

Attempt of a new approach to the phenomenon Piet Stockmans

1. My connection to Piet Stockmans

The author admits having an affection for as well as a friendship with Piet Stockmans for decades. The following brief preliminary remarks are intended to illustrate this process of rapprochement and appreciation.

After studying porcelain design at the world-renowned porcelain school in Selb, he worked for 23 years as in-house designer at Royal Mosa in Maastricht until 1989. While still employed, he held professorships in product design/ceramic design in Genk/Limburg (Belgium) and Eindhoven (Netherlands). Anticipating the foreseeable sad decline of the tableware ceramics industry in the Benelux, he established his own studio in his hometown of Genk (in Flanders, Limburg region). Incredibly fast and adept, he built up a workshop base that to this very day allows him to produce both serial-manufactured and artistic individual pieces.

Among other things, he acted as a cultural ambassador for Flanders and the Kingdom of Belgium. Piet Stockmans represented the new, creative, post-industrial scene of a dramatically deindustrialized region of Western Europe (former coal-steel region). Significantly, he established his studio on a former coal mine site - now a workshop, a "place to be" with a shop/showroom and a permanent display of works. Where once black coal was mined, today Piet, his daughter and his son-in-law produce white, fine hard paste porcelain, only very sparingly accented with cobalt blue.

In 1996, during an international ceramics symposium at the prestigious Finnish Design University in Helsinki, I finally met him in person. His lecture "Art and Design in Synergy" was a statement received with much approval and admiration. The unsurpassed range of creativity in porcelain, already broadly developed at that time, convinced not only me. He was a stimulating role model for a new, expanded teaching concept in my field at the BURG GIEBICHENSTEIN. We succeeded in inviting him to Halle several times as a guest lecturer and external examiner.

After the reunification of Germany changed virtually all aspects of the professional life, we had to explore new ways of design education in porcelain, glass, ceramics. Thus far we had been strongly focused on industrial services but now aimed to teach a broader, more versatile workshop practice. This perspective towards a more flexible qualification of students/graduates for multiple forms of creativity was also sorely needed as the once strong ties to companies and workshops in the glass and ceramics industry of the former East Germany, guaranteeing employment after graduation, almost completely disappeared. The students swiftly needed to adapt to the new (commercial) reality. Thus, Piet Stockmans was for us also an encourager and advisor for an expanded, new model and teaching profile; preparing our students to work as freelancer and workshop founder/study designer instead of the rarely found steady employments at companies.

2. Porcelain - Its medium. Its program. Its repertoire

Piet Stockmans lives and breathes porcelain, a material he has been in contact with since the age of 26. This material is his medium that determines his life and work to this very day. His artistic pleasure in the manual, direct handling of the material gave rise to an impressive, extremely multifaceted oeuvre over his lifetime. Worldwide he is regarded as a solitaire - not only in the international porcelain scene – by his signature style that by now has become a recognizable brand comparable to none.

Piet Stockman's fine ceramic experience and design expertise was acquired in the classical fields of experience in the porcelain industry. Starting with an excellent professional qualification in Selb and Limoges (at that time world centers of the porcelain industry), a 23-year practice as in-house designer at Royal Mosa followed. His experience in the constant handling of plaster (as a modeling and production material) as well as porcelain (dealing mainly with casting technology and the complexity of mass production) was decisive for his later studio foundation and equipment. Piet Stockman's designs for functional tableware at the time clearly reflected the Scandinavian modernism of the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to functional clarity and original solutions, one also senses moments of a natural sensuality and deliberate suitability for everyday use. Here I see a sympathetic closeness to the life's work of a great Japanese porcelain designer Masahiro Mori (1927-

2005). Analogous to the soy sauce bottle "G-type", an absolute long seller by Mori in 1958, one could mention his "Sonja" cup for Royal Mosa in 1967 (production volume: approx. 50 million copies). Piet Stockmans proudly points out that probably more than half of all Dutch people had his cup(s) in their cupboards at that time.

