



RÖRELSE V / MOVEMENT V, FRÅN UTSTÄLLNINGEN  
 "PLACE TO BE LOST", 2018 | KODE 3, BERGEN, NORGE.  
 Foto: Anne Britt Ylvisåker

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## GUNILLA MARIA ÅKESSON – SILENT VARIATIONS

*Text by Anne Britt Ylvisåker*

**London 2020.** The small rooms in stately *Sommerset House* are brimming over during *Collect*, the annual collectors fair. In the middle of the hustle and bustle, cacophony of voices and huge amounts of craft that are all screaming for our attention, my eye is drawn to Gunilla Maria Åkesson's ceramic cylinders sitting on the corner of a table. With their thin, straight walls and slightly convex bases, they radiate an air of stoic calm in the midst of all the surrounding noise. *Vessel no 47*, *Vessel no 56*, and *Vessel no 57* are restful on the eyes and lower your pulse – but only at first glance. We soon discover the duality of these objects. While the internal surfaces are covered in an even, monochrome glaze in neutral black or white, the glazes on the outside are expressive in a completely different way. Their uneven surfaces reveal a rich and lively play of colour, where the colours run into each other or pop up in small "peepholes" in the surface.

"These effects are created by first coating the clay cylinders in glaze and then applying a coat of slip – liquid clay with colour added to it – before several alternative layers of slip and glaze are added on top," says Åkesson. "Different glazes will function in different ways and, not least, will react both with each other and the slip," she explains. The mixes can start to boil during firing, so that the bubbles form small craters in the glaze. They can also shrink, crack or start to ooze in the intense heat. The unevenness created during the firing process governs whether the next layer of glaze or slip will run down the outside of the object, find alternative routes or accumulate in thicker layers. This can lead to the formation of deep craters, cracks and bubbles in the surface, and pieces of glaze can even break off and protrude like sharp knives, as in *Vessel no 63*. Or the glaze can slide viscously down the sides and form something resembling a lace collar at the base, as in *Vessel no 5*. In a way, the surfaces create themselves in the kiln, and despite extensive knowledge of glazes and great experience as a ceramicist, Åkesson does not know what the final result will be until she opens the door of the kiln. Anything can happen during the process – in each and every firing in the kiln. Åkesson's role is to assess the result, select what she regards as finished, work further on what she wants to give another layer of glaze and, not least, discard what has been broken or no longer has potential. The pieces that receive the artist's critical approval – and that the public get to see – are both tactile and sensuous. They immediately appeal to our senses. But their rich surfaces can also trigger associations with something outside





themselves, like the light and silence that follows a snowfall, the scars and wrinkles that come from a lived life, or the pain and anxiety we feel when something has gone very wrong around or in us. In my experience, Åkesson's work in recent years has become both more intense and more pained, more aggressive and insistent. Obstinate. Risk-taking. Raw.

At the same time, the explosions of glaze on the outside of the objects stand in strong contrast to the calmness on the inside. This creates a quivering tension between the outer and inner surfaces, like that between noise and silence, control and chaos. And the only thing separating the two extremes from each other is a paper thin, fragile and breakable wall of clay.

I both wonder at and recognise the expressiveness of Åkesson's work as I stand there at *Collect 2020*. Because this is far from the first time I have seen her ceramics. On the contrary, our paths have crossed many times since she was a ceramics student at the National College of Art and Design (SHKD)<sup>1</sup> in Bergen in the late 1980s, while I taught there. When we met again a few years later in connection with the *Norwegian Craft Acquisition Fund*, our roles had changed. Åkesson had become an established maker and had been elected as a representative of her professional association, while I represented *West Norway Museum of Decorative Art*<sup>2</sup> and was responsible for developing the museum's craft collection. For four years, we travelled all over Norway together and discussed many different ceramic expressions and styles. But on our travels by car or bus and at airports around Norway, our conversations often touched on Åkesson's own art. The museum had purchased a few of her works for its collection, and I was curious to learn more about the background to them.

And it is precisely these first purchases of Åkesson's work that come to my mind on this March day in 2020. How did she get from there to here? What aspects of what she was concerned with then are still recognisable in her most recent work, and what traces of her college years in Bergen can we see in Åkesson's art today? Let us go back to the beginning.

