

David Jones

Grenzerfahrung: Embodied narrative – a critical tool to develop a sustainable ethical practice

The concept of embodied narrative has developed through reflection on my practice as a potter and reflective practitioner. This paper examines the extent to which it is possible to use craft not merely as an idea but as a skills-based mode of expression to convey an ethical message, and through the physicality of the work and the relationship to craft traditions to become a contemporary agent of change. The concept of *embodied narrative* has emerged out of reflection on making; it will be illustrated by reference to my own installations that deal with responses to the Holocaust from a familial perspective within a context of contemporary practice.

This paper addresses the ethical meaning of craft-making and its objects that underpins the issue of craft-work as problem solving. It considers the supplanting of making by industrial production in modernism as symptomatic of moral issues in society, and speculates on whether that ideological disappearance may have been significant in the increasingly bureaucratised views of human beings in the twentieth century and the consequential devaluing and genocidal outcomes that resulted from that instrumental view, through 'a reduction in our collective sense of agency and well-being'.

The search for understanding is as old as philosophy: Socrates famously quotes the maxim 'Know thyself': Γνωθι σεαυτόν (Gnothi Seauton) on a number of occasions: In *The Phaedrus*, Plato has his character Socrates pronounce that he considers it a waste of time to study myth and art, since he has 'not yet succeeded in obeying the Delphic injunction to 'know thyself', and it seems absurd to consider problems about other beings 'while I am in ignorance of my own nature' (Plato 1973: Section 230, p. 25).

I develop the concept of embodied narrative as a tool to explore this necessary self-awareness, as well as social awareness, that derives from my reading of Phenomenology: 'The body is our medium for having a world' (Merleau-Ponty 1970: 146) and 'Because we are in the world, we are *condemned to*

meaning, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history' (Merleau-Ponty 1970: xix). Embodied narrative is a mode of understanding that has emerged out of reflection on my own raku practice. That practice has become a 'methodological map of reflection', an 'engaged practice ... with an open-ended, undetermined procedural trajectory' (Sullivan 2010: 85). It has led to personal discoveries through the act of self-reflection on the narratives embodied in material, process, objects and display. My practice has evolved into a complex methodology of making that references a pre-Socratic sensibility which, itself, echoes the later Zen-Buddhist thinking. This philosophy of acting in the here and now, informed by Zen, has generated an awareness of myself as an embodied maker, and led to a largely phenomenological interpretation of making. This has led in turn to the concept of embodied narrative which represents an embedded ethically sustainable position. This derives from the histories of craft, particularly those mediated by Morris, Ruskin and David Pye.

My contemporary interpretation of raku practice utilises the Japanese methodology of making but, by removing the pot red-hot from the kiln, with gloves and/or metal tongs, the cooling is interrupted and the piece is processed by plunging into sawdust. After some hours, when the piece is cold, it is removed from the smothered sawdust which leaves the surface of the clay heavily blackened and 'burnt' through contact with carbonised sawdust. The tradition of raku has embedded in its history a focus on hapticity. In medieval Japan the tea-bowl was passed from hand to hand in the 'tea ceremony', which makes raku an ideal vehicle for the investigation of the place of 'the handmade' in 'the age of mechanical reproduction' (Benjamin 1968), as part of the embodied narrative conveyed by the work. Beuys states that: 'Thinking is sculpting' (quoted in Honnef, 1990: 42), implying a reciprocity between mind forming matter and matter forming mind. Raku can be read as a way of creating embodied narratives of haptic enquiry as well as objects for 'the gaze'. Raku establishes a new language of form and surface distinct from spoken or written

language, in which new objects evolve from the tradition of making containers for tea ceremony, by hand, as well as appropriating objects. The intimate relationship of the artist to the kiln and to fire itself and the embodied narratives of firing lead to a further extension of the understanding of raku that develops into a 'way of thinking through fire' (Jones, 2007: 156). The practice follows the methodology established by Walter Benjamin, who argues that:

The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition ... the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. (Benjamin 1968: 217)

Kant, in the *Critique of Judgement*, developed the high-seriousness of the new project of aesthetics, through adopting the contemplative position of 'disinterested objectivity', as well as in the denial of utility in the aesthetic object. Kant suggests that art objects are autonomous: they possess a unitary identity that is fixed ontologically (Kant 1972: 38) and derives from a dominant emphasis on opticality; sight is the sense that provides the most distance in perception. For the ceramicist this attitude of disinterest seems at variance with the real physical pleasures of making, handling and looking at ceramic objects, for this is an involved sensuality, in which the entire body and all its senses are involved. Pleasure is a quality that is as significant as disinterest in making assessments of art objects.

