time consuming. And it demands attention.

So I am in front of something. Something made of clay, then dyed and glazed before burning. It mirrors something, but is something different in itself. I recognize everything and I know everything that is referenced. What I am seeing can best be described as three-dimensional depictions of things; things we use and things we consume, things we hold in our hands and things we ingest as food. Nothing extraordinary and nothing out of the ordinary. But this depiction is not one to one. The shape is not exact, nor is the size. The objects are somewhat crooked and imperfect. Had these objects been people, I would have thought of them as being worse for wear, but also robust. The composition of objects is striking in itself and it is this combination of distractions that beckons my attention.

At this point I haven't met the artist, don't know her, her previous work or oeuvre, so my immediate experience can be described as practically virgin. My immediate thought is that I haven't seen art like this before.

But later the virgin air vanishes, promptly actually, and references appear and what I see is colored by what I've read, seen and experienced and those I talk to in that moment.

But in a way I am recognizing what I am seeing. As references to shape. The recognizable offers an experience of something seemingly known. It is not the seemingly I find interesting. Because the seemingly is exactly that: not entirely true. This is not like the arts' trompe-l'oeil, purposed to deceive the eye when the artist is

creating images or objects designed to appear differently than they actually are. It is not illusionistic and virtuoso in that way.

But what *is* interesting is what this starting point, the artistic communication, conjures up – associations, thoughts and images – in the mind of the one experiencing it.

What immediately spring to mind is Cézanne (1839-1906) and his strange visual universe of distorted perspectives and non-realistic spaces that turned art into something more than a picture of something, gaining its own aesthetic size and scale. I am thinking of the Dutch 16th century still lifes and their hidden religious symbolism and memento mori messages. And I am thinking of all the objects, artifacts and things we surround ourselves with and hardly notice in our daily life, things that are shaped by thought and consideration that we forget to register. But I am also thinking about the objects referred to by this artist; where did I see them first? In what home, at which flea market, in what store? When? And suddenly I am a little boy again standing in my grandmother's kitchen and soon after I remember the smell of my parent's basement.

I am taken aback by the emotions and thoughts created by this artwork. They are merely ceramic objects resembling something. Perhaps it is because Rose Eken is able to break the chains of common reclusive and self-referencing artist behavior. Contemporary art is often blamed for being a conceptual system of insider communication and theoretical references, creating a closed circuit of secret handshakes, excluding the uninitiated. The critique is often well founded.

It is in the entryway to this world Rose Eken puts a wedge in the door, to let the light in *and* out. "There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in", Leonard Cohen wrote. It is a beautiful image. A consoling image in a time that pursues perfection and reaches for airy ideals. And it is a rich image when the material of choice is ceramics. But it is also an important image.

I am certain that one of the most important pursuits for artists currently, to ensure the continued justification of the arts, is to communicate beyond their own references. If the arts remain in a closed circuit controlled by cultural and financial currency benefitting a select few, it will not only become less relevant but also lose its clear potential for contributing to substantial thoughts on society, the individual and values, and therefore lose its opportunity to influence coming agendas. It is all about how we humans have settled into this world. And so the artists are faced with a decision to work inside of a closed and excluding framework or in an open and including community. One is *me* - the other is *us*.

But is it *that* important? Yes! What, historically speaking, has made it possible for us to co-exist in large constellations and create societies, is our ability to create cohesion through storytelling. This is the evolutionary advantage of the human race (*homo sapiens*).ⁱⁱ Our ability to imagine the non-existing and our aptitude for abstraction, which results in fiction, has given us the means to dream collectively thus building community. During the cognitive revolution (70.000-30.000 BC) we developed the prerequisite for humans to live in larger relationships than flocks of hundreds. During this time myths, religions, music and art came to be. These were phenomena that made it possible to imagine what wasn't there and to visualize different future scenarios. It was stories of the non-existing that connected us and created a sense of togetherness – a state of mind that also included strangers. And

still these stories connect us. Myths and tales constitute communities. Just imagine this practical phenomenon, which is basically fiction and an abstraction: the national state.

Art is not a cornucopia, but a result of evolution and an advantage. In a way, art is a part of our evolutionary history and so is ceramics.

It is often said that art is born out of its time, that it is shaped by time. Art supposedly reflects. I think art, in equal measures, is able to shape its time and not only reflect it, to let shards of light cut open the darkness when we cannot see. If we allow it.

We are all on the brink of something new. We have only seen the beginning of how the digital universe will impact us, workwise and socially. We don't know what's going to happen. Connecting unmatched skills, focusing on innovation and creating new possibilities is of greater and greater importance in the age we are entering. Art has been doing this for thousands of years already. Don't forget that.

In a hundred years all is forgotten and the world will be different. But Rose Eken's ceramic pieces will still be there long after we are gone, like the bells. It is sad to imagine, but also comforting. Maybe they will let the light in and illuminate our time in a way we can't ourselves. Maybe someone will see them and think of us. Meanwhile I am counting the bell strokes.

ⁱ Leonard Cohen *Anthem* (1992)

ⁱⁱ Yuval Noah Harari *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London 2014)