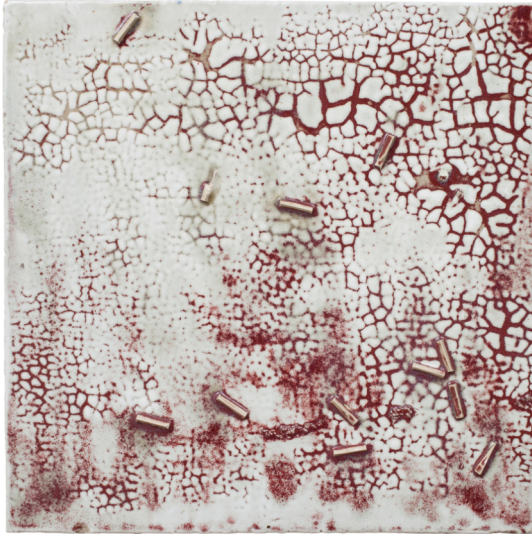


BREAKING VIOLENTLY THE ACT OF RATIONALITY.

The work of Katrine Køster Holst

Text by Fleur van Muiswinkel

“Although artworks are neither conceptual nor judgemental, they are logical.”, this line by the philosopher Theodor Adorno catches my attention while on a residency with Katrine Køster Holst around Easter this year¹. Køster Holst’s work is known for its strong systematic approach, which according to the artist herself, gives her freedom and creates space for the unexpected to happen. In his book *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno explains that the logical consistency of the artwork is strongly related to the rational aspect of the work. Our daily life is dominated by mathematics and science, which create the standard conventions through which we understand our daily reality. These conventions have strongly influenced our understanding and appreciation of art and become the starting point for Adorno to analyse our logic dominated thinking, through analysing the complexity of form in relation to art. He acknowledges that both art and science deal, in their own way, with existential questions raised by our daily reality. However the main difference between them is found in the aesthetics qualities of the artwork and the signs used within mathematics.



1. *Red Soil* (2012), glazed stoneware 35,5 x 35,5 x 3cm
photo by Kjell Ove Storvik

No existential questions are at stake in Køster Holst's work, the following text is rather an exercise confronting two new works *Red Soil* (2012) and *The Phantom of an Owl* (2012)² with Adorno's ideas about the complexity of form in relation to the artwork. Adorno will guide us to step beyond the works formal qualities and allow them a more poetic reading.

We brought with us to Hellebou³, *Red Soil* (2012) a square tablet size 35,5 x 35,5 x 3cm. [image 1] Its surface is build up from different layers of glaze resulting in a play of red lines, white planes, green-ish shades and small blue dots. Over the course of the days we continue talking about the work, look closer and more carefully, and become surprised each time the light changes and brings forward new details. Our interpretation of the work, Adorno explains, is on the first hand established on the level of form.

Continuously shifted by the artworks aesthetic form, it is our own subjective and unconscious reading that creates the final image. This first layer of understanding is what Adorno means when talking about the literal reading of the work. When we acknowledge the formal logic and understand that this leads us to both an *event* and *resolutions* that constitute the artwork, a deeper layer of meaning manifests itself in front of us. The complexity of form and how this leads to several layers on which the meaning of the work is based, is summarised by Adorno as followed: *“Form is mediation in that it is the relation of parts to each other and to the whole and as the elaboration of details.”*⁴ In the case of a ceramic work, it is important to bear in mind that the clay originates from the earth. This will influence our understanding of the artwork and make us aware that it is inherently connected to the world around us. Adorno says: *“There is nothing in art, not even the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed.”*⁵ So to allow for new layers of meaning to appear, the challenge is to overcome and understand that the aforementioned way of interpretation is mainly based on the medium and allows only for one layer meaning to become visible.

When speaking of medium in relation to *Red Soil*, it is important to recognize the deliberate choices made by the artist in the process of applying the glaze that result in the pattern of cracks and diversity of colour hues; While at the same time knowing that the aesthetic outcome can only partly be anticipated by her. The artist explains to me that at the moment of applying the layer of glaze, it is still transparent, the final result is therefore always created collectively with chance. She has no direct influence and cannot control the chain reactions set in motion after moment of applying the glaze. The surface underneath the glaze will react in its own way influenced of course by several forces from the outside (like the temperature and the duration of

firing the work in the kiln) that again can be controlled by the artist. But inside the kiln; chance is fighting control and will eventually turn out to be the winner. In the case of Køster Holst, the strict systematic approach in combination with her deep technical knowledge about the medium of ceramics (build up over the past fifteen years), the artist incorporates chance so it becomes a welcoming sparring partner in the process of creation. The unexpected and unforeseen opens up the work to in a new way.