In his theory of somaesthetics Richard Schusterman states that it seeks for an appreciation of the everyday, to generate a 'transfiguring intensity of awareness, perception, and feeling, but without high art's alienating difficulty and elitism' (Schusterman 2012: 305). The way in which the concept of 'embodied narrative' is utilised in understanding my practice of necessity involves an awareness of the metaphoric and symbolic content of an object, signified *haptically* as well as optically. Embodied narrative is embedded in the work by the hand (and the extensions of the hand – tools and fire); a trace of the history of making is imprinted on/in handmade objects, in this case the abstract vessel – a container. The objects are created by hand-forming and on the potter's wheel – archaic modes of manufacture that carry their own traditional association. The clay pieces are marked through their manufacture – imprinting with fingers and tools. Clay objects have a secondary existence, for they must metamorphose in order to become ceramic: they must be fired in a kiln and become a new substance. The finished

pieces have that 'making-history' made permanent through firing – meaning burnt into the clay in their transformation from clay to ceramic.

In my recent practice, a synergy has slowly become apparent between firing in raku and the Holocaust, which became their embodied narrative, inscribed into the matter of the vessel, burnt into them. Holocaust etymologically is: *holo* = whole / *caust* = burnt – it stands for the complete combustion of the sacrifice in the temple. The heat involved in firing my vessels is even hotter, but the effect on clay bodies is not so total as on human bodies.

Daniel C. Dennett originally proposed 'embodied narrative' as a concept that might explicate the self (Dennett, 1992). Arthur Danto developed the idea that he called 'embodied meaning' to apply to productions in art (Danto 1964: 580); Bruce Metcalf further refined this theory in the context of the crafts as 'embodied sympathy' (Metcalf 2002). Metcalf proposes the idea of 'sympathetic craft as an extension of its maker's hand. The pot, in being touched, extends the potter's touch to its user ... for this process to work the object must be used' (Metcalf 2002: 7). My pieces are not designed for use, but I have adapted these models to connote the metaphoric and symbolic content of a work, signified via its material, haptic and visual properties; the notion of narratives is very significant in my work, so I choose to remain with the original nomenclature. Through these embodied narratives the thoughts and feelings of the artist are communicated; they are directly intuitable by the audience, not merely through sight, words and actions, but also via handling the objects that he or she has made, or appropriated. This is a model of interpretation that is significant in contemporary exegesis. Borgdorff states that:

Art research begins by addressing questions that are pertinent in the research context and in the art world. Researchers employ experimental and hermeneutic methods that reveal and articulate the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes. (quoted in Sullivan 2010: 79)

Meaning is embodied in a ceramic object through the making – in its performative inception. Then in the secondary activity of interpretation the finished piece is 'read' by the maker/artist. Finally it is 'read' by the audience. Some of the imprinted meaning is conscious and is deliberate mark-making

imposed on the soft receptive clay; other marks are the unconscious product of accustomed (craft) practices embedded, as Schusterman suggests, through ‘muscle-memory’, which is that ingrained habit that a craftsman develops through practice: ‘muscle-memory extends our range of attention and perception and thus enhances our freedom of action’ (Schusterman 2012: 99).

Embodied narrative is part of a phenomenological account of the significance of created outcomes; Edmund Husserl argued that one must develop a ‘standpoint’, a baseline that provides a ‘horizon’ (Husserl 1969), a philosophical position from which to understand the world. Martin Heidegger maintains that the ‘horizon’ is set by my Being in the world (Heidegger 1962). To critique my work a ‘horizon of making’ is established addressing aspects of hapticity (Tallis), through my understanding of myself as ‘the reflective practitioner’ (Donald Schön). Merleau-Ponty considers the whole, integrated person as embodied subject; embodied narrative employs the artistic expression that Plato wished to condemn as a mere distraction, and on the contrary to express through haptic means what cannot be expressed through text. As mentioned, one of the most recent and fully articulated positions of the body/mind, that he calls *soma*, has been developed by Richard Schusterman in his theory of somaesthetics.