Leaving his permanent position at Royal Mosa he first continued to work as a porcelain designer for various Belgian and Dutch labels in the 1990s but started as a designer and producer of exclusive small series from his own studio. As early as 1987, he established his own studio line and a clearly recognizable product program grew steadily - based exclusively on cast ware (a thick, pourable hard paste porcelain mass). He perfectly adapted this production technology originally meant for the industrial setting and used it in his studio for flexible, small scale production that represents the foundation for his collections until today. This technology is also a prerequisite for his artistic object series (multiples), installations and architecture-related works. Common to all forms of expression is the serial yet variable mode of production.

Piet Stockman's repertoire of forms in the field of tableware and home accessories is characterized by minimalism and purism. Simple shapes and vessel bodies: mostly cylinder types and box shapes (with square bases) form the functional "modules" of his sets and/or entire table furnishings. This elementary, open world of forms is individualized/improved in the process of its multi-stage "becoming" through left-over traces of processing or through deliberate interventions. His porcelains thus show a discreet liveliness, fine deviations and variations of a theme that can easily be recognized as his brand. This creates a natural contrast to the perfect, series-identical, industrial standard items. His working methods refer to all stages of the patient, multi-part creation process and include careful observation, repetition, correction (I call it "reflective repetition").

Especially in his series of objects he fixes phases of flowing of the casting compound (slip) as a sign of the change from liquid to solid. Of course, a certain, professional avoidance of errors is essential, but even more he plays with the "allowing" of errors/deviations or even with the deliberate bringing about of deformations up to destruction. Thus, above all, material is created for arrangements and installations rich in associations, which conserve the respective phases of "becoming" or "passing away": of the liquid, the soft-plastic, the

leather-hard or the hardness of the fired porcelain. Modifying the material at the different states of aggregation allows him to rise to his intellectual and creative virtuosity!

Piet Stockmans thus is comparable to none in the worldwide contemporary ceramics scene. Many others of his rank succeed through a certain monotony of specialization, through a handwriting, through a narrower spectrum of expression a rather linear optimization and consequently fixation of their work. Here he profits from the synergies of his different creative activities!

As an author and "porcelain fetishist", I must of course mention his excellent hard porcelain body, this paper-like, thin-walled, translucent body! Asked about his life's work, he once said: in the beginning, there could have been paper instead of porcelain. His work does not necessarily result from his professional start and these (initial) imprints. His studio collections convey a lightness, delicacy and sensual coolness that can only be found very rarely executed (see also chap.5). An important challenge for the further perfection of the fine body and a here necessary form constancy of the small series was the cooperation with the German jewelery label NIESSING from 1994 on. This specific quality of the fractured porcellain is predominantly due to the biscuit like surface, i.e. unglazed and polished. Here, the white or blue colored body appears even "whiter" in the interaction with light and the colorations looks more precise. The tactile quality is thus enhanced as a moment of sensory pleasure. But where the function of use requires it, glazing is of course used.

The creative spectrum of his means is crowned by his legendary "Stockmansblauw" - introduced in the 80s that developed into a brand. This cobalt blue used as a metal salt solution (either as a painting agent or dipping solution) determines almost his entire program. In addition, other porcelain colors and decorative techniques are not or rarely used. Stockman's white-blue constellation is just so strong and coherent! Rather casually, it is reminiscent of one of the "original colors" of porcelain and its origins. And firing-wise, these cobalt compounds are one of the most stable color bodies in the sintered porcelain body, and the "Stockmansblauw" is toxically inert.

3. Object-space understanding. Methods of production and presentation

As a designer one can internalize the principle of mass production as the most perfect possible production of always the same, defect-free products. Likewise, one can perceive the handling and arrangement of individual items during the manufacturing process as geometric structures, certain ordering principles, and a specific aesthetic quality. Be it manual or machine production, it is always about rows and various stacking and accumulating processes. For this, both the casting technology used by Piet Stockmans provides the reproduction basis as well as the classical turning (pottery) in the handicraft-manufacturing area.

The individual is always multiplied to a multiple. Whereby the desired goal in Piet Stockmans' work is not the standardized sameness, but the calculated or improvised allowance and induction of deviation. Perhaps an experienced industrial designer can play more consciously with these limitations or de-limitations, vary them and thus use them for his individualized studio production (see chap. 2). Here they serve a personal handwriting, an enlivening of the object and also an increase in value.

