

"I am a sculptor, not a ceramicist. I have never thrown a plate on a wheel nor painted a vase. I detest lacy designs and dainty nuances." Lucio Fontana

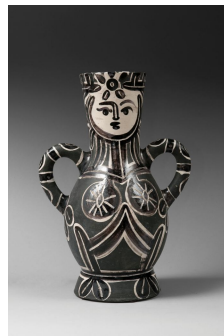
"One should project the imagination, not just expose the material. This is what makes it art...creating into the material, art beyond technique, beyond life." Paul Valéry

The status of craft in the world of fine art is not a new subject: it has been debated and discussed by theorists such as John Ruskin, William Morris, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and many others since the 1800s when the separation between craft and fine art took root with the development of industrialisation. Perceived as having the potential not only to substitute but also improve the quality of man-made objects, and doubtlessly increase production and profit exponentially, the mechanisation of industry demoted the status of craft, which allowed for fine art to move into a superior position. Ironically, from an etymological perspective, craft ended up where it had started in antiquity, and where all art began – in the realm of pure skill at the service of function (from the Latin *ars*). And this skill was just no longer needed since machines did things so much better and faster. So art needed to be other than skilful – it needed to be cerebral.

But if we try to really separate the two fields we see it's not always so simple. To differentiate between art and craft, we can quote the influential work of Rose Slivka who defines craftsman as he who "incorporates acknowledgement, however implied, of functional possibilities or commitments (including the function of decoration) – as long as he maintains personal control over the execution of the final product, and he assumes personal responsibility for its aesthetic material quality – it is craft."¹ Meaning that if the maker alludes in any way to function, *and* is in charge of both design and production, *and* leaves nothing to chance (artists should not be so controlling...), then we have to see the object as craft. But if one of these is not part of the equation, then we are free to call it art. So by outsourcing the production of his pots and by pointing out that through the firing process he lets chance have its way with the work, Picasso's decorative pots and plates become high art, although they look very craft-like to the contemporary viewer.



Pablo Picasso, Four Enlaced Profiles, hautes, round/square plate, 1949.



Pablo Picasso, Vase with two handles - Vase deux anses 1953

But unfortunately many sculptors using materials traditionally associated with the realm of craft, specifically clay, don't have the same advantages as Picasso. They are called potters or ceramists, not sculptors, or not even plain old artists. Even Peter Voulkos, the artworld's token ceramic sculptor, is often still referred to by art critics and historians as a potter. Why this special categorization which smells of contempt? What is it about clay that still makes the art world sceptical?



Peter Voulkos, *Noodle*. stoneware sculpture, 1996, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Well, history plays a very important part, and unfortunately we cannot shake it off. Clay, more than any other material, has been used for tens of thousands of years in the creation of functional objects, from bowls to religious figurines and everything in between. It is the most available and reliable of materials, transforming from a malleable paste to a solid form through firing, humanity's first technology.

Clay comes directly from the earth and is therefore inherently associated with our dependence on the earth – it evokes a pre-industrial romantic past that to many is out of sync with the realities of the modern western world. Contemporary sculpture's materials have to come out of the contemporary world: refuse or found object, technology, metal - all point to their own contemporaneity. Contemporary sculpture must be big and it must be tough, just like the world. Not fragile and precious as clay can seem to be. And for it to be really contemporary, without any touch of quaintness, sculpture really should be made by hired labor, not by the artist's hand. The real artist just comes up with the concepts to be made by craftspeople. So because clay is easy to find, relatively easy to use, somewhat easy to control, it is therefore also easy to dismiss.

But clay is not at all easy to master, and many important sculptors, like Lucio Fontana in the 1950s and many Futurists before him in the 30s, undertook the task of learning the “craft” of the ceramist, that contemptible second-cousin once removed, to create more expressive, more physically engaging sculptures. Mastering ceramics is a complex process accompanied not only by repetition and practice but by all the current technologies needed for the transformative process to take place, including kilns, tools, glazing, etc. Maybe the process-intensive investment associated with mastering ceramics is the reason that concept is sometimes secondary to form. But should that be viewed as a handicap or an advantage? A return to the formalism of Greenberg is not proposed, but neither is staying in the realm of homogeneity and idea recycling without much aesthetic preoccupation.



Lucio Fontana, Battaglia, 1960

In *A Critical History of 20th Century Art*, Donald Kuspit writes that “Conceptualism and Minimalism eschew unconscious fantasy and intense feeling...” and “Conceptualism's hierarchy, which privileges concept over medium, collapses.” Kuspit champions a new art form that he calls New Old Master art, a “return to the more complete, balanced idea of art offered by tradition.... In the new traditionalism, the material medium and the artist's concept are re-integrated into an organic whole.”¹

We agree with Kuspit: we too enjoy seeing the artist marry skill with concept. The two need to become partners in art making once again rather than remain in opposition and conflict. And precisely this collaboration between skill and concept is explored to different degrees by the three artists exhibiting in *Fire It Up*: Mark Divo, Pascal Häusermann, and Cristian Anderson.