Merleau-Ponty states axiomatically that ‘I cannot be other than the constitution and the experiences of my body, which enters into the world which is always there for it’ and which also is ‘our medium for having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1970: vii, 146). The methodology of embodied narrative depends on the realisation of the ‘ultimate rejection of the mind-body duality, as the embodied nature of feeling, acting, and thinking becomes better understood’ (Merleau-Ponty 1970: xiv) and ‘new synaptic connections form in response to embodied interactions’ (Sullivan 2010: 131–2). Schusterman recognises the perpetually social situation of our lives: he suggests a mode of ‘somatic consciousness [that] is always shaped by culture and thus admits of different forms in different cultures’ (Schusterman 2012: 4). Schusterman maintains that mind, as well as body, are ‘background’; that is, they provide a framework that structures our being, and of which we can be both aware and unaware, e.g. deep-seated racism (Schusterman 2012: 66).

The opening up of the craft tradition under the pressures of modernism has created opportunities to use it for much more expressive intent. Since utilitarian objects can be made far more profitably

within a globalised market it has released the traditions of craft to be utilised not merely as referential ideas but as the carriers of meaning from our shared pasts. That meaning is both implicit and consciously developed – marks of process and marks of intention. In my work the narrative embodied in the clay involves making scars by penetrating the clay surfaces with knives – cutting open the skin of clay and peeling back the fleshy covering of space. It is a disruption of the vessel tradition, symptomatic of the break with the past incurred under modernism, that allows expressive freedom.



like skin



broken-hearted



Shiboleth, Doris Salcedo, Tate Modern, 2007

Achim Borchardt-Hume, in critiquing the actions of Doris Salcedo in her intervention *Shibboleth*, reflects on this activity of cutting and incision in a symbolic way:

The act of cutting is motivated in equal measure by anger and the will to harm as by a mode of doubt and enquiry, of 'testing the limits'. By creating a moment of disjuncture, cuts offer a means to find out what happens *beneath* the surface. (Salcedo 2007: 17)

In his posthumously published essay, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', Merleau-Ponty develops his early phenomenological thinking concerning the body. He suggests a very close interplay between seeing, touching, and the body; seeing is no longer a passive, innocent activity of merely looking at things; as he says: there is a 'reciprocal insertion and intertwining' of the 'seeing body with the visible body' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 138). He wants to insist on a blurring of subject with object. Not merely does seeing implicate the seer in every act of active looking, but it can also bring into play the sense of touch and its sensations of haptic space:

Every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space ... palpating it with our look ... the gaze envelopes them, clothes them with its own flesh. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134, 131)

This phenomenological perspective on art and its making is far from the 'disinterest' of Kant; it provides an explanation of the way that the hand combined with the eye is an essential part of the decoding as well as the making of the embodied narrative.



Broken Hearted. David Jones.

The confrontation of audience with object is an experience where the aura of the work is transmitted through an intimate relationship (parallel to the intuitive ethical interaction analysed by the (Jewish)

philosopher Martin Buber in *I and Thou*; it is characterised by Emmanuel Levinas as 'the face of the other' – in short, it is that direct confrontation with another's humanity. I use the intuitive experience of handling, in addition to seeing, a handmade craft object to connect the audience to that embodied narrative. Seeing or feeling the place where the maker's hands have been, particularly with ceramics, connects fabricator to audience.

The work, then, involves a meditation on the transience of human existence; the artefacts presented will endure past the death of the maker, for once clay is fired it becomes 'fixed'; as such, ceramic remains have nearly the longest duration of any man-made products. Time is 'embedded' as an essential part of the embodied narrative of the ceramic object; a vessel can be read as a *memento mori*, making us aware of our own inevitable death and drawing attention to our own authentic existence. Speaking of another discipline that freezes time, Susan Sontag has observed that:

All photographs are *memento mori* ... to take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. (Sontag, p15)