In my view, Piet Stockmans is "pre-loaded" by his "entry" into the fine ceramic world. A special perfection is his characteristic, as a sovereign he uses almost all possibilities of serial casting technique for his respective tasks. He pushes limits or ignores them where others define or limit their production methods and workshop profiles more firmly. He makes highly undogmatic use of the potentials of the "disciplines": industrial design, studio design (applied art/craft) and artistic work (object art, sculpture, etc.). If it serves his artistic goal, he changes the "genre boundaries" and constantly develops his symbiotic ways of playing.

I think that the special quality and peculiarity of Piet Stockman's work lies in his serial thinking as a work concept. It contains the principle of repetition as a formula that became a ritual. It is based on reflection and inspiration in "making" - his actual creative work process. He often plays with the nuances of change, with the tensions between uniformity and individuality, between austerity and sensuality, between form and deformation.

This production principle corresponds to his principle of how to present his work. It is the calculated play with a serial aesthetic as the basis of his installations, actions or his architecture-related interventions. He uses this "quantity" of elements in arrangement

structures, displays, to charge them with an idea and to bring them into the respective contextual references. But he avoids any strained gesture, any mannerism or intellectual overload!

Since the beginning of his space-related projects, one prop has been almost indispensable to him: the wooden box -which has also become a part of the Stockmanns brand for exhibitions. These boxes, big and small, that are always open do not actually want to be packaging utensils, but rather housings, framings, settings - means of an often meditative setting of, for example, variable states of a form, a vessel. He plays with the impression of systematic order structures, as we know them from material and goods warehouses. Perhaps his blue and white ware bedded in wooden boxes on wood wool is after all a discreet reference to the "Golden Age" and the legendary Dutch East India Company and its careful, protective packaging of imported porcelains?

As early as the beginning 1980s, Piet Stockmans began to explore space and also open space with his porcelain medium, in addition to his employment as a designer at Royal Mosa. Recently, in conversation, he commented on his intentions at the time as: "out of the cupboard" and "down from the table." It was a breaking out of porcelain from its classical role attribution as the main actor of table culture. First installations emerged as cheerful, serial "additions" on walls in private and public indoor and outdoor spaces, on the floor in rooms, but also in open spaces in the form of simple elements, such as snippets, strips, shards, fragments, and the like. These installations of often innumerable, surface-filling elements consisted mostly of fired porcelain fragments, but sometimes also of raw, unfired casting slip. Such mostly temporary installations amazed, surprised and enabled a different perception of space - quite in contrast to baroque porcelain cabinets and their exuberant lust for decoration in stylistic harmony. Mostly, his "statements" are to be understood in the architectural context as a setting of contrast or as a distancing from the room and its interior.

The individual object gained even broader international recognition and resonance by his new means of presentation involving object series and novel installative methods. Piet Stockmans is a pioneer of a more universal understanding of ceramic vessel design and object art. He contributed fundamentally to a radically different perception and reception!

Subsequently he inspired other artists that used adaptations of this Stockmans' program in installative projects, e.g. by Young-Jae Lee "1111 Schalen" 2006 in the Rotunda of the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich, furthermore by Edmund de Waal "Signs & Wonders" 2009 in the Victoria and Albert Museum London. But also the series of vessel still lifes by the Australian Gwyn Hanssen Pigott reveal sympathetic references to the work of Piet Stockmans.

In essence, I view his installation works as well-calculated, temporary projects that continually open up new spaces and levels of perception for the ceramic material. His most unusual and impressive exhibitions (always connected with site-specific installations) were created in (free) spaces of transition, spaces of disuse. Here, original breaks, contrasts and exciting interrelationships in the perception of the space and its props, its porcelains, can develop their maximum effectiveness. I am pleased to mention the first appearance of Piet Stockmans in Schulenburg Mansion in 1999 after the it was stripped to the bare walls and before the historical reconstruction started that was just recently completed. This catalog offers interesting comparative documents. But also his work presentation in 2004 in the old Rosenthal porcelain factory in Selb (European Museum of Porcelain) with its brittle charm of an awakened industrial ruin offered ideal spaces for his interventions.