On one side of the “artist-made vs. hired labor” discussion is the *Zürisack* by Mark Divo, known for his Dada reinterpretations and events. Made in porcelain, that very precious clay material associated with the decorative arts of the wealthy (kitschy objects and bibelots), this humorous sculpture at once elevates the *Zürisack* to the status of precious object (not too far from the truth considering its price and important role in Zürich life) while poking fun at the fetishization of the material in objects that are ultimately no more than junk, as bibelots ultimately are.

Collaborating closely with the producer of the bag (porcelain is a truly difficult material to make and it necessitates a master), Mark took the position of artist as conceiver in true Dada fashion. According to Slivka's definition of craft, Mark's collaboration with a trained ceramist assures his status in the fine arts (pfew...) but his obvious respect for skill and his willingness to work with a material that is so rooted in the tradition of craft makes the art-as-craft craft-as-art duality a thoughtful and provocative challenge.

Mark Divo, Zürisack, 2011



Walking the line entirely is Pascal Häusermann, one of those artists who knows how to make stuff with his own hands. He was trained as a mason and only later pursued his art theory degree. This background gave him the technical know-how to give form to his concepts, but not even this experience was enough to allow him to make the work entirely alone. So after making a few moulds, Pascal collaborated with a professional to get the effect he was looking for.

Renato Bertelli, Head of Mussolini (Continuous Profile), 1933

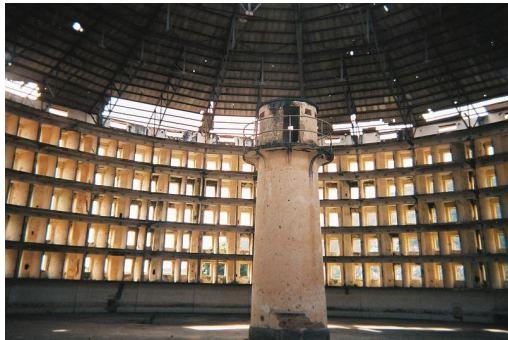


Pascal Häusermann, Panoptical Portraits, 2011

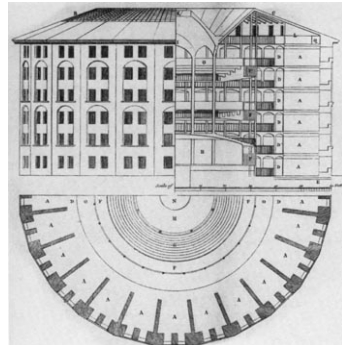


For his new series, *Panoptical Portraits*, Pascal channels Bertelli's iconic 1933 portrait of Mussolini but gives it a contemporary twist: the continuous profiles are of Europe's contemporary right-wing leaders. But whereas Bertelli was keen to camouflage the ceramic quality of the material and instead gave it the metallic/machine look so glorified by the Futurists, Pascal prefers to accentuate his sculptures' clay features and highlight their vessel-like form by painting them the beige of regular china and keeping their surface rough and rugged.

The Panopticon, to which Pascal's title refers, was social theorist and architect Jeremy Bentham's utopian solution to the prison crisis at the end of the 18th century, and offered a way to oversee the inmates from any point in the building without their knowledge, thus minimising the need for staff. Under the veil of "security", in the last ten years right-wing politicians have pushed for more and more monitoring of the public sphere, which has led artists the world over to criticize the Big Brother watching us, or in this case, the ever-watching eye of the government.



Prison Presidio Modelo, Inside one of the buildings
December 2005



Plan of the Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham,
1791

On the other side of the "artist-made vs. hired labor" debate is Cristian Andersen, who is uniquely responsible for the entire process of his work, from conception to creation. His ceramic assemblages are direct extensions of contemporary sculpture's fascination with found objects. His compositions feature trash found in the street, stuff bought at second-hand shops, and objects found lying around the house that are then combined into small vertical heaps. Cristian's work is as distant from function as sculpture can be, despite the evident history of function inherent in the individual objects making up the composition. Each object is recognizable - a can, a sponge, a doll's arm - and yet once attached and joined together, they lose the particular and become exercises in form.

Cristian is obviously attracted to urban debris, to the leftovers of civilization, so there is something poetic in his decision to cast them in a natural material like ceramic. Maybe as a sort of philosophical statement of the earth's capacity to preserve what we leave behind, his technique does seem to allude to "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" - we go back to the earth, this primal material, which functions as a time capsule for our junk.



Cristian Andersen, Oerlikon, 2009

In the work of the artists of *Fire It Up* we see a concern with craftsmanship, the interest in making objects that have an aesthetic force. And yet none of the artists collapse into pure aestheticism and decoration, but rather insist on balancing skill with concepts to create contemporary sculpture that is relevant and apropos, to be embraced on an equal level as all other contemporary materials.

Olga Stefan, 2012

1 Slivka, Rose, *The New Ceramic Presence*, Craft Horizons, 1961

2 Kuspit, Donald. *A Critical History of 20th Century Art*. Chapter 10. Part 2. 2006