But although chance is a collaborative partner in the aesthetic outcome of the artwork, it is only the artist herself that is the decisive factor when exhibiting the work. In the case of most works presented her in this show, Køster Holst decided to present them hanging on the wall. This immediately changed the way I read them and I wondered if this display decision had influenced the artist during the working process. Did she decide already while working on them in a horizontal position that they would be presented in a vertical position hanging on the wall? It turns out that this was not the case at all. Nevertheless I would like to argue that there is a relationship between *Red Soil* and painting that does direct our reading of the work into new layers of meaning.

One of the elements involved within both ceramics and painting is *time*. Especially while thinking about the role of time in both oil painting and the act of glazing in ceramics. Time is for example found in the drying process of the oil and resembled by the time a ceramic artist needs to wait for the glaze to be completely dry before being able to applying a new layer. But there are more similarities to be found between painting and ceramics. For example, when we look at the function glaze it is often understood as a method to protect the painted decorations. This, in the case of painting, would resemble the act of varnishing in the painting. In both mediums this act is used to

frame a moment in time and to protect a certain layer underneath. In painting it also intensify appearance of pigments by the refraction of light, while in case of *Red Soil* the glaze is used as the painting material and not necessarily as the protecting layer. Køster Holst breaks the convention by continuously applying layers of glaze and dismissing the glaze as an indicator for the finalisation of the work. (As is often the case with painting where the layer of varnish is used to fix the work) However there is one occasion in the life span of a painting when the varnish is used for other reasons. This is when varnished is used in restoration. During this process this layer becomes the indicator of time. It will allow for changes made on the surface to be reversed when needed in another moment.

In case of *Red Soil*, the artist pushed the material beyond its traditional function. The harm is done and the continuous layering of glaze passes a moment of no return, they become part of the aesthetic qualities of the work like in painting where each brushstroke defines the intensity and the mixture of colour(s). In the case of *Red Soil* however each layer creates its own detail. Therefore the mediation and interrelation of the layers direct our attention and open for a more metaphorical reading of form in relation to content. It is the visual logic that allows us to let go of the assumed reality in which we experience the work and give way to a more poetical reading. This moment might be better described as a dream-like reality in which our imagination mixes up time and space, merging into unforeseen forms that are connected to our own subjective reading of and informed by the artwork itself.

The title *Red Soil* and the red cracks in the surface made me think about the images of the dried clay soil of the desert. [image 2] As a result of gruesome torture by the sun and unimaginable temperature for hours, days and weeks, the clay starts to crack and deep

traces start to appear. Although this reference to the landscape through the material of the clay the metaphorical capacity of ceramics seems to be limited. The way Køster Holst is able to take this abstraction a step further by her usage of the glaze makes me come back to the work again and again.



2. *Dried Soil in the Dessert*, photo by Anton Prado⁶

Of course there might more literal references we can think of and ones holding a more poetical quality. I told the artist for example that the work somewhere reminded me of bacterial growth but I had to admit directly that mainly the title restricted me from completely drifting of into that direction. We spoke a bit longer about the relation to nature; the title, clay and how aesthetic qualities could also hold a reference to a more culture relation aspect of reality when only looking and putting aside the title. For Køster Holst the white long rectangular elements in the work, made her thinking about drifting wood. [see image 3 & 4]

Images of the old log drives start to appear in my mind and a short imaginary movie of man handling drifting wood, cut upstream in high the mountains and transporting it down by the river started to unfold.

The movie shows images of large heavy logs following the stream down to the place where they will be cut and put onto truck for further transportation. By a seemingly coincidence it turns out that Køster Holst had been on a summer residency in Namsos (NO) in 2009, where she lived near a lake and a wood mill at the end of a river where they collected the freshly cut logs.



