



photo - © Bettina BaumAnn

*Vessel-Spaces*

# BETTINA BAUMANN and CARLO SAUTER in Lucerne

*René Peter*

**V**ESSEL-SPACES is the name of the exhibition put on by ceramic artist Bettina BaumAnn and author Carlos Sauter at the gallery Das Ding in Lucerne in 2010. As ceramic and literary works were on an equal footing and merged to form a unified whole, the opportunity arises to discuss the interaction of the two means of expression.

Let us begin with the words, "In view of the sea, I am a vessel!" "Between river and bank, vessels take in what feeds and releases" („Angesichts des Meeres: Ich Krug!" „Zwischen Fluss und Ufer erfassen Gefässe was nährt und löst.") The two sentences contain the sound of flowing and the attempt to grasp it, but they remain enigmatic.

Now let us take the deep sea-blue spherical vessel and see how it succeeds in forming a relationship with the words and perhaps in solving the enigma. Its surface really does grasp the blue from the depths of the sea, gleaming water-smooth, rougher towards the top, so that it seems to be filling more and more with air and light, changing to white and rippling at the lip, as if the spray were hissing outwards or

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ILLUSTRATION -

- "Vers un eye-eurs" - stoneware - photograph - print - 2009/2010

the waves were frothing and curling inwards. The visual and tactile scanning of the vessel wall has now created the image of the wave as well as opening the perception both of the ceramic and literary vessel space. The interior of the blue vessel widens our perspective. It catches the eye with a miracle: strange, bubble-like humps grow into the dark, huddle together and form gullies and fissures. Every time we look inside, a changing image forms, that solidifies as a whole, allowing us to experience the interior space more intensely.

And thus it comes to pass that "On the inverted skin appears – like leaves on the night current – the imprint of the waves". ("Auf der umgestülpten Haut erscheint – wie Laub auf dem Nachtstrom – die Prägung der Wellen.")

What is happening here? The expression night current awakens associations of a broad and heavily flowing body of water. But it appears in print amidst fired vessels. If we read it there, it creates an idea of night in the studio, when the night-time electrical (off-peak) current heats the kiln and the heat does its work on the material.

But the leaves on the night current take us away again, from the surface of the text to the autumn, when leaves form a skin on the ground and on the water. This skin bears forms and colours and makes noises. It appears as the eye reads like leaves and the imprint of the waves.

Now the hand reaches for the vessel. It touches the skin that the night-time electric current has burned onto the surface in the kiln. It

can study the material character prepared by the artist and that the nocturnal current carries away to be among people.

With air pressure, mud and water, the artist in the studio takes up what a storm has done on the shore. Like the skin of the world, the bowl bears the marks that our creative forces exert on water, air and earth.

The artist's vessels and the writer's texts examine the boundary between perception and sensory event, where a sensory moment is captured as something concrete. The vessels lead the senses to the turning point where they are caught by the object, hesitate and try to grasp it perceptually or fall back into incomprehension.

Where the eye discovers soft moss and the hand expects to grasp soft coolness and encounters hard roughness, perception strays in the dark until it can assemble all points of reference to form a stable something. In this search for definition, sensory perception, reflection and feeling set off together.

"Between seeing and understanding, we cross the inner river. Every crossing works on the arc of comprehension. At last the branch – again and again a feeling."

This sentence sends out a sense of surprise, the first passion, as Descartes puts it, which initiates thought, connected with a knowledge of cultural history accompanied with sensory perception and feeling. In an interchange, they arrive at an idea that integrates this sentence in comprehension and beds it down in the soul.

The world of the vessel expresses itself with great material force. For instance, slightly raised, there is a white floor space like a stage, which folds and becomes a wall. Evenly spaced on it are vessels, like buds. Between them hover their black images, printed on the white surface. The two-dimensional photographs thus occupy exterior space, together with their three-dimensional "originals", but this is also the interior space of the exhibition. Similarly, the round opening allows us to see inside the spherical vessels, where perception

#### ILLUSTRATIONS -

below - "Mutual Influences" - stoneware - photograph - print -  
30 x 90 x 35 cm - 2008/2009  
opposite page - "Vessel" - stoneware - 13 x 20 x 20 cm - 2010





photo - © Bettina BaumAnn

encounters a peculiar landscape, and the sense of surprise sets all the cognitive forces in motion.

Our perception is accustomed to recognise household vessels by their decoration and their function. Their interior is usually simple and smooth as they were made in accordance with a practical principle: they have to be cleaned from time to time. In contrast, these strange vessels in the exhibition are unadorned and smooth on the outside but reveal carefully embellished interior worlds, reminiscent of underwater landscapes or the surfaces of natural vessels that become accessible under the magnifying glass or the microscope. Bettina BaumAnn's vessels seem to follow the concept of an inverted cup, whose smooth inner skin has been turned outwards and the ornamentally undulating, sometimes even furry outer skin looks inwards. They seem to reveal hidden worlds and only open themselves when patient attention is directed towards them and they are permitted to confuse the perceptions. Here, the writer gives a clue: "Contained astonishment (Where composure is lost)". ("Gefasstes Staunen (Wo die Fassung verloren geht)" [*Translator's note: This is a complex German play on the word "Fassung", which means composure and also the ability to contain – also the root of the word Gefäß = vessel.*])

What do ceramic art and working poetically with language have in common that enables them to be combined to form one work? At the heart of both is the ability to take in content. Both create vessels that hold meaning. Their outer forms are infinitely varied, as is what is inside, what they contain. But there is a close connection between form and content, as if the form clothed the endlessly variable content. Any object can be clothed in something, whether it is concrete or abstract. But a reference to a vessel implies the content. This reference is both: it limits and widens the perspective. For instance, if we consider the human being as a vessel, our point of reference might be that of a doctor or an economist. But also of a mother, teacher, psychologist, author or artist. In the same way as looking at someone limits us and at the same time opens our eyes to inner values, a vessel limits endless space as if to steer the gaze into another landscape. The vessel thus opens up an empty space that is

implicitly constitutive of the same. This insight is old, and familiar to us from Laozi: "We turn clay to make a vessel; But it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends." While this makes obvious sense in the context of concrete vessels, it places us in an area of uncertainty with oral or written vessels. What might the emptiness at the heart of the words mean? At the same moment as I ask the question, the space that it opens for the answer begins to fill with content, flowing into the answer glass like water. Words are always vessels: if I say or write a word like "cylinder", I am preparing a word vessel that may or may not be filled with meaning. Its interior is still vacant, but it offers the opportunity to allow a variety of significant concepts to flow into it. The space that language encompasses in total is infinite and indeterminate. But if I limit this space with the vessel "cylinder", then it acquires meaning.

*René Peter is a cabinet maker, philosopher and educator. He lives and works in Zürich.*

*Bettina BaumAnn, M.A., born in Zürich, trained at the Faculty of Art and Design, University of Wales Institute Cardiff (GB), Academy of the Arts, University of Tasmania (AUS), teacher training at the Universität Zürich, Since 2001, studio with Grazia Conti Rossini Schifferli in Meilen, Zürich, since 1997 national and international solo and group exhibitions, since 1992 teacher and lecturer, various awards and scholarships.*

BETTINA BAUMANN Ceramics  
Sägegasse 8, CH-8702 Zollikon  
Switzerland  
Tel. +41 (0)43 499 78 07  
[info@bb-ceramics.com](mailto:info@bb-ceramics.com)  
[www.bb-ceramics.com](http://www.bb-ceramics.com)

