Ceramic Vitality in a Fragmented Field

Cilla Robach, Senior Curator, Applied Art and Design
2016 was a significant year for ceramics, as the Nationalmuseum acknowledged by acquiring of eight works, thanks to generous donations from the Friends of the Nationalmuseum’s Bengt Julin Fund; these will be discussed below, along with a couple of earlier acquisitions.

Gustavsbergs Konsthall celebrated Stig Lindberg’s 100th anniversary with the exhibition Carnival on 28 May – 11 September, featuring seven contemporary ceramic artists. The autumn kicked off with hangmenProjects’ exhibition The Death of Ceramics – an ironic title for an art form that is most definitely alive. On 11 October, the ceramic artist August Sörenson’s crafts series En Ding Ding Värld was nominated for Svensk Form’s Design S award in the Crafts category (Fig 1). The autumn break began with an exhibition by Caroline Slotte and Kjell Rylander, Pages, at Konsthantverkarna. And on 14 December, 2016, the ceramicist Mårten Medbo was the first in Sweden to attain a PhD in Crafts. Part of his thesis, Lerbaserad erfarenhet och språklighet (Clay-Based Experience and Language-Ness) consisted of an exhibition, Slutkommentar (End Note), at Galleri Thomassen in Gothenburg.

Fig. 1 August Sörenson (b. 1980), Wall clock “Watch”, 2016. Stoneware, 29 x 15 x 4 cm (h x w x d). Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Bengt Julin’s Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 298/2016.
Fig. 2 Kjell Rylander (b. 1964), *Sculpture “Untitled”,* 2015. Brickwork clay, porcelain clay, copy paper, MDF board, 10 x 75 x 32 cm (h x w x d). Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Bengt Julins Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 394/2016.

Fig. 3 Caroline Slotte (b. 1975), *Plate “Under Blue Skies”,* 2015. Creamware, sandblasted, 3 x 24 cm (h x diam). Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Bengt Julins Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 381/2016.

Fig. 4 Caroline Slotte (b. 1975), *Dish “Going Blank Again”,* 2016. Creamware, sandblasted, 3 x 43 x 34.5 cm (h x w x d). Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Bengt Julins Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 382/2016.
Artistic research was established in Sweden at the turn of the millennium, and entails that the researcher is an artist whose research focuses on their own art in text and material, and reflects on their own creative practice. Artistic research often includes discussions about various languages – spoken, written, visualised – and what they convey respectively. A common basic premise is that art, with its representational language, conveys something beyond what can be expressed in words, and that art’s wordless communication can be just as important as written communication.

Two pioneers in Nordic artistic research are Kjell Rylander and Caroline Slotte, who studied at Master level in 2009–11 within the framework of the Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Programme at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design. Rylander has studied the language aspect in depth – what can be said with white porcelain clay and blank sheets of A4 respectively? Compared to a paper cup, a porcelain cup has a higher status, but when it comes to theoretical discussions, paper has an undeniably higher hierarchical position than clay. There are even differences among clays. Rylander uses fine porcelain clay alongside brick clay, the lowest of the various often highly specialised and carefully controlled clay mixtures (Fig 2). In the Nationalmuseum’s work, he allowed the clay to dry naturally, which means that it cracks in an “undesirable” way, according to the traditional view. The clay thereby assumes a life of its own.

Caroline Slotte has studied ceramic products from art industry, whose practices have left visible traces in the goods. Slotte adds new perspectives and meanings by processing classic decors. Before the objects are sandblasted, she meticulously varnishes the parts she wants to keep. In the series Under Blue Skies she has erased all the decor except the sky, perhaps the “least interesting” part of the motif, which probably depicted a landscape with human
Fig. 6 Christian-Pontus Andersson (b. 1977), "Guard for tears", 2007. Porcelain, mother of pearl-coated, 85 x 60 x 45 cm (h x w x d). Nationalmuseum, NMK 20/2009.
figures and animals, where the sky could be regarded as “filling”. And yet, the sky represents dreams, and maybe even the life hereafter (Fig 3). In the plate Going Blank Again Slotte has sandblasted away all the coloured glaze, restoring the object to its original white colour. Brown blotches and cracks remind us of its former life as a utility article (Fig 4).

Anton Alvarez’s practice takes as its starting point a theoretical question on how absent an artist/craftsperson/designer can be at the conception of a work of art. Together with the computer programmer Jakob Öhman, Alvarez has constructed a machine, The Extruder, a large-scale clay press that extrudes clay through various alphabetical profiles with a pressure of three tonnes. The result is unique sculptural shapes “created” by a machine. The series is called Alphabet Aerobics, and at the exhibition The Death of Ceramics the Nationalmuseum acquired E-16, i.e., the letter E made in 2016 (Fig 5).6

The Death of Ceramics discussed the increasingly blurred line between art and crafts in contemporary ceramics.7 A pivotal moment in this amalgamation was Christian-Pontus Andersson’s large sculptures in pearlescent-glazed porcelain, which were shown by an established fine arts gallery in 2007.7 In 2006, Andersson had been awarded the Bengt Julin Fund’s prize for young craftspersons, and the Nationalmuseum collection owns his Guard for Tears (Fig 6). The trend continued in 2015, when the fine arts gallery Andréhn-Schiptjenko showed the ceramic artist Per B. Sundberg (Fig 7).9

After being demoted by modernism, the porcelain figurine has experienced a renaissance on the Swedish crafts scene since the turn of the millennium.10 Alexander Tallén touches on issues of identity and existentialism by using his own body as a model, and placing it in both realistic and bizarre situations. Tallén’s figurines have also been embraced by the art scene, not least in connection