4. Henry van de Velde and Piet Stockmans. An attempt of a cultural approach

In 2022, Piet Stockmans will once again use the space of the Schulenburg Mansion in Gera, an ensemble of buildings designed in 1913/1914 by his fellow countryman Henry van de Velde. Are there interfaces in the life's work, in the design views, convictions of both? Is it even a presumption on my part to ask? Since both "universal designers" meet here, I still want to try. In the happiest case, I could help to sense closeness and distance, connecting and separating.

In his laudatio on the occasion of the Thuringian Monument Protection Award 2012, Holger Reinhardt states: "The Schulenburg House is van de Velde's last work realized in Germany. Here, his architectural language manifests itself on the basis of the art theory and reform approaches he developed. In its entirety, consisting of a residence with ancillary buildings up to the garden pavillion, furniture and garden design, it is considered

the most mature work of the ingenious artist on the threshold of "New Building" in Germany. Here the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* propagated by him can be experienced as a symbiosis of architecture, garden design and decorative arts as a harmonious whole."(1)

I would like to refer to some spatial design aspects and positions, since both actors touch each other quite directly in this mansion. Is there perhaps a "stimulus-response pattern" to be sensed? How does someone born 77 years later react to this carefully restored architectural monument? How does Piet Stockmans change his conception compared to the 1999 exhibition where the building looked closer to complete destruction than to complete reconstruction?

Van de Velde designed a building as a compositional interpenetration of all parts of the building in the sense of a holistic, sculptural design. Still rooted in pre-modernism and associated with the reform movement of the early Werkbund, the Schulenburg mansion appears very massive, compact and relatively closed - quite in contrast to the famous villas of the New Building movement in the 1920s and 1930s. The design is carried through from the large body of the building to the smallest detail of the furniture. An important element of effect is the line and with it the dynamic progressions, both in the ornamentation and the plastic compression of individual form elements and building parts, their volumes. A conscious lighting and color scheme support the functional structure and dramaturgy of the rooms. Reduced ornaments are integrated into the surfaces. The entire building is an artistic statement and a masterful planning achievement in the sense of a very personal dedication to the client. Henry van de Velde is the ingenious planner-designer-draughtsman - he directs the individual trades on the building, takes care of the complete interior fittings, the furnishings up to the works of art as well as the entire exterior space. It is a great challenge for Piet Stockmans to unfold in these stylistically extremely condensed spaces. Because: he does not create spaces, he tries to react to existing spaces intelligently and playfully at the same time! Rather, he organizes a conscious contrast, creating breaks, causing irritations, creating free spaces. In this way, his "interventions" can bring about an altered perception of and attention to the existing structure, while at the same time conveying a new, temporary experience of space. He has an enormous reservoir of materials and means at his disposal, enabling him to realize interesting interventions even in such museum-like "closed" structures. Perhaps the intentions of the

architect and the guest are combined in the detection of the inner logic of the building, the spatial sequences, the visual axes, the pathway of the lights?

Despite their historically very different context of creativity as well as their non-overlapping creative profiles, both share a very independent attitude to the equal value and unity of artistic and creative disciplines. They both move confidently within this organic context that they perceived. While Henry van de Velde still strives for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an exclusive building task, Piet Stockmans celebrates his universalistic principle entirely out of his medium, his material as a virtuoso multi-instrumentalist, whether as a functional service provider or autonomous porcelain artist. In his person he embodies the unity (and freedom) of design and execution.

And there is another perspective which allows to recognize connecting lines between the two exceptional artists. In 1902, the Grand Duchy of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach appointed Henry van de Velde to head an arts and crafts advisory service, the *Kunstgewerbliche Seminar*. This institution - promoted in a special way by the Grand Duchess's mother Pauline - became a little later, with the founding of the School of Arts and Crafts as a teaching institution, the Belgian's passionate field of activity and a beacon of the arts and crafts reform movement in Thuringia. After van de Velde's was fired in 1914/15 as an enemy of the country, Walter Gropius was able to pick up where he left off in 1919 with his Bauhaus program and further develop the idea of the university-practice partnership. Immediately after the Second World War, Horst Michel and his Weimar Institute for Interior Design achieved a unique level of successful regional design consulting and cooperation with, in part, entire branches of industry in the newly founded German Democratic Republic. Of course, the strong Thuringian porcelain industry was always in the focus of all these "design agencies". And finally, Piet Stockmans comes into play again!

