

# Ruminating on Dignity in the Presence of *Arbor Vitae*: What Has Ceramics got to do With it?

Written by **Sigrid Dahle**

**C**eramics is the art of time and ceramics is above all, an archival material. This last theme, Death, is possibly the most important of all in ceramics as it encompasses all the others, interestingly enough.

(Mathieu, 7)

We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled. Elements that appear remote if we follow the spiral may turn out to be quite near if we follow the loops.

(Latour, Location 1544 of 3230)

What people admired then was an art (whose mode was the classical one) that minimized the pain of pain. It showed people able to maintain decorum and composure, even in monumental suffering.

(Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*, 296-97)

Within the confines of the 21st century contemporary art gallery, the concept and performance of 'dignity' seems stuffy and vaguely anachronistic – a throw-back to largely discredited 17th and 18th century Eurocentric values. A multiplicity of forces – early 20th century modernist avant-gardism, 1960s counter culture and its contemporary activist offspring, the inflaming of consumer desires by every manner imaginable and the

cross-connection of geographically distant communities by multiple means – ensure that today's art has other aspirations and trajectories. Contemporary art aims to be political, destabilizing, accessible, playful, ironic, intellectual, community-building, spectacular, seductive, bad ass and smart assed, hip, cool, clever and entertaining, desirable and utterly collectible – but certainly never 'dignified.' Perhaps that's why the 'dignity effect' so ably generated by Grace Nickel's exhibition, *Arbor Vitae*, unsettled me so.

## Toying With Classicism

As viewers, we enter the space of *Arbor Vitae*, the exhibition, as we might a museum diorama or the tragically doomed city of Pompeii: it's as though we are witnesses to a significant event frozen in time – free to walk in, amongst and through what remains of someone else's real or imaginary dream or nightmare. As such, we have the luxury of paying slow and close attention to each and every detail and the privilege of proposing and pondering as many creative interpretations as our intellects and imaginations will allow. For this exploration, time is a most welcome companion.

The lead role in Nickel's scenario is played by an ambitious seven component work, which (like the exhibition itself) is entitled *Arbor Vitae*. An elegant, symmetrical and orderly arrangement of six stately unglazed porcelain columns reminiscent of classical architectural ruins, gleam white as marble under the gallery's brilliant spot lights.

**Arbor Vitae**, 2015, porcelain (from fabric formwork models), oxides, glaze, metal armatures, 240 x 360 x 525 cm overall. Image credit: Michael Zajac.

Without any irony whatsoever, grand and mythologically rich architectural spaces customarily associated with religious ritual, institutional stability and vested authority, are evoked. Athena's Parthenon, legislative buildings, 19th century banks and museums – but also a sacred grove and funerary honour guard – come to mind. If you studied art history you're likely to recall the architectural orders with their own precisely prescribed capital, shaft and base. But closer inspection reveals that each of Nickel's columns (or are they actually tree trunks?)<sup>1</sup> is idiosyncratically unique rather than a normative rendition of a standardized form. Moreover, the surfaces of Grace's columns are alive with the texture of various fabrics, hand and machine stitching, decorative braiding and other traces of human living and making: form and surface decoration, body and garment, architectural structure and ornament are effectively fused into one.

To achieve this resolution, Nickel employed and adapted a contemporary architectural technology – fabric formwork – in which flexible fabric membranes are cast to make solid concrete building supports (Veenendaal, West & Block) – or in this instance, freestanding ceramic columns. There are eccentric folds and rolls as thick and sticky as cake icing. Unseemly bulges and playfully decadent tassels co-exist with surface pock-marks and scars. Some of the columns have amputated limbs reminiscent of both radically pruned trees and the torsos of limbless classical statues. Others are bulbous and bloated in a humorously cartoon-like way. All of them emerge from bases that seem constricting and undersized considering the towering structures they are expected to support. Like urban trees crammed into planters or en pointe dancers suffering the discomfort of pointe shoes, they have adapted to their circumstances with grace and humour.



Which is to say that these columns have *personalities* as well as *agency*: they are ‘beings’ and ‘subjects’ as much as they are ‘things’. Their scars, embellishments and other irregularities – inseparable from their form which also constitutes their essence – in no way detracts from their stateliness. Rather, their so-called imperfections – traces of a life lived, meaning made, relationships nurtured and contributions offered – record all they have endured and accomplished whether as shelter-giving tree, architectural support or ‘pillar of the community.’

