

# THE POTTER'S WHEEL

Katrine Køster Holst

The thing that happens when the potter sits at their Potter's Wheel and forms a pot from the malleable clay is nothing short of a process of creation. After he has set the large kick wheel in motion with the foot, with his wet hands, he quickly throws his lump of clay into a pot or a dish [...] The art of throwing consists of, among other things, letting the clay run smoothly between the middle fingers of both hands while the thumbs control the rim of the vessel.<sup>1</sup>

Vivild Ungdomsskole<sup>2</sup> 1994. Twice a week, a local potter came to the college to teach us ceramics. Along the wall with the low windows facing the street, there were four potter's wheels: traditional kick wheels, the type of which where you sit high up on a seat in front of the wheel that is kicked into motion with the power created by the movement of the feet. When the flywheel had picked up speed, you could concentrate on getting the lump of clay in the centre with your hands. It could take time, and for the first few attempts we got help from our teacher who instantly tamed the lump of clay until it lay still on the rotating wheel. Then I could

push my thumbs down into the middle of the lump and open it up to create a form. With a combination of luck and good sense, I got it how I wanted it. But in the beginning, my clumsy hands had so little control that the lump of clay sometimes flew off the wheel without warning, and before I was able to catch it, it ended up on the floor or the wall. Fortunately, the clay could be picked up, kneaded again, and I could start over again. I liked the kick wheel, it was like riding a bike: the work performed by the body, the rhythms and the exchange between the feet and the hands that alternated between work and rest.

About throwing, ceramicist Mårten Medbo writes:

Throwing is an extremely sensual experience that requires great physical and, in general, some mental presence. [...] The physical part of the activity requires a degree of that mental capacity, but there is often a certain amount of mental space left at one's disposal. It is possible to think of something else while performing the activity. It does not have to negatively affect the quality of the activity. [...] In this way, there is an intellectual and meditative dimension in the physically repetitive effort. You are engaged in the activity and do not need to think about what to do next. You are there in the moment and do what you are doing. This means that you have room to direct your gaze inward.<sup>3</sup>

Pottery School in Sønderborg<sup>4</sup>, 1997. Johann<sup>5</sup> was good at

throwing, so good that he could tell us that he had participated in the World Championship in throwing. I never found out whether he had been behind the potter's wheel or among the audience, or if the championship even existed, but it did not matter. The point is that he created the idea that one could become a champion in the discipline that I was learning. This was something I had not thought of before, but it was in fact clear if you looked closely at the educational goals: we should be competitive, trained and so skilled that we could, at some point in the future, run a business based on market demand. In the first term, we had to practice what was measurable craftsmanship, and the grades were given according to our achievements, which were measured by criteria such as technique, tempo and precision. We had to do the same exercises over and over again to learn how to distribute and throw the clay in the correct thickness, and so that it would end up being a shape identical to the previous ones. On the last Friday of every month there was a test: one hour. And when the hour had elapsed, our teacher came around with a checklist and a cutting thread. All the objects that had been made were dissected to reveal a cross section which revealed the thickness of the walls, and then the piece was carefully examined.

Bergen 2003. Since attending the pottery school, a few years have passed, and I am doing my Master's degree at Bergen National Academy of the Arts<sup>6</sup>. I have gradually moved away from functional ceramics and am in the middle of a process where I am challenging my established ways of thinking in my quest for a distinctive standpoint. To approach this, I have begun to investigate ceramic techniques which I learnt from previous educations. Among other things, I am investigating the potter's wheel. For me, the potter's wheel was so close-

ly connected to functional products, that I had difficulty thinking about the potter's wheel without thinking about tableware. I asked myself, could I keep the techniques (work processes) and adjust the purpose? Could I neutralize the techniques, start over and look at, for example, the potter's wheel as a more universal tool, such as a pair of scissors, a pencil, a saw.

Winter 2004. I am in a project room with several times my own weight in red earthenware clay stacked on a yellow cart in ten-kilo packages. There is also a potter's wheel; an electric model, the kind where you sit bent over on a low stool and control the speed with your foot on a pedal. The engine is buzzing, and the sound increases with the number of revolutions per second, like a car's engine does. I sit behind the potter's wheel and the body knows exactly what it has to do: it works automatically. I start with a lump, equivalent to five to six kilos of clay, and form small cylinders that fit in my hand. Throwing many small items from a larger lump is called "stack throwing". It is a method that is often used in pottery production, because you quickly get into an uninterrupted rhythm. Once, twice, three times, I quickly pull the clay up to form a cylinder, cut it loose with my nails and throw it mercilessly through the air so that it hits a wall two metres away. The actions are carefully planned, and it's about testing how the action of throwing the clay can be used to create form.

The first attempt started with throwing the clay from a ladder. I made a cylinder and held it carefully in my hand as I climbed up to the top step of the ladder then released it so that it fell directly on to the floor. After a few days of going

up and down the ladder, I came to the conclusion that the method was too physically strenuous, even though there was something of worth in the idea. That led to an adjustment: Instead of thinking in terms of up and down, I could think in terms of straight ahead. With a distance of two metres to a wall, I could, from a sitting position, achieve the same force as when the clay is dropped from the ladder. For several days, I sat uninterruptedly behind the potter's wheel, only taking breaks to get more clay. It was liberatingly simple. The body did the work, and I remember the feeling of relief and joy, as if I had solved a riddle. I trusted what I did, and on the wall in front of me a form, that could be compared to structures in nature, emerged. It was not a copy of something that already exists. It had a distinctive character and grew out of a system that made me curious. In the process I took on two roles. I was a practitioner and an observer at the same time. And at that moment, I thought that it was not at all I that controlled the shape on the wall, it just came into being.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rugde, Emil (1946). *Lertøj [Pottery]*. In Johs. Andersen, A.H.M. Andreassen, Søren Berg P. Bispekov, Helge Finsen, Nathalie Krebs, Axel C. Kristensen, Erik Lassen, H.C. Leisner, H. A. L. Madslund, Therkel Mathiasen, Viggo Sten Øller, Vagn Poulsen, Emil Ruge, E. Tuxen, Kaj Uldall, E. Heikel Vinther. *KERAMIK, keramisk Teknik, Keramisk Kunst [CERAMICS, Ceramic Techniques, Ceramic Art]*, Copenhagen: Jul. Gjellerups Forlag, pp. 41–42.

<sup>2</sup> A type of school for 14-18-year olds based on Grundtvig's pedagogy. I was a student at Vivild Ungdomsskole from 1994–1996.

<sup>3</sup> Medbo, Mårten (2012) *Att dreja eller inte dreja, det är frågan* [To throw or not to throw; that is the question]. Course in Knowledge Philosophy, Academy of Dramatic Arts HDK p. 7

<sup>4</sup> The Pottery School, EUC South in Sønderborg. I was a student there in the first school term in 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Grassberger taught at Sønderborg Pottery School for over 39 years. The Pottery School, EUC – South, was closed down in 2010.

<sup>6</sup> My exam project received the title of the Køster Holst method. The project was motivated by a search for a distinct artistic standpoint. The result was an archive of discarded products, by-products from procedural experiments related to traditional ceramic techniques. Bergen University College of Art 2003–2006.

<sup>7</sup> *The throwing project* has been shown in a variety of different versions in public exhibitions: 2013, The Artist Centre in Buskerud, Drammen; 2010, Artist Association, Oslo; 2010, Galerie Favardin & de Verneuil, Paris; 2007, Guldagergård International Ceramics Centre, Denmark.

*Translated by Christine O'Hagan*

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