5. *Piet Stockmans and the Thuringian porcelain industry after 1990*

The crisis in the European porcelain industry moved from west to east like a storm front on the weather channel. The drastic reduction of production sites in the Benelux countries began as early as the late 1980s. In the Maastricht area, the center of the ceramic industry in the Netherlands was affected. As already mentioned, Piet Stockmans left his company

Royal Mosa in 1989. In the following years, he was able to realize excellent designs for several design labels in Belgium and the Netherlands; increasingly, customized table furnishings for ambitious restaurants were and are being created.

At the same time, he looked around for company partnerships in East Germany. Here, the Treuhand privatizations created paradoxical situations: first, (design) personnel were laid off, and then the new owners sought new design ideas and designers for their successful takeovers. In 1993, Piet Stockmans came into contact with the renowned quality porcelain producer *Weimar Porzellan* in Blankenhain through the new owner, Herbert Hillebrand of Cologne. His complex tableware program "Expression" together with further designs could go into production under again new owner construction in 1995. Under the label "Weimar Design" Blankenhain offered his designs and those of other guest designers in a great collection of contemporary design. But in 2007 the company had to file for bankruptcy again and was sold. The enormous potential of a possible more intensive partnership, especially with Piet Stockmans, could not materialize. The new and last owner, Turpin Rosenthal, sealed the downfall and sell-out of one of the best Thuringian porcelain factories.

Today, the porcelain manufactory Reichenbach is Piet Stockman's partner for the series "Expression" and other of his designs. Here he may now find his save harbour! When it comes to fine table porcelain, the Reichenbachers, with their skill and spirit of experimentation, offer a top position among the remaining porcelain companies in Germany. In addition to its in-house collection, this agile, family-run manufactory is an ideal production site for internationally renowned designers and design labels – a must mention: HERING BERLIN, Sabine Wachs as well as various Danish brands.

6. Fragility – a parable of the state of the world and ceramic

Comparable to an autobiography in pictures, Piet Stockmans published his opus magnum "*no china*" in 2018 as probably the most extensive publication of his work. It is an opulent picture album - with only the necessary picture and work information in the appendix. What has he wrung from his medium, porcelain, in the 50 years documented here! I call it simply: the phenomenon Piet Stockmans.

Browsing through the pages, I am always impressed by his sensing and exploration of new possibilities of expression at all stages of "becoming," of the entire working process. He observes most attentively, reflects, reacts, repeats, pauses, stops the process, conserves a stage. For example, he allows the viscous porcelain casting slip to flow freely, to dry, to shrink, to form cracks. Intermediate stages of "making" thus coagulate into valid "images."

They associate geological processes or tectonic structures, they are reminiscent of volcanic surfaces and elemental forces. They are symbols of the transition from the fluid to the solid, from the hard, whole to the torn, broken.

One thread of his pictorial research that I have not mentioned so far is the large group of body impressions. Around 1993, he first began with his mask paintings or portraits, and from about 2000 he experimented with partial body impressions, predominantly of young female bodies. Using the transfer material plaster, body parts and surfaces are thus depicted "up close". Fragmentary, rather two-dimensional body images emerge as signs of the so vulnerable human body, torso-like sketches in porcelain of the specifically feminine.

And again and again vessels are created, but they "fail": tear, shatter, fall, are compressed, flattened ... defenselessly exposed to air drying and / or kiln heat (1400° C).

But also vessels are created, but they "shine" in minimalist elegance of Stockmans` studio porcelain, functional companions for table rounds, tête-à-têtes or other moments of pleasure. Fine, delicate, light and translucent - animating lustful touch and use.

All this and still is Piet Stockmans!

Yet - like a parable - his "free" works increasingly remind us of the fragility of all creation(s). Beauty can also lie in the depiction of the vulnerable, the destroyed can admonish, the damaged and defenseless can arouse compassion. Paper-thin is its body usually, fragile the object. The transition from the enduring, solid to the pile of shards is always present.

References:

(1)

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