Grenzerfahrung



Pile of human bone-ash, Buchenwald 1945. Pile of waste clay, *Grenzerfahrung*

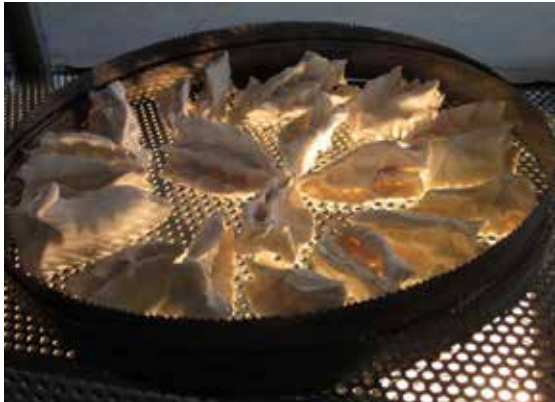
The ideas concerning embodied narrative crystallise around my recent installation *Grenzerfahrung*; this can be translated as: border/limit/liminal experience. It critically utilises the theories of Giorgio Agamben, concerning the separation of the animal aspect of our being from the political and social; Agamben makes a distinction, based on Aristotle's *Politics*, between 'bare life' (*zoē* in Greek) and 'political/social life' (*bios* in Greek) (Agamben 1995: 1). It is this 'bare life' that was most starkly revealed in the concentration camps. In Agamben's analysis, once reduced to this condition of 'bare life', the human being is outside the norms of society and can be sacrificed by the 'Sovereign Power'. Agamben builds on the theories of Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (1998), concerning the separation of *homo faber* from *homo laborans*. The former ('man the maker') is the quintessential craftsman (socially integrated as well as skilled) who can also be stripped of his/her rights and skills to emerge as *homo laborans*, the unskilled worker/lumpen-proletariat/*homo sacer* – the 'bare life' that Agamben sees as sacrificed at the whim of the sovereign/(or perhaps The Führer) (Agamben 1995: 71). He describes the liminal interface between the 'interiority' and 'exteriority' of the social and examines the ways in which the human qualities (of *bios*) can be restored (Agamben 1995: 4).



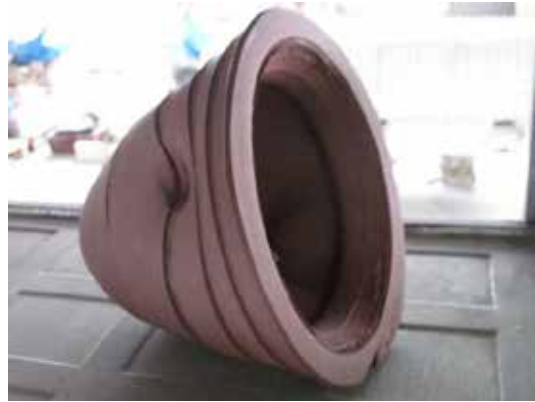
Herzen, Gefässe

Dein aschenes Haar, Shulamith

Through a symbolic use of ceramic and appropriated materials, the intention of *Grenzerfahrung* is to seek a metaphoric restitution, through the aesthetic-ethical means of the embodied narrative of 'the hand', to the former inmates of the camps. The narrative embodies a formula, where the broken skin of the unglazed surface of the clay form stands in the relation: bare clay = bare earth = 'bare life' (Agamben 1995). That is, it stands for the most basic aspects of our 'species-being' (Marx 2007). The clay is cut, torn and burnt; cutting and tearing also finds an echo in the iconography of Judaism: *keriah* is the tearing and rending of clothes in Jewish mourning rituals that parallels the 'gash'/cut as an embedded marking that has always been a feature of my vessels, and that I now also read as a signature for my own self, post a major heart operation.



Herzen,



Gefässe



Urns for ashes to be re-sold to the Jews

Burning is an integral narrative aspect of the work brought home to me after a visit to Buchenwald, where my grandmother was killed, when the ironic synergy between kiln-firing and the crematoria (and gas chambers) became searingly apparent. The crematoria had been carefully designed by teams of engineers at Topf und Soehne of Ehrfurt to dispose of vast numbers of human bodies in as efficient and cost-effective a manner as possible – a corrupt inversion of our current concern with sustainable developments in ceramics and kiln design, underlining the need for an ethical framework to be considered in all applications of science and art; this work therefore insists on a clear demarcation from the idea of disinterestedness and ‘art for art’s sake’, for as Schusterman says: ‘ethical content so often deeply pervade[s] the artwork’s meaning that the work could not be properly understood without attending to its ethical dimensions’ (Schusterman 2012: 133)