### Holding and Handling

This quirky grouping of columns flanks *Prone*, a saw-segmented, ornamented ceramic tree-trunk-like being gently laid to rest on bronze-glazed ceramic pillows. The supports, found in beds and tombs in China and Japan dating back over a thousand years, could also be interpreted, in this particular context, as exquisitely crafted sawhorses. Lattice-like openings in *Prone*'s surface give us a glimpse of its mysterious interior where iridescent bronze-glazed ‘growths’ as beautiful and ordinary as (tree) shelf fungus, and as disturbingly abject as cancerous tumours, make their home. As with the columns, *Prone*'s taxonomical classification and ontological status remains ambiguous. ‘It’ reads simultaneously as an object, a subject, a symbolic fiction, a material fact and an aestheticized scientific model. Regardless of how it is classified or theorized, in this scenario its value has been unambiguously declared by virtue of the reverence and care with which it is held and handled.

In *Arbor Vitae* neither host nor parasite are privileged or vilified. Each is granted a space of dignity in the seemingly ongoing process of production, growth, decomposition, regeneration and reconstruction; a process that is shown to involve a complex network of intimately engaged actors: human, creaturely, vegetative, material, technological, social and ideological.<sup>2</sup>

### An Aside on Dignity

...for things too have to be elevated to the dignity of narrative

(Latour, LOC 1845 of 3230).

The word dates back to the early 13c., from Old French *dignite* “dignity, privilege, honor,” from Latin *dignitatem* (nominative *dignities*) “worthiness,” from *dignus* “worth (n.), worthy, proper, fitting” from PIE \**dek-no-*, from root \**dek-* “to take, accept” (Online Etymology). Dignity is sometimes coupled with the word ‘decorum,’ from the Latin, ‘deceat,’ which has



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Opposite:  
**Arbor Vitae**  
(detail), 2015.  
Image credit:  
Michael Zajac.

Right:  
**Host**, (detail), 2015,  
Jingdezhen porcelain,  
metal base and armature,  
270 x 50 x 50 cm.  
Image credit:  
Michael Zajac.

also given us the words ‘decent’ and ‘decorative’ (Schaeffer, 14). Defined as “behaviour that is in good taste and propriety”, decorum lends a moralistic tone to the concept of dignity and also suggests how class privilege, aesthetics and morality inform one another.

Today, we are most likely to encounter the term ‘dignity’ in conversations concerning ethics (rather than aesthetics), in particular, the right to die and human rights. For example, the preamble to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (United Nations). Recently theorists such as Bruno Latour have argued – convincingly – on behalf of a world view in which dignity is granted to “the least grain of reality” (Harman, 15), calling for a radical democratization of the hierarchy of being that situates human agents at the apex, creatures and plant life somewhere in the middle, with inert matter relegated to the base. Yet despite the gravity, profound implications and imaginative richness of the conversations in which dignity is an active player, the term’s meaning remains frustratingly elusive (which isn’t necessarily such a bad thing).

### **Host: The Ardor of Vitae**

*Host* is a singular, 9 foot tall, ghost-white porcelain column accompanied by the *Espalier series* – cardboard-thin, paper-white porcelain tiles installed on the wall like drawings. Both column and tiles, by virtue of their scale and proportions, push the limits of what porcelain as a material is usually called upon to do and be. While the *Arbor Vitae* columns were fabricated with experimental technologies found close to home in the University of Manitoba’s Faculty of Architecture’s C.A.S.T. (Centre for Architectural Structures and Technology), the workshops of Jingdezhen, China, a city dedicated to pottery production for close to two millennia,<sup>3</sup> provided access to additional technologies as well as ‘super white porcelain’.

As with the exhibition’s other columns, *Host*’s shaft appears to have been constructed by transforming fabric – this time a sumptuous brocade – into bleached white stone. *Host*’s monumental scale and singularity ensures that its gesture as a structure is much more definitive than that of the other columns: its shaft twists, turns, torques and stretches, spiraling ever upwards (and by extension, downwards) as though it has been painstakingly engineered and carefully coaxed into its current form. The spiral shaft culminates in a ring of acanthus-like

leaves, simultaneously evoking a Corinthian capital, a crown of honour, a tree crown and perhaps even a crown of thorns.

*Host* clearly references both the victory columns erected by conquering rulers throughout Europe and the Middle East (a practice even older than the city of Jingdezhen) as well as the ‘tree of life’ concept found in mythologies, fictions and philosophies world-wide. Victory columns, an ancient form of propaganda, typically recounted the details of successful military exploits with frieze-like representations inscribed around their surfaces (which are sometimes compared to contemporary cartoons). The ‘tree of life’, on the other hand, customarily celebrates the shared origin and interconnectedness of all creation, past, present and future.

The exteriors of ceramic vessels, like those of victory columns, often serve as surfaces or grounds on which graphic narratives unfold. In *Host*, Nickel metaphorically peels away the narrative that one would expect to find as though stripping bark from a tree. She then flattens and laser-marks this ‘text’ onto over-sized porcelain tiles, producing the *Espalier* series. Her gesture, like the series title, also references the art of training a tree to grow against a flat wall. The drawings that result read like a cross between asemic writing and expressive representations of a tangled forest. Though an abundance of narratives are suggested, no one’s story in particular is ever revealed. The effect is to foreground *life* as a generative force, an impulse shared by all manner of being. In *Arbor Vitae*, this force is made manifest as a

spiraling ceramic column whose remarkable, overreaching form could only be achieved through intimate conversations between new and old technologies, skilled artisans and engineers informed by diverse cultural contexts, the vagaries of chance, porcelain’s spectacular properties and limitations and an artist’s unwavering aspirational desires.

### Conclusion

At this point, you’re probably aware that Grace Nickel’s work is rigorously situated within the complex, kilo-years-long and trans-culturally deep discourse that is ceramics. But like other notable Canadian artists such as Paul Mathieu, Léopold L. Foulem and Rory MacDonald, she deftly deploys this discourse to address concerns that go far beyond those specific to ceramics as an artmaking medium. I chose not to address her work taxonomically for this reason. Instead, I began, as I often do, with what troubled and challenged me the most about her work – its unapologetic enactment of dignity. Through the re/search and writing process that followed, I came to understand how her work grapples with one of the most pressing conundrums of the 21st century: the need to radically reconceptualize the relationship between humans, other living species, technologies, physical forces and matter.

In Nickel’s work dignity is once again conjoined with aesthetics. However, in *Arbor Vitae* this coupling is in the service of a ‘trans-being’ ethics of respect and care rather than the maintenance of social class, species or category hierarchies.

### Endnotes

“We know from vase painting that a third way of saving sacrificial remains was to hang them in trees. In fact the first temples were groves of such trees... One common belief, an ancient one supported by architectural theory, is that Greek temples evolved from these groves. The tree trunks became the column shafts...” (Hersey)  
Bruno Latour’s actor network theory (ANT), which I was recently introduced to, haunts this text. ANT proposes that non-humans, including even things (as well as living beings such as animals, plants, forces), have agency and the ability to actively participate in social networks.  
Ai Wei Wei’s *Kui Hua Zi (Sunflower Seeds)*, 2010, consisting of more than 100 million tiny, handmade porcelain sunflower seeds, was produced by 1600 Jingdezhen artisans hired by the artist. During a three year residency in Jingdezhen, Canadian artist Paul Mathieu out sourced the actual production of one particular body of work to Jingdezhen artisans.



*Opposite:*  
**Prone** (detail), 2015,  
porcelain, oxides, glaze,  
each section 30 x 30 x 60  
cm, 380 cm long overall.  
Image credit:  
Michael Zajac.

*Below:*  
**Arbor Vitae** detail, 2015.  
Image credit:  
Michael Zajac.

## Addendum: Reflections on 'White Cube Gallery Art' in the Shadow of *Arbor Vitae*

Culture, serious culture from anywhere, is an expression of human dignity.”

(Susan Sontag, *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo, 90.)

Material culture which aims to nurture social bonds through the production of individual and collective meaning (referred to as 'art' in some languages but not in others) takes an unimaginable diversity of forms and practices globally – it always has and hopefully always will. At the same time, those of us educated in 'Euro-Can-American-centric' art academies (including myself) have been encouraged to valorize very particular approaches to making, using, conceptualizing and critiquing art. This art is customarily referred to as 'contemporary'; I think of it as 'white-cube gallery art' because it is informed by the context the contemporary art

gallery represents even when it is not literally situated in one. The cultural and economic capital worth of 'white cube gallery art' is substantial and often inflated compared to other categories of cultural production.

'White cube gallery art' has been and continues to be an important, materially compelling and intellectually stimulating form of art production – but it is only one single strand in a vast hairball of equally valuable stands of cultural practice. It seems that many circular and uninspiring debates such as the never-ending "craft vs art" discussion could be sidestepped if a more expansive interpretation of what constitutes significant art were to be adopted. What if we simply committed ourselves to responding to all art practices as *singularities* – including those that I've cheekily categorized as 'white-cube gallery art'? ■

## ...for things too have to be elevated to the dignity of narrative

– Latour, LOC 1845 of 3230



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### About the Author

Mansfield Ceramics and the team at *Ceramics: Art+Perception* pays tribute to the innovative curator, writer, and critic, Sigrid Dahle who passed away on October 31st 2020 of complications related to Covid-19. Her close association with the School of Art, the School Art Gallery, and the University of Manitoba, for over 36 years, established her as a trail-blazing leader in Winnipeg's art scene. Her far-reaching impact and legacy are profound. More can be read about the brilliant life and work of Dahle at DAHLE SIGRID - Obituaries - Winnipeg Free Press Passages