### **"It's here I'm going to study!"**

On a summer day in 1987, Gunilla Maria Åkesson was in Bergen for the very first time. She was taking part in a three-day admission process at SHKD when she passed some student works in the corridors of the ceramics department. "It's here I'm going to study!" she suddenly realised. "Here, they do what I'm interested in – the unique object – this is a place I will be able to develop!"<sup>3</sup>

Åkesson had previously applied without success to both *Konstfack (the University College of Arts, Craft and Design)* in Stockholm and the *Academy of Design and Crafts* in Gothenburg, and she felt that she had to look beyond Sweden to pursue her education. In winter 1986–87, Åkesson worked as a trainee with the ceramicist Ulla Viotti (b. 1933), from whom she learned about the college in Bergen. Viotti knew the newly appointed professor of ceramics at SHKD, Arne Åse<sup>4</sup> (b. 1940), who had developed his own technique for applying watercolours to



AVSLÖJANDE I / REVEALING I, 2008. Foto: Vidar Helle

porcelain, and who was strongly opposed to all the secrecy about techniques and methods which he believed to be characteristic of large parts of the ceramics community.

Åkesson applied to Bergen, this time successfully. She was accepted for the ceramics programme at SHKD and, although she was ambivalent about her first years at the college and found things a bit confusing, she was happy there and felt fairly certain that she had made the right choice. Arne Åse no longer worked at the college, however. He had been appointed to a new professorship in Oslo, so that he was only in Bergen for a short period. His professorial responsibilities in Bergen were divided between several stand-ins, who took turns at being present at the college. This made it difficult to achieve good continuity. Moreover, the teaching in the first year was largely adapted to suit students with little prior knowledge of ceramics. With her experience from *Capellagåden college* on Öland and *Nyckelvikskolan college* on Lidingö, as well as her job as a trainee with Viotti, Åkesson was already familiar with a lot of the curriculum. Despite all these unexpected developments, it became increasingly clear that the two colleges Åkesson had unsuccessfully applied to in Sweden probably did not have the special qualities that she was looking for, but were more oriented towards industrial design and production than independent artistic expression: "It was a stroke of luck really that I was never accepted by Konstfack in Stockholm. And I would never have been where I am today, neither as a ceramist nor as a person, if I had been,"



FÖRVÄNDLING / TRANSFORMATION, 1998. Foto: KODE / Dag Fosse

Åkesson wrote already in her degree assignment from 1992, and goes on to say: “So, in retrospect, I regard my years studying ceramics in Sweden as many years spent attempting to conform.”<sup>5</sup> The ceramics tradition in her home country was extensive and very well-established, and there were some absolute norms for what good ceramics should look like: “You have to be very aware and strong if you want to succeed in developing your own personality and a completely different style than the established tradition says is the right one,” she concludes, wise after the event. *The National College of Art and Design* (SHKS) in Oslo was not a real educational alternative either. While they did work on unique objects there as well, they largely cast porcelain in plaster moulds. That was not something that appealed to Åkesson. “I wanted to work with the clay – like they did in Bergen!”

Things began to fall more into place in her second year. Hanne Heuch (b. 1954) was appointed as Arne Åse’s successor as professor, bringing with her fresh ideas about what ceramic art can be. In a generous and inclusive manner, she also shared her extensive professional network with the students, in addition to inviting guest lecturers from a wide artistic spectrum to the department. A good ten years previously, Heuch had herself been a student at the same college during a period when the conflict level between teaching staff and students had been high. At that time, the two sides had opposing views of what the discipline should be and what this entailed in terms of the teaching offered. When all the ceramics teachers resigned and left the college in 1977, the students had to take over teaching duties themselves.<sup>6</sup> And they accepted this challenge with great enthusiasm. They invited guest lecturers of international standing to the college in Bergen, which would later become the norm rather than just a one-off occurrence at the department. While, in the first few years, the guest lecturers

represented the full breadth of the ceramics field, the newly appointed Hanne Heuch also invited representatives of other art forms to contribute. The idea was to further challenge and expand the understanding of the discipline. It was this development that came to shape the new everyday life of Åkesson and her co-students at the department.

**“At first, I really didn’t understand what was going on at all.”**

The students were encouraged to experiment with materials, techniques and firing. They tried raku and salt-firing, and Åkesson was even involved in building and participated in firings in a wood-burning kiln at the studio of the Norwegian ceramicist Magni Jensen (b. 1953). The students went on study trips and studio visits and, through all the guest lecturers, they gained direct insight into the many different ways in which ceramicists actually worked, such as the Japanese ceramicist Takeshi Yasuda (b. 1943), the Norwegian Torbjørn Kvasbø<sup>7</sup> (b. 1953) and two very different British ceramicists, Walter Keeler (b. 1942) and Richard Slee (b. 1946).<sup>8</sup>

And Åkesson now had something to get to grips with. “When I arrived here, I experienced a kind of liberating shock,” Åkesson wrote in 1992: “Here, I got more praise for the cup I had dropped on the floor than for the beautiful ones stylishly displayed side by side in a row. *At first, I really didn’t understand what was going on at all.*”<sup>9</sup> For Professor Heuch, who liked to mix ceramics with plexiglass or other materials, and who was particularly keen on publicly commissioned ceramic art,<sup>10</sup> was not at all satisfied with students who just made ‘nice’ or ‘OK’ objects. Instead of remaining within the bounds of what was safe, Heuch tried to pressure her students out of their comfort zones and get them to break through barriers, and push the envelope as far as possible, both personally and in their work. “I carry her comments with me in my head,” Åkesson confesses many years later, “And she asked me ‘what would happen if you turned everything 180 degrees around?’ There were always other possibilities. You weren’t supposed to be content with what you’d done. You had to go as far as you could, preferably beyond what was possible (...) and create something that was really interesting. To surprise yourself.”

The person from whom she learned most, however, is the Norwegian visual artist Svein Rønning. His criticism in connection with an assessment of an assignment was devastating: “He was so angry that he triggered something in me (...) He thought that what I’d done was totally uninteresting,” says Åkesson with a laugh today. Rønning simply did not understand what she was doing, and that really provoked her. He touched on something that she had to explore in more depth, and, not least, she felt that she had to show Rønning that she knew what she was doing – and that helped: “The next assessment he had with me developed into a really good conversation!”

Almost 30 years later, Åkesson can sit and philosophise about her ‘awakening’: “This is what Hanne wanted – to draw on people who weren’t ceramicists, to get a more overarching perspective and different points of view. And that led to a lot of discussions about the



idea, about the expression – does this get the idea across?” But it took time to get rid of the baggage she had brought with her from Sweden: “I struggled with myself and was drawn between what ‘some people’ expected me to do and what I really wanted to do most, but didn’t quite dare.”<sup>11</sup>

**‘rytm, symmetri, koncentration, stillhet’  
(rhythm, symmetry, concentration, silence)**

After many questions and a lot of doubt, in her final exam, Åkesson presented a series of rectangular, strongly coloured modules. The modules resembled open boxes without lids or bases, and they had a clear architectural quality. The walls are roughly hewn from thick, rolled out strips of clay and are staggered so that the modules can be stacked on top of each other, like building blocks for a large building. At the same time, each module is an independent ‘building’ enclosing a clearly defined space.

In purely visual terms, the degree assignment bears little resemblance to what Åkesson would later go on to create. It is more relevant to read her reflections about what she does, about the choices she makes – and why. Åkesson writes about space and architecture as things of both a physical and metaphysical nature, about opposites that complement each other and create equilibrium, about people, nature and the never-ending search for the real and the original. And she highlights art and artistic expressions that she can both see herself and find inspiration in.

It is perhaps on this last point that I believe I can see the biggest difference between the young, inquiring student and the mature artist. While the student Åkesson appears to turn outwards in pursuit of a foothold and artistic confirmation, the artist Åkesson of today seems to enter more into a dialogue with herself in order to find meaning. And she also works in a different way.