---

Fig. 7 Per B. Sundberg (b. 1964), Object "The village", 2014. 48 x 36 x 36 cm (h x l x w). Nationalmuseum, NMK 86/2014.
Fig. 8 Alexander Tallén (b. 1988), Figurine "Together at last", 2016. Stoneware, 23 x 28 x 18 cm (h x l x w). Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Bengt Julins Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 389/2016.
Fig. 9 Mårten Medbo (b. 1964), Vase "Crowd", 2015. Stoneware, 45 x 23 cm and 58 x 28.5 cm (h x diam). Nationalmuseum, NMK 224–225/2015.
with his exhibition *Something Has Been Lost* at Stene Projects in October 2016, where the Nationalmuseum acquired *Together at Last* (Fig 8). The same year, we also purchased his figurine *Self Possession* (2015).

Since 2000, alongside the emergence of artistic research, the entire crafts field has seen a revitalisation, and is accompanied by growing academic interest, especially in crafts that have converged on art.\(^\text{11}\) This increased theoretical awareness has also had an impact on education at art colleges.\(^\text{12}\)

In Sweden, the theorisation of crafts has been especially pronounced in jewellery and ceramics. In his thesis *Lerbaserad erfarenhet och språklighet*, the ceramic artist Mårten Medbo describes how this has led to a fragmentation within ceramics, where that part which has a theoretical underpinning and includes various forms of norm critique is defined as “communicative”, while other ceramic expressions are marginalised as “form with no content other than form”.\(^\text{13}\) Much of Medbo’s own artistic output cannot, according to this definition, be defined as theorising, communicative ceramics – and yet, communicate is exactly what he wants and does, albeit in the language of clay rather than in the concepts of theory (Fig 9).

One of the fields that have not received much attention among either theorists in the sciences or at university colleges of art is issues relating to form and materiality based on skilful craftsmanship. How ceramic materials react to various conditions has interested studio ceramicists throughout the 20th century. The ability to mix and control clays, glazes and firing has been part of a ceramic artist’s basic skill set, in addition to knowing how to shape the clay by turning, sculpting, moulding or other techniques. And works are obviously still being created today where the starting point is an exploration of materials and methods, as shown in the Nationalmuseum’s works by Ellen Ehk (Fig 10), Hanna Hyving Järlehed (Fig 11), and Michal Fargo (Fig 12).

**Notes:**

3. On 29 October – 16 November, Konsthantverkarna showed the exhibition Pages, featuring Caroline Slotte and Kjell Rylander, both of whom have undertaken artistic research in ceramics at the Bergen Academy of Art and Design in Norway. In their respective works, they challenge notions of material, production and durability. http://

Charlotta Östlund and Per B Sundberg. The purpose was to highlight the complex interaction between art and crafts, particularly in ceramics. This material has had a low status in the art world, and has mainly been used for maquettes prior to creating the “real” work of art. While ceramics enjoy a new standing in the field of crafts, with many ceramicists working like artists, it has nevertheless been hard to reach the art audience. http://hangmenprojects.com/work/ceramics/

2. Design S is Föreningen Svensk Form’s design award, instituted as a biennial award in 2006. In 2016, awards were given in the categories Aluminium, Architecture, Digital Products and Services, Graphic Design, Social Sustainability, Industrial Design, Crafts, Furniture, Interior & Textile, Fashion, Products & Accessories, and Service Design. All nominated products, objects and phenomena were displayed in the exhibition Design


Fig. 12 Michal Fargo (b. 1984), Two vases, 2016. Porcelain, 14 x 11.5 x 10 cm (h x l x w), 17.8 x 7.5 cm (h x diam). Donated by the Friends of the Nationalmuseum, Bengt Julins Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 303–304/2016.

4. Slutkommentar showed works from the series Enlightenment, Homo Capax, Thinking Through Clay, Wheel-Throwing from Inside and Clay-Based Language-Ness, which were included in Medbo’s artistic research. They were juxtaposed with works by Medbo that were not directly linked to his research but nevertheless reflected his ceramic practice and text-based experiences in the thesis. The exhibition took place at Galleri Thomassen in Gothenburg on 19 May – 5 June 2016. Mårten Medbo, Lerbaserad erfarenhet och språklighet, artistic thesis, School of Design and Crafts, Gothenburg University, Gothenburg 2016.

5. The Nationalmuseum collection already included Rylander’s work Resistance from 2001, consisting of a dish rack with plates where the middle is missing, i.e., only the decorated rims remain. NMK 118/2008.

6. Anton Alvarez placed The Extruder at the National Centre for Craft and Design, Seaford, UK, where the museum guards at the exhibition became co-creators. In the course of the three-month period, the staff “produced” the objects for the exhibition. E-16 was made when Alvarez and Öhman were testing the machine, and were thus created in Alvarez’s studio in Stockholm. Telephone conversation with Anton Alvarez, December 2016.

7. The question was also raised in Bo Madestrand, “Keramiken är en ny, kreativ arena” DN 19 January 2017.


10. Per B. Sundberg is one of the pioneers and one of the first to use figurines he bought at flea markets in his art. See, for instance, Älgradio in the Nationalmuseum collection (NMK 188/2000). Others who have made figurines include Maria Boij (NMK 21/2009) and Emma Kronvall (NMK 100/2005).


12. The amount of theory in, for instance, textile studies at the School of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg, has increased from 8% in 1978 to 50% in 2007. Nina Bondeson and Marie Holmgren, Tiden som är för handen. Om praktisk konsttillverkning, Gothenburg 2007, p. 48.