3. River pigs steady a log so a fellow worker can scramble back up during the last log drive on Priest Rlver, in 1949, By Ross Hall / The Ross Hall Collection ⁷



6. *The Phantom Image of an Owl* Stoneware reduction/oxidation, 120 x 70 x 5cm photo by Kjell Ove Storvik

"It is not through the abstract negation of the ratio, nor through a mysterious, immediate eidetic vision of essences, that art seeks justice for the repressed, but rather by revoking the violent act of rationality by emancipating rationality from what it holds to be inalienable material in the empirical world."⁸

– Theodor Adorno

Isn't this a thought provoking quote when looking at Køster Holst's *The Phantom image of an Owl* (2012)? [image 5 & 6]

Let me give you some time to read the quote again. What struck me most was the last part where Adorno says that: "*art seeks justice for the repressed.*" It is this search for a thought, feeling or desire that art seeks to set free. But in *The Phantom image of an Owl* the idea that something is prevented from visualisation and we are only able to imagine what it might have been like, is phenomenal. The artist choice to use the metaphor of the phantom (also understood as a ghost or a figment of the imagination) in relation to the idea of an image creates a marvellous irresolvable contradiction in itself. It also gives the work her rich poetical resonance. It is only the reference to the owl that gives us any hints of what is at stake here. For the rest we are left with the *unalienable material* that even by looking at the artwork itself won't be giving any straight answers.

This time no shiny, glossy, seducing layer of glaze but just a bare surface that shows (again) traces of an event that lies in the past. In this work Køster Holst challenges us to think through a multiplication of abstractions even more. But if this work is an image of an owl? How would one explain the asymmetrical circle in the centre of the work seems, enclosed by the thin halo? Since we only see owls on very rare occasions, I assume this is how to explain the title. We can often hear its hooting drifting through the dark night when he is out hunting. But catching a glimpse of this night animal is more a matter of luck. It is like trying to catch your own shadow; you never manage and still it is there. Or like the phantom pain you feel after a limb is amputated, that is an echo from the past reminding you of something that is not there anymore but feels very present.

What would a shadow of a nocturnal animal look like? I start to wonder if there will actually be enough light to capture it. If we use photography, the light sensitivity necessary to make that picture in these circumstances would lead to such great loss of detail. But more importantly the time needed before the imprint of the owl would manifest itself on the memory-card seems to be as useless as trying to catch your own shadow.

On the other hand, the light circle, the soft tones and its thin halo, remind me of the image that occurs after having been blinded by a strong bright light. It is only after turning away from the blinding light source that the after-image occurs; my light sensitive cells on the back of my eyeballs send impulses via my optical nerve to my brain and form a visual image. This after-image becomes the visual reduction of the happening. Victor Stoichita, an art historian known for his book *A Short History of the Shadow* explains this visual reduction by referring to Pliny the Elder (a Roman author, naturalist and nature philosopher living from 23 AD till 79 AD) who so beautifully illustrated this by telling the story of an Sicyon potter.

The story is as follows; a potter called Butades living in Sicyon near Corinth had a daughter who fell in love with a young man who is about to leave her and travel abroad. She decides to draw on the wall the outline of her lovers shadow. Her father, searching for a way to cherish this image for eternity, chose to press clay on his daughters drawing, take it off and fire it with his other stoneware in the oven.

According to Stoichita the reduction that is happening as a result of the shadow is only restricted to nature. However in the case of Køster Holst's *The Phantom image of an Owl*, it is not the reduction of nature that occurs in front of us. But we are confronted with the reduction of an *original* volume whose imprint is the

only remnant. It is there to remind us of what used to be present.⁹

The Phantom image of an Owl originates from a plate that supports objects in the kiln. And it is the act of framing this plate and providing it with a new unequalled value, by the artist that challenges our understanding of its functionality. But it also illustrates what Adorno means when he speaks about the artworks responsibility to form that should go beyond its own subjectivity.¹⁰ Køster Holst challenges us with this exhibition and introduces a new promising direction for her future work that is leaning towards a more poetic reading. I hope you will enjoy.



5. *The Phantom Image of an Owl*, installation shot Northern Norwegian Art centre, photo by Kjell Ove Storvik

Endnotes

¹ *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers, 1997, p. 136

² Two works made during her three months residency at the European Ceramic Workcentre in Den Bosch, the Netherlands

³ *Hellebou* is a artist-residency in Norway founded by Johanne Birkeland and Ellen Henriette Suhrkein Blefjell. Katrine Køster Holst and I were there for one week in the second part of our two-week research period together, during Easter holiday of 2013.

⁴ P.144

⁵ p. 138

⁶ <http://www.scienceclarified.com/landforms/Basins-to-Dunes/Dune-and-Other-Desert-Features.html#b>

⁷ <http://www.sandpointonline.com/sandpointmag/smw07/feature1.html>

⁸ p. 139

⁹ The *original* mentioned here is a sculpture by the Belgium artist Johan Creten, who worked at the same time at the EKWC when Katrine Køster Holst was there.

¹⁰ *"In artworks, form is aesthetic essential insofar as it is an objective determination. Its locus is precisely there where the work frees itself from being simply a product of subjectivity."*