

Reflections on Edmund De Waal's Phaidon monograph

Having ordered Edmund De Waal's monograph from Phaidon for the school library, I had asked to be notified as soon as it arrived. When it did a week later, I signed it out, brought it home and read it in one sweep for my curiosity was such that I couldn't wait and once started, I couldn't stop. In so many ways, it is really impressive, beautifully produced, with numerous photographs and a variety of essays by diverse writers on various aspects of the work and the maker himself. The most notable text is basically a work of poetic fiction by Colm Toibin, quite remarkable in itself and more informative in so many ways than any of the other essays, which tend to focus almost exclusively on the artist and his well-known life trajectory, on precise descriptions of the work itself, its processes of making, and quite importantly here, on its contextualization, an essential aspect of its specific experience. All these focus needlessly on the what, the how and the where to the detriment of the why as is so often the case with writings on ceramics, unfortunately and unnecessarily. So I ask myself, what is this work about, exactly? Why make such work? What is its relevancy, its importance, its significance, its meaning?

The very fact that the prestigious publisher Phaidon is putting out a monograph on the work of a potter is in itself noteworthy. But then, this is also a potter who had a very successful solo exhibition at Gagosian NY just last year, in itself a remarkable event, and something implausible until quite recently and possibly unthinkable for anybody else but for Edmund de Waal's work, and for quite a while still. We will see. Such phenomenal success, such high visibility, such embrace by the highest echelon of the art world can only be good for the field as a whole, over time. Thanks Edmund. Sarcastically, one would wonder what's next? Who may possibly be cast to play him in the BBC biopic or even the Hollywood blockbuster! The narrative arc of De Waal's life is interesting enough for such a thing to happen: the Second World War family background, the forced exile, the riches to rags to riches story, the paper trail of books, the deserved literary success, the work itself and its tremendous reception. The very stuff of movies. I can already see the scene with a young actor playing Edmund's as a little boy running in the attic and on the roof of Lincoln Cathedral shot from a helicopter with swooping camera and heroic music.

As someone raised on a steady diet of post-structuralism and who also happens to agree with Roland Barthes's premise of the death of the author and the irrelevancy of the personal history of the maker to understand a work of art, something long argued by many over time, all the way back to Marcel Proust in "Contre Sainte-Beuve", I find troublesome and worrisome this focus on biography as necessary knowledge to access, appreciate and above all analyze the work of Edmund De Wall. Is it simply due to the fact that the writers here, as is so often the case, rely on such easy information in lieu of having something more substantive to say in front of work that actually escapes them? I would be curious to see what Jacques Derrida would have made of this work, with his particular and peculiar obsession with language and with grammar, for if this work is about anything, it is fundamentally literary work, much more linear in its "reading", top to bottom and left to right, much more text (and even fiction, if abstracted) than physical, material work. The latest examples, flat on their wall mounted perpendicular structures of stacked shelves, even appear to be pages torn from books or newspapers or sheet music, with the various elements acting stand-in for soundless words, blank sentences and even inexistent photographs, perceived as boxes within boxes, removed and distant like all and any images.

I of course can only be jealous of all this. I would describe myself and my work as the exact opposite of Edmund De Waal's. My family story couldn't be more ordinary and insignificant, my own life while fascinating to myself is probably of little interest to anybody else, and my work couldn't be more different to his, with its clear emphasis on excessive narrative and decorative surfaces over form (although we are both potters and writers), and my own professional and commercial success is basically a joke compared to his, as well. I simply use myself as a contrasting example here since it is so probant. Why is that the case? Why is he so successful while I am not, to that degree anyway? What is his secret? After all, this is someone whose whole work could be described, glibly yet correctly, as that of a potter who makes blank cylinders placed on shelves.

If Edmund De Wall's work is basically about materials and their transformation, about form in its most basic manifestation, it is above all about placement and context, about which there is more to say (and to actually experience) than of the other aspects. If pottery is inherently a tactile art form, begging to be touched, De Wall's work in their restricted and restrictive presentation (representation?) reinforce the pervasive institutional taboo around touch in art experience and art appreciation and this contradiction for work imminently tactile in its making is but one of its most confusing aspect.

I have argued elsewhere (in "The Art of the Future") that ceramics and pottery are essentially about the conflation of a volumetric form with a distinct surface. And most importantly, that ceramics and pottery are essentially arts of time, intrinsically forms of archives. Clay, and fired clay at that, is possibly essential yet remain incidental to this theoretical construct. How does this relate to De Waal's work? What is its relation to form, to surface, to time and to history? This may start to explain the why of his work, something rather missing from the Phaidon monograph.

The Phaidon monograph is really nothing else but an effective exercise in legitimacy (surprise!). All the various texts with their emphasis on the artist himself, his fascinating I must admit family history, his own life narrative with its connection to historical continuity (Leach..., again...) then his apostasy within the field of pottery making (with all the contradictions that entails), his notable accomplishments as a writer of art historical books and memoirs, his embrace by important institutions and the artworld as a whole, etc., etc., all serve to justify the importance of the work while largely avoiding to discuss it in any significant way. This is always rather true for Phaidon monographs, who are nothing but a necessary and possibly essential marker for arrival and legitimation for real artists within the real artworld. Yet rarely do such Phaidon monographs focus so exclusively on the life of the artist and the making of the work itself (which always implies ridiculously romantic clichés when potters and pottery are featured in media) to the detriment of a critical analysis of the work. Why is that the case here too? Another glib answer would be that basically no one has a clue about the significance and meaning of pottery, thus no one, it appears, can intelligently write about it. This could even be said, to a degree, of Edmund De Waal's own writing on pottery, which relies much more on an accumulation of data than on their analysis.

Pottery making historically used to serve three major cultural roles, the first within the practical needs of the daily life of real people, the second within various religious rituals, notably around funerary practices. From its earliest manifestations, I would argue that it also served a third role, as markers for wealth and power in ostentatious displays. It still does all three today in different proportions, very little of the first in industrial societies, almost none of the second anymore, and basically a lot of the third, almost exclusively now. This is where Edmund De Wall's work significance locates itself, as does my very own and the work of most potters of substance working now. The work exists as a marker of wealth and power, as a sign of sophistication and prestige. A Phaidon monograph is a clear sign of achievement of such a cultural status. This is also true of most if not all artworks made today.

To continue this line of thought a bit further, it may be necessary to add that within Modernism, most hand-made pottery existed to signify the expressive uniqueness of individuals. A Lucie Rie bowl exists fundamentally to signify that it is made by Lucie Rie. It may embody real aesthetic merit as a visual (and tactile) experience but its true existential nature resides in proclaiming the originality of its maker and the sophistication of its present owner. Modernist pottery also had by necessity to be expertly made with skill and be exquisitely beautiful. As with anything else within Modernism, some makers contested these very premises and made work that was intentionally badly made and ugly, with significant results. Pottery and ceramics are arts of excess and operate best at the polar edges of making. These two aspects still go on today, with very interesting results on both poles. Edmund De Waal's works work in the in-between, and this is where its relevancy lies. If the categories and definitions of art, craft, design and media used to be quite clear and distinct, they are more and more blurred. De Wall's work is altogether all four and now specifically the fourth more than any of the other three, in its mediation through photography, like all and any other contemporary experiences. One could argue that the work exists solely to be experienced as photographs, within the rarified pages of a Phaidon monograph. This is where most people will experience it, obviously. I would even argue that this easy and efficient mediation explains in a large part its, we must all admit, exceptional and rather phenomenal success. The simple fact that the pottery we find here actually exists as props for the compositional needs of a work of art, in its most basic definition: a flat square thing that hangs on the wall.

It is also important to address context here. De Waal's work has been predicated for a long time now on the exploration of context in the display and experience of pottery. He has investigated this problem in a variety of ways over the years, first through site specificity where groupings of works would be inserted within existing spaces, notably important historical homes where ostentation is the norm (as it is in institutional spaces, like galleries and museums) and again and more recently within custom made "furniture" such as boxes and shelves, where the work is confined, contained and much more fixed than previously. I always found the first series to be rather forced and I find the second to be rather limiting, but then I salute their experimental nature and a willingness to expand on the experience of pottery forms. My problem resides in the appropriation of strategies coming from other fields, notably sculpture and installation, with little to no real understanding of their actual workings and necessity within these different contexts, but then this mentality is endemic with the field of ceramics right now... I find the use of such strategies much more political (to be taken seriously as art, to legitimize) than actually critical, as it should be if it wanted to be actually essential and effective.

One of the most interesting aspects of pottery's potency resides in its mobility. It goes everywhere and nowhere, simultaneously. It doing so, it is rather impolite, since you never really know where it goes and what to do with it. This confuses a lot of people who chose to ignore it instead, quite simply. No matter where it is located and finds itself, its intrinsic nature is little affected by such change in context, be it the kitchen or the art museum. Pottery contains its own context much more than it contains anything else. By using site specificity or fixity within a defined space as display strategies, one reduces the potential of pottery and transform what are essentially objects into images, things to be seen (and photographed) exclusively. This is what visual art does, and does so effectively and powerfully. Is it what pottery should be doing too? This may add to its acceptance with the conventional system of contemporary art, it may add to its marketability as a commodity, but in the process it reduces itself just as much, towards insignificance. Especially when, as is the case with De Waal's work, it already reduces itself, ad absurdum, to its most basic formal possibilities and within drastic chromatic limitations and with no other content or even intent than the most fundamental visuality. I am curious to see where this will eventually take him...

Such legitimation is also manifest in the monograph on its reliance to multiple references to high art precedents (historical or contemporary) coming from the world of art instead of the world of pottery and ceramics themselves, if we make exception of the Leach genealogy, which also serves as a historical legitimation, since Leach has become canonical. There is so much name dropping in the essays as to make oneself dizzy yet nowhere can be found, as one example among many, the name of Takeshi Yasuda (whose approach to the wheel as an experimental tool for making forms is in direct relation to De Waal's, yet I find Yasuda to be much more inventive) or again someone like Gwen Hansen Pigott who experimented with the grouping of simple, monochromatic pottery forms way before De Waal's attempted such a thing, which I admit pushes things much farther than she ever did or intended to. At least, De Wall's work only rarely relies on the conventions of the still-life, a trope of great commercial appeal, but proposes new possibilities of great potential. Janet DeBoos also works with groupings and inserts sets of pots within another pottery object such as a tray, while all elements retain their original identity and intrinsic nature. De Waal's pots do not. But to bring those potters up would be detrimental to the legitimation exercise under way in the book.

One wonders what will happen to this work. For now, it begs to be institutionalized, to be "white boxed". This is the only place where it can possibly remain relevant. There, it is politely contained in its frames, out of touch and its formal organization defined and finalized. It really looks like art, no doubt. Even more so now that it has been enshrined in a Phaidon monograph.

If pottery and ceramics are essentially archival and one of their primary roles is to contain and transmit time, what then is the archival potential for Edmund De Waal's work? Quite simply, this is work that only archives itself. And it now finds itself further archived, if less permanently possibly, within the exquisite photographs found in the book, itself an archive, even more distant and directive than the work itself. This may be where its ultimate meaning reside, as but another marker of contemporary alienation.

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