For her first solo exhibition at *Blås & Knåda* in Stockholm in 1994, Åkesson built her works in plaster moulds, and cast one piece to be wall-mounted. Already in 1996, however, she started using the ancient coil technique, which she would develop, refine and remain faithful to from then on. Briefly explained, the coil technique consists of creating volume by laying clay coils on top of each other. To begin with, Åkesson rolled out long strips of clay that she used to build with, and both of the oldest works by her in our museum collection are made in this way (*Förvandling / Transformation*, 1998, joint title) The strips of clay are visible in the unglazed earthenware objects. They resemble the growth rings we see in tree trunks, and it is these irregular, rough and dry edges of the strips that give life to the otherwise precise, circular shapes. The next work of hers that the museum purchased (*Rörelse V / Movement V*, 2006) is in a completely different style. A twisting organic shape is covered by viscous glazes in pink, white and yellowish brown that merge into each other. The sculpture has something corporeal about it, and the first impression we get is of revolting innards or marbled meat mixed with bodily waste. On closer inspection, however, it is easy to be seduced by the sensual

dance the glaze performs on the shapes and the dynamic play of colour in the shiny surface. The piece alternates between being attractive and repulsive.

A few years later came the last of Åkesson’s works in the museum’s collection (*Avslöjande I / Revealing I*, 2008). It consists of two amoebic forms that flow on and around each other in a passionate embrace. It is first when viewed close up that the elaborate pattern in the light glaze becomes apparent, as if a thousand soap bubbles have been frozen while in movement, or like lichen, fish scales or perhaps lumps of frog spawn. There is something corporeal and ambiguous about this work as well. While the exterior is delicate and discreet, a core of sparkling red and gold is revealed that is only visible if you force the two parts apart. The piece is both delicate and fragile, juicy and sensuous.

Both of the last two pieces are made using the coil technique, but in a completely different way than the first one. To achieve the completely free forms, the clay coils are laid over an inner ‘skeleton’ of clay. The grooves between the coils are then so finely evened out that they are no longer visible. And we see that the dynamic interplay between form and glaze has begun to be important to her, at the same time as there is a tension between the outside and inside of both pieces.

**A new silence**

And then complete silence. In 2009, Åkesson left Norway and the ceramics community of which she was a part to start anew in her home country. To begin with, she had no studio and, after more than 20 years in Norway, she also felt that she was a stranger on the Swedish craft scene. When she eventually had a studio in place and she could finally restart, she no longer knew who she was as a ceramicist, whether she would manage to work or why she should continue to dedicate her life to clay. She fiddled and fumbled, rolled coils, pinched and squeezed them and forced herself to work with clay without knowing whether she would succeed or where she wanted to go.

Already in 1996, Åkesson had started using meditation as part of her process. Now, her work became like an exercise in meditation. The monotonous repetitions that the coil technique involves left her free to think, and Åkesson gradually came to acknowledge that she needed to work on ceramics for her own sake and that she had to stop thinking about what others expected of her. Then things finally fell into place! She first made a series of bulging, organic pots with round bases and narrow openings, which she exhibited lying in a group on a layer of sand or salt. The surfaces were unglazed and matt white, with shiny glazed insides in black, yellow or white, and the round bases forced the pots to face towards or away from each other. They lay there like satellites ready to pick up signals from something or other out there. And perhaps it is from here it came, what happened next?

In 2013, Åkesson exhibited her first cylinder series, and she would stick with this classical design and further develop it in endless variations from then on. But the procedure is the same: First, she places a rolled-out strip of clay in a plaster mould with a slightly





concave base, which both gives the vessel a slight lift up from the underlay and defines the format. She then attaches row after row of thin hand-rolled coils along the edge. She first evens them out before carefully turning the modelling stand with one hand, while forming the walls as thinly as she can between the fingertips of her other hand. After a few rows, the thin soft clay walls become too unstable for her to continue, and the clay needs to dry a little before further rows can be built on top. This is one of the reasons why Åkesson works in series, making several cylinders at a time. Since they are at different stages of the drying process, she can move from one to the other depending on whether they are ready for new layers of clay to be added. This technique is slow, and, for Åkesson, giving form to the object is almost a meditative process where she can experience that she becomes one with the clay. In this way, she endeavours to make contact with what she feels is present in the piece in question and that she wants to bring out and develop in the further process.

