

“Dropping the Urn” and “Breaking the Vase”

Paul Mathieu

Why is it that so many artists feel they can break ceramic objects, usually pots, with such impunity? Could they get away with it, with any other art form? Would it be so readily acceptable to break, smash, throw, drop, damage or destroy a painting, a photograph or any other artwork? Why is it so common and so tolerated (not only acceptable but almost prescribed) to do so with ceramics? Of course, breaking things or referencing breakage has always been fertile ground for expression, as this offer subtle to obvious potential for psychological and metaphorical interpretation. Examples abound.

Not surprisingly, an early practitioner in the art of breaking a pot was Yoko Ono in her performance at the Whitney Museum where a large blue and white Chinese porcelain vase was smashed and the resulting shards given to members of the audience (if a vase breaks in the absence of witnesses, does it makes any sound?), with the intention that they would all return at a specific time in the future to reassemble the vase. At least, there was a reparative intention at work here. As is so often the case with these kind of gestures/events/performances/installations, it was imitated by others, notably by Eloise O’Hare in her “Pretend Ono Performance” where a big handmade terracotta pot is also smashed; Chris Martin does something similar, also with a large Chinese blue & white porcelain vase that he pushes over, but he then re-glues all the bits back together himself; there are numerous art videos and installations where vases, found or made, are broken, Feiko Bekkers comes to mind.

Within the field of ceramics itself, many practitioners have worked with re-assembled broken pots and here Rick Dillingham was a bit of a precursor in the 80’s, but also Keiko Fukazawa and too many others to list here; Marek Cecula’s floor “mandalas” are assembled with broken dishes; Jim Melchert breaks tiles, paints them and reassembles them; Booke de Vries works with broken vases and figurines and makes impressive and ambitious installations mining the psychological potential of the fragments to comment on historical/political destructive events; Kerri Reid makes series of “fake” broken pots where each pots appears to be broken exactly like all the others, an impossibility within entropy and the laws of physics; Li Xiao Feng makes wearable dresses made with broken porcelain dishes; Clare Twomey has piled huge quantities of ceramic shards in a gallery context, as does Cai Guo Qiang and many others; Liu Jianhua has made, then smashed large quantities of cast porcelain objects, from multiple sources referencing consumer culture; Yee Soo Kyung makes sculptural ceramics from broken pots as well, and we all are familiar with Julian Schnabel’s broken dishes paintings. There are too many others, within art and craft and design and media practices who make work with broken dishes, or “faux” broken, “faux” cracked” or “faux” repaired dishes of all kinds to list here. The work of Richard Milette is exemplary in that regard for his conceptual complexity. I would also refer the curious reader to my website at www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture, under “Theory Book” and then “Death” chapter images.

Furthermore and notably, photographer Martin Klimas captures ceramic figurines as they explode when hitting the ground; in the sphere of Design, the breakage conceit has become a bit of an obsession recently, and I will mention here Tjep Design and their “Do Break Vase” that

remains integral even after it has been dropped and “broken”; Alexander Hulme whose plate produces two smaller dishes if you drop and/or break the larger one; Dorota Skalska and Agnieszka Mazur whose “Corezone” is a ceramic heart that requires breaking to reveal its message; Studio Kahn makes ceramic jewelry that must be broken and reassembled to become a necklace, and there is also Stephen Burks whose plastic vases look like they were made from reassembled shards. The list goes on. So after “dropping” all these names, it is time to go back to Ai Wei Wei’s “Dropping the Urn”.

Ai Wei Wei’s photographic work “Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn”, 1995, is one of his most famous and iconic event-based art pieces. The three large, probably life size black and white photographs show the artist holding a vase (1), then dropping it (2), and then standing there in front of smashed bits covering the ground (3). The “performance” was apparently spontaneous and improvised. Wei Wei had just gotten a new digital camera and he wanted to check how quickly it could take pictures. He asked an assistant to take the pictures as he grabbed a vase nearby, held it in his hands and dropped it while the camera clicked away. I speculate that when the artist saw the images later, he realized right away their potential and inherent, symbolic power. Never one to pass up an opportunity, they became one of his most reproduced and widely distributed works. Vandalism is a necessary artistic rite of passage, it now seems.

There just happened to be a vase available nearby. It is supposed to be Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), and I suspect it actually was the real thing by the look of it, since Ai Wei Wei’s Beijing studio is littered with all kinds of Chinese stuff that are used in various and rather inventive ways by the artist. I know first-hand since (bragging time) I have actually visited the place myself. He did really like my red shoes and photographed a patch of ground with my brightly shod feet. It may very well be my claim to fame one day, my very own fifteen minutes. The Han vase was handy and readily available. Wei Wei is also famously known to dunk and drip garish paint colors over ancient pottery vases that can easily be bought for not much more than a hundred bucks, often less, in any “antique” shop in China. There is what appears to be an endless supply of them. Many are reproductions, rather obvious at times, and I would suspect that Wei Wei even has some brand “new” ones made specifically for him. The more recent examples have such sharp edges and clear articulations that they scream: “thrown on an electric wheel!”. No ancient pot looks like that. The “new” forms are much more about external compression than internal expansion, which would be the case if they were of antiquity. Yet, who is to know once the thing is covered with paint, and who cares anyway. Antiquity is not the point here, and I even wonder if authenticity is an issue at all, as well. I predict thousands and thousands of Ai Wei Wei “fake” painted vases will appear in the marketplace, in the future. They will be ridiculously easy to make, as there really is nothing personal or original, beyond the concept, about them. Their operative painting process relies on entropy, as it does for breakage, and entropy as a law of physics is a constant for everyone, not just famous artists.

Which brings us now to Maximo Caminero, the Miami artist who, when confronted with a series of “painted” Ai Wei Wei vases presented on a low white plinth in front of the three iconic photographs of “Dropping the Urn”, apparently spontaneously, like Wei Wei himself originally, picked up one of the vases and dropped it. The whole thing was captured on video cellphone by an unsuspecting witness (is that a fact?) and has made the round of the news cycle and the web, ever since (the news cycle just for a few days, like anything else). The press in its habitual

exaggerated dramatization and its propensity to make tempests in teacups, keeps repeating endlessly that the said dropped vase is (was) worth “a million dollars”, when a simple internet search reveals that similar to identical examples sold recently for as little (!) as \$15,000 each. I wish this were true of my own work! But “a million dollars” sound so much better. It reminds me of Doctor Evil (and Mini Me) in the Austin Powers movies who, when expressing awe at a stupendous amount of money, puts his left pinky to his lips and slowly articulates “A MILLION DOLLARS!”.

Both artists have various reasons for justifying their respective if similar action. I won't go into that here. As a potter myself, I just ask why is it so acceptable to break ceramic pots? *Is the simple fact of ownership enough justification to alter to the point of destruction, another artist's work?* After all, that is also what Ai Wei Wei did and will probably continue doing: he destroys by breaking or again modifies drastically by covering it with paint, another artist's work. Whether this artist lived in the Han Dynasty or happens to be a more recent faker or was hired by Ai Wei Wei to make convincing reproductions, this actual maker was making aesthetic choices and was de facto an artist as well, if we accept the dubious premise that aesthetics has anything to do with art now. It is really interesting that the older an object is, the more acceptable it is as art, yet the less it is considered the work of an artist! Of course Wei Wei bought or paid for these objects; he owns them. Caminero doesn't. Wei Wei himself said, “I am the only one who owns my work”. So, is ethical behavior reduced to the simple fact of ownership? In our capitalist, consumer society, meaning resides in consumption, both in buying and in throwing away, and basically nowhere else. I hope Maximo Caminero ends up profiting from the publicity and makes a buck from his gesture. He probably will. We also know, that Ai Wei Wei will cash in even more. Good for them! Too bad for the pots!

Paul Mathieu is a potter living in Vancouver, Canada, where he teaches ceramics at Emily Carr University. His most recent book “The Art of the Future; a History and Theory of Ceramics” is available for FREE online, texts and images, at www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture