

Woodfire - performance and meaning

Pedro Fortuna, PhD, FBAUL

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When approaching the study of fire, anthropological studies (André Leroi-Gourman¹; Daniel Fessler²) use two headwords: production and control, and if we look for a pragmatic reflection we shall inscribe the phenomenon of fire as associated to ceramics in its forms of control, but if we're looking for meanings of certain actions, the original production of fire - the moment man succeeds reproducing a natural event, transforming it in a technical act through a spark or the friction of two bush branches – is meaningful.

Jean-Jacques Annaud directed a captivating film in 1981 “The Quest for Fire” (La Guerre du Feu, Fra / Can) inspired on the novel by J.H. Rosny Aîné, 1909, to which I return once in a while.

The need to find meaning for the use of a certain technical protocol, voluntarily places us close in the pristine experience of fire, 500.000 years ago, despoiled of the many technical resources that do not need to be legitimated, but often interpose between us and the world. “Although our specific formulations of these meanings may be socially constructed, the human importance of acknowledging the concerns remains real and unchanging.” (H. Dissanayake, p.191). Although it is actually simple to spark a fire, its creation is an intentional act and though the familiarity of their chemical and physical explanations, many of us remain curious, unsatisfied with the knowledge of the physical properties of fire (color, light, heat) and needs to assign it as significant in our speeches (including here the ceramic production). This means that we find in fire a polysemic validity, connecting it to other signifiers and building the network of cultural identity³.

¹ L’homme et la matière. Paris: Albin Michel, 1971.

² A Burning Desire: Steps Toward an Evolutionary Psychology of Fire Learning

³ The fire and heat provide a means of explanation in many different areas because they are for us the opportunity to imperishable memories, simple and personal decisive experiences.(Bachelard,p.23, *free transl*).

When in ceramics one chooses this particular way to make, it is more than one way of finishing a process, although strictly speaking we know that certain piece may technically have alternative destination. By the time we make this choice we had our contact with woodfire long ago. Saying this, and at risk of bringing to debate questions too elementary, I would like to highlight two elements that characterize this mode of doing.

First our contact with fire and its learning as technical phenomenon is different in historical, geographical and cultural terms. Some may have had the experience, or very near, of the wood fire as a daily domestic tool, cooking, heating, or being part of some craft, and not remember that someone has taught us to produce or to control this fire so close to us. Looking now for meaning in gestures that proximity has become commonplace, I recall short warnings of "be careful" and "look out you'll burn yourself" (and actually do it) that the smell of green meant flame resistance and unreliable, that the fire grew in breathing constructions, hierarchically ordered, from the brittle kindling wood to slow logs, and I still like to do this building, witnessing the consume of the first to hold the final logs⁴. This experience concurs with one observed in contemporary traditional societies or pre-industrial, marked by an early contact and a non-specific and gradual learning, where the fire has a utilitarian purpose. From this perspective the fire has the value of a tool familiar and ordinary, as opposed to the modern urban societies, where it is mainly used as decoration or entertainment in fireplaces, campfires, candles or fireworks, always exceptional and held in high regard. Most remarkable in this process, is that in our Western societies, learning of fire use takes place a little later, but most of all the reasons that could justify this learning are not completely satisfied, putting the fire throughout life within a framework of perpetual fascination, playing the role of a toy (Fessler, p.446), and entertainment.

The other striking element from where meaning and technical consequences elapse is wood itself. These technical features relate to an uneven distribution of the heat, thermal dynamics and deposition of wood ashes acting as a flux and helping to form the glaze.

⁴ From the moment the friction leads to the production of an incandescent parcel, fire takes its logical place among the elementary techniques. This burning parcel was received by the tow, brought in contact with a more compact body, dry leaves or fibers, and step by step more substantial twigs, sticks, logs or charcoal are handed to the rising fire."(Leroi-Gourman, p.70, *free transl*).

“Everything comes in textbooks“ said Gedeão in his “Poem of the Heart”⁵. But we may look at the wood and be unable to forget that behind it is a tree, with thousands of links that mark a relationship between us and the woods, brought by man as fuel since the dawn rationality as a sign of greater comfort, at the same time as a destructive power - fire, death, planned, premeditated or accidental against someone.

Looking at ceramic and realizing the energy needs required, allow us to feel the need of the domesticated fire to be as near as possible of the absolute fire, ever without cease the category where its use belongs and that always means the need to overcome itself.

The use of wood requires, to be continually supplied. As we know this isn't done at continuous rates, automated, the characteristics, size and variety of wood, are here of recognized importance and requires a commitment and permanence by the ceramist. But if we choose to be rather stricted, than we must consider the contributions chemicals will add from the ash, resulting from different woods as a result of the land where they grew, variety and age of the specimens are a critical part of the final result. The consciousness of being in this hub, paying attention to multiple factors, both individual and all, gives the ceramist the perception of permanent contingency and ephemeral, that the results of each firing remind us clearly, internalizing these concepts in ceramics as associated with the intentionality and allowing work to receive part of its sense of authority.

Our perception is that this stress and ephemeris is transmitted to the work, either in the sense that gives to the material its proper hardness, which by itself is always an exception to the evolution of clay, either in the visual sense of color patterns and the brilliance achieved. Contingency and ephemeris are accepted as elements of aesthetic perception that we are almost always ready to value, distinguishing from the banal, satisfying different levels of curiosity and teaching something.

These pieces have in common, references to what Merleau-Ponty called multisensory⁶, noticing themselves with not only their individual physical attributes, but in the form of a certain symbiosis, a physical and cultural compound that has the ability to invade and

⁵ António Gedeão (1906-97), in *Linhas de Força, Lines of Strength*, 1967, free transl.

⁶ p.373.

prepare us to a particular host. In this respect the memory's role is to dismantle the structure of the perception where it was born. The sensory properties of each piece come together as a bundle projecting the respective signals and finding another symmetric receptive bundle, as functions of a single body and integrated in a single action, actively exploring each object.

We perceive a piece in its multiplicity of signals in the field of our existence; every phenomenon appeared polarizes to itself all my body as complex system of perceptive skills.

Valuing this bundle of connections, the ceramist extends in firing the way he lives in that production, "refusing" to abandon it, taking the risk of delaying the separation (as concept) of the object to allow the observation distance and criticism required.

We say in ceramics, but here more accurate, that you do not only unload from the kiln the pieces technically approved. The woodfiring requires both a physical commitment: collecting the amount and type of wood (even if only through a phone call) realizing the volume (which is a natural exchange for the result of firing) leading the fire to a progressive temperature, staying and realizing the time as a requirement negotiated by the matter in its transformation, while projecting an energy that transcends and returns the way into the action itself as stated by John Dewey in "Art as Experience"⁷.

In a recent interview Marina Abramović (Belgrade, 1946) refers her "believe in the transformative power of the performance genre and the flow of energy that circulates in each piece"⁸(...). In the Seventies (Performance) was very much related with the body, it was physical", but justified by many conveniences it became more technological and sometimes "technology makes us invalids (...) it was created to have more time to doing things, but we don't have any time".

Even individually and extended by long hours of the night, without any public, woodfiring is a performance projected into the inside, assuming an inner growth that allows its full reading.

⁷ Direct experience comes from nature and man interacting with each other. In this interaction, human energy gathers, is released, dammed up, frustrated and victorious. There are rhythmic beats of want and fulfilment, pulses of doing and being withheld from doing. (J. Dewey, 15)

⁸ Bergoña Rodríguez, The flesh and the spirit, *in* Lapid, 261, April, May, 2010. Madrid: Publicaciones de Estética y Pensamiento.

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