The clay she uses is reinforced with paper fibre which makes it stronger as a building material. Åkesson makes full use of this as she forms walls so high and thin that they are almost on the point of collapsing. Some of her cylinders are made of porcelain and are so delicate that you can see through them. Since the thickness of the hand-built walls will vary somewhat, the clay will also be more or less transparent, which gives the objects a both pulsating and lively appearance. But Åkesson also experiments with other types of clay. In the *Shelter* series from 2015, for example, she made cylinders of porous clay, apparently randomly glazed with a light glaze that runs

layer upon layer without covering the whole of the red object. Here, the fairly simple raw material is partly covered and partly uncovered, at the same time as the layers of glaze of varying transparency create space and a landscape on the surface. It is first in the last five or six years that Åkesson has started experimenting with glazes and slip applied in layers, like the pieces she exhibited at *Collect 2020*.

After several decades' work, Åkesson has finally dared to narrow down the number of variables and express herself within a fairly limited repertoire. She can concentrate, explore in depth and change her work in almost imperceptible small steps. Her work has a new calmness now. And in the midst of all this calm, simplicity and the well-known, Åkesson has found a place where she feels safe, yet does not have full control. She initiates a process and must be alert at all times if she is to pick up on what happens as things progress. Only in this way can she also 'surprise herself', as Professor Heuch encouraged her to do.

And it was here she envisaged getting to, the degree student from 1992:

“To always ask why.

To be able to remove everything unnecessary.

To stand naked.

To arrive here, I had to get my inner contradictions.

To cooperate.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The college has changed both its name and status several times. First from *Bergen School of Applied Art* to the *National College of Art and Design* (SHKD) in 1986, then to *Bergen National Academy of the Arts* (KHiB) in 1996, when SHKD merged with *Bergen National Academy of the Arts*. Since 2017, the art and design departments from the former *National Academy of the Arts*, together with the *Grieg Academy* (music) have been three departments in the *Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design* (KMD) at the University of Bergen.

<sup>2</sup> In 2007, *West Norway Museum of Decorative Art* was merged with four other museums to form what is now *KODE Art Museums and Composer Homes*.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the quotes from the artist in this article are taken from an interview with Åkesson recorded on 18 July 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Arne Åse was the first professor of ceramics in Norway. He took up the position in autumn 1986. The year after, a corresponding position was created at the *National College of Art and Design* in Oslo, where Åse was a lecturer from 1969 until he took up the professorship in Bergen, and he returned to the college in Oslo, now as a professor.

<sup>5</sup> Gunilla Åkesson, *rytm, symmetri, koncentration, stilhet (rhythm, symmetry, concentration, silence)*, master's degree assignment at the Department of Ceramics at the National College of Art and Design (SHKD), Bergen 1992, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> As the minutes of the board meeting put it: 'The Department of Ceramics must itself agree on the subjects to be covered by the lecturers the college is to write to, and find their addresses.' Minutes of board meeting on 21 September 1977.

<sup>7</sup> Torbjørn Kvasbø, who studied at *Bergen School of Applied Art* (which later became SHKD) at the same time as Professor Hanne Heuch during the most turbulent period, was professor of ceramics at *HDK* during the period 1996–2000 and at *Konstfack* from 2000–2008, thereby passing on a lot of what he had experienced in Bergen to Sweden.

<sup>8</sup> Åkesson also came into contact with the British ceramicist Sebastian Blackie (b. 1949), when she was an exchange student in Farnham in her second year. The contact between them was made via Richard Launder (b. 1953), her teacher in Bergen, who had had Blackie as a teacher when he attended the same college

<sup>9</sup> Åkesson 1992 op.cit. My emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> After the Norwegian artists' organisations, as a result of *Kunstneraksjonen (the artists' campaign)* in 1974, achieved negotiating rights with the state, the State committed itself to increasing its use of art. In 1976, it was decided to use more art in public buildings and, a few years later, a rule was introduced whereby 1% of the total cost of new buildings was to be set aside for artistic decoration.

<sup>11</sup> Åkesson 1992 op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> Åkesson 1992, p. 4.



CONTAINER / DETALJ, 2016