Ghostdance - a metaphor

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Citation: SAWDON, P., 1999. Ghostdance - a metaphor. IN: Ceramic Contemporaries 3, National Association of Ceramics in Higher Education

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/2933

Publisher: © NACHE

Please cite the published version.
This item was submitted to Loughborough’s Institutional Repository by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

For the full text of this licence, please go to:
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
Ghostdance – a metaphor

Phil Sawdon

Phil Sawdon, Daniel Defoe and guests.
Format debt to Michael Phillipson

A virtual, bewildering and erratic tutorial with Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner. “The facts surrounding the discovery of this drifting....” discourse..... “Have been so