

Between Inside and Outside Susanne Kallenbach's clay vessels

It happens from time to time in the course of an individual's life that a path unwillingly taken at first proves in retrospect to have been a stroke of fortune and the basis of a lifetime's happiness. That was the case for Susanne Kallenbach, born in 1957 in the Bavarian market town of Türkheim, who while still a teenager doing practical training fell under the spell of pottery. This was very much to the displeasure of her parents when it came to career choices. Her father was an attorney and had other expectations, yet in the end was no match for his daughter's stubbornness. However, after her high school exams in 1976 this clay-fascinated young woman failed to find what she wanted: an apprenticeship in a pottery. It was the high season for this creative profession. The enormous flood of applicants to the then still numerous training institutions led to year-long waiting-lists filled with young hopeful potters.

The only choice remaining was one she had actually wanted to avoid: an academic education in ceramics. Apart from the practical training regulated by the guilds, there were schools of ceramics or technical high schools; there was even the faculty of ceramics at art school. And here there were often highly influential teachers, which meant that in the sphere of ceramics there were stylistic schools which competed for the position of the guardian of ceramic principles or considered themselves the ceramic avant-garde. From one's preferred shapes, techniques and approach to manipulating clay, it was usually clear which stable one came from. *(Su in der Mu, Foto Nele)*

In the 1960s, these were above all the antipodes Jan Bontjes van Beek at the Hamburg School of Art, with his severe, finely glazed vessels, and in Kassel Walter Popp, who had discovered the sculptural quality of ceramic montage and had revealed wholly new dimensions in pottery; and then there was Johannes Gebhardt in Kiel, born in 1933, who compared to the first two belonged almost to the next generation. Gebhardt had been teaching from 1956 at the Muthesius School of Arts and Crafts, which in the 1970s gained the status of technical college; today it is a fully-fledged School of Art. With his own works, Gebhardt had in the later 1960s given a new direction and freedom to the various methods of expression in the field of ceramics.

Clearly also following certain trends in contemporary fine art – one thinks of Arte Povera or the then emergent materiality in painting – Gebhardt gave ceramic material a voice: in unglazed abstract reliefs and figures, and later in vessels modelled with apparently natural structures. He allowed the material to develop a life of its own, indeed even provoked this. However, despite the freedom won in his own work and communicated to his students, he was a strict instructor. Although he never imposed a particular artistic canon, whoever studied with him was in the first semesters obliged to master all the fundamental aspects of the craft at the potter's wheel. The new freedom that transcended the traditional canon and artistic expression in the ceramic genre was for Gebhardt founded in a profound understanding of the handling and technical potential of this metier. Ceramic work is unforgiving of technical mistakes or carelessness: nothing can be hidden under the screen of "brilliance". If the ability or the will is absent, it is impossible to develop an individual signature in one's work. So it occurred that Susanne Kallenbach discovered her originally unlooked-for academic training in Kiel was the stroke of luck she needed, and the influence of her teacher Johannes Gebhardt was the foundation of her further work. Everything about her œuvre grew out of this training and without it would not even be conceivable. Yet her decision to study in Kiel had very non-ceramic motives: it was the desire for the furthest possible distance from her Bavarian home that took her to the northern coast of Germany. And here she has remained, ever since her student years from 1978 to 1986; in 2007 she founded a studio in Ranzel, between Rendsburg and Kiel.

The ceramicist communicates in her work, both in her ceramic pots and in her free sculptural pieces, an unmistakable, very specific sensibility for the material, for the unheard-of possibilities of

near-natural structures and surface textures. Often appearing rough, at times even with apparently brutal injuries, and muted in colour, these works always result from the material itself, liberated to become what it is. Nevertheless, they retain a delicacy that demands from the viewer (and the handler) a particular optic and haptic sensitivity. Susanne Kallenbach's works breathe through this peculiar sensibility which makes itself felt aesthetically in many tensions or even contradictions, yet without losing a sense of harmony. Some of her earthenware vessels seem to float: ringing, wafer-thin bowls, some of them astonishingly large, opening wide above a minimalist foot. Others are faintly conical, sturdy cylinder vessels, often grouped like individuals within a species, as if they were still softly swinging. They are all marked by the typical slightly irregular but extremely sharp edge that seems finely to sever the monochrome, velvet-smooth glazed interior from the palpably scored, layered, cracked, multivalent images – landscapes, topographic and geologic elements, rinds and barks – encompassing the outer surface. These structures are at no point to be confused with decor. Without losing its essence as a receptacle, the vessel gains an autonomy that entirely departs from functionality; it becomes as it were a ceramic skin that divides its character into shield and shielded, wounded and whole, and unites the differences, indeed to some extent defines them. Moreover, these vessels become images of their own genesis, so that in the end the fine relief of their faces, as it were grown ancient and frozen in material singularity, can no longer be distinguished from the underlying structure: a symbol of life lived, and ultimately of transience.

Such pieces are never turned on the wheel, a process that would give the material an entirely different structure, but formed out of the material mass like sculptures, then also worked on sculpturally: scraped, scored, combed, painted with coloured slip and studded with spots of porcelain, rubbed with ash and then wiped clean. Here the artist does not, despite appearances, work in an entirely informal and spontaneous way. Often the material images that evolve on her pots are based on sketches and preparatory drawings which naturally become different and unique when translated into the plastic medium. In fact, she often has particular themes, moods, even very specific memories in mind; these are reflected in the titles of ceramic groups, although their idiomatic language is rarely self-evident or easily read. Then follows the decisive step in the process: Susanne Kallenbach begins to stretch this already worked material, with all the informally drawn lines, the slip painting, the porcellain inlays, ash and additions of organic and inorganic substances: she stretches this delicately and carefully into vessels with ultra-thin walls. In this manner, the clay shells receive their softly swung inner form; at the same time, the repeatedly worked outer surface expands, as it were, from an irregular anamorphic mass of uncertain origin to a unique, round microcosm of geohistory with a planet's surface: a micrological topography with its own atmosphere. This puts Susanne Kallenbach's objects in the direct vicinity of the plastic arts, sculpture and painting, yet they retain the functionality of ceramic pots. Uniting as they do many opposing principles, they are as artificially construed as they appear natural; they are at once expressive and introvert, injured and healed. They combine masterfully concise artistic statement and the simple message of the material per se. And all this with a magical beauty which paradoxically and wonderfully resolves the immanent contrasts while allowing them to remain as they are.

That's life. What has happened cannot be undone. The traces it leaves behind can only be further worked like a palimpsest. What happens is often unlooked-for: it happens to us, but also frees possibilities which later prove to be fortunate or unfortunate – we have to accept it. We should never believe, as the spirit of our digital age would suggest, that life is programmable. Susanne Kallenbach's ceramic vessel works are allegories of this risky, inescapable, once-and-for-all defining freedom which we call life.

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