To communicate the ‘handedness’ of *homo faber*, *Grenzerfahrung* is composed of hand-made and hand-marked ceramic vessels, collaboratively made ceramic objects and appropriated structures and materials. Meaning is burnt into ceramic in firing, reiterating the fate of the bodies of the victims of the Holocaust. These pieces are juxtaposed with the appropriated waste from the factory, which is marked by the patina of use. The skeleton of the work is composed of disused shelves; they stand for the stacked sleeping quarters in the camps, and also function as the structure that divides the spaces where the piece is exhibited. On the shelves, like exhibits in a Wunderkammer, are individual elements, groups and undifferentiated piles of materials, redolent of the piles discovered at the liberation of the concentration camps.



Internet image from American army photographer.

Eheringe



Buchenwald at liberation,1945

Grenzerfahrung

Conclusion

In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (2010), Zygmunt Bauman makes a strong argument that the Holocaust was only made possible through industrialisation/modernism. The ambition of *Grenzerfahrung* is to disrupt this alienated condition by generating a discourse, through the mode of presentation, between the marginal status of craft, that has continued in a vestigial form in the modern world. The work created through the practice is non-utilitarian and informed by Modernism; it reads craft as sited between design and art, essentially as part of a continuum reaching back millennia rather than a rupture with tradition. Making by hand is significant in the practice – it stands for a directly intuited humanness, a continuity of tradition that has not been subject to ‘the radical rupture in time created by the Holocaust’ (Hoffman 2005: 87). It demonstrates an ethical meaning embodied in the work that is neither ‘ironic’, ‘supplementary’ nor ‘nostalgic’ (Adamson 2007: 13).

It means that my work occupies a contemporary niche in expression that wishes to communicate the concept of damage; in his discussion of *Shibboleth* Paul Gilroy observes of Salcedo’s work the well-attested trope that ‘the idea that the world is broken ... corresponds directly to the ambivalent history of modernity as both progress and catastrophe’ (Salcedo 2007: 25).

This analysis of embodied narrative starts to demonstrate the ways in which craft is an essential mode of communication that can be used to address contemporary problems and issues in a sustainable way. The making and handling of craft pieces has an ethical dimension that is in danger of being lost in late modernism/post-modernity. There are aspects of making that communicate what cannot be said and thus can function as a vehicle for the transmission of significant aspects of our moral selves; this can lead to a greater sense of self-knowledge and understanding of others, and may help to prevent other catastrophes that are clearly predicated in the unsustainable abuse of materials, modes of manufacture and workers.

References

- Adamson, G. (2007) *Thinking through Craft*. Oxford: Berg.
- Agamben, G. (1995) *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2010) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1968) *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace.
- Buber, M. (2003) *I and Thou*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Danto, A. (1964) The artworld. *Journal of Philosophy* 61.
- Dennett, D.C. (1992) The self as a center of narrative gravity. In: F. Kessel, P. Cole and D. Johnson (eds), *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hoffman, E. (2005) *After Such Knowledge*. London: Random House.
- Honnet, K. (1990) *Contemporary Art*. Köln: Benedikt Taschen.
- Husserl, E. (1969) *Ideas*. New York: George Allen and Unwin.
- Jones, D. (2007) *Firing: Philosophies within Contemporary Ceramic Practice*. Marlborough: Crowood Press.
- Kant, I. (1972) *Critique of Judgment*. New York: Hafner.
- Levinas, E. (1996) *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. Peperzak. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Marx, K. (2007) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. New York: Dover Books.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1970) *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.
- Metcalf, B. (2002) Embodied sympathy. *Metalsmith* 2(3).
- Plato (1973) *Phaedrus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Roberts, J. (2008) *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade*. London: Verso.
- Salcedo, D. (2007) *Shibboleth*. London: Tate Publishing.
- Schöne, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Schusterman, R. (2012) *Thinking through the Body – Essays in Somaesthetics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sontag, S. (1979) *On Photography*. London: Penguin.
- Sullivan, G. (2010) *Art Practice as Visual Research*. London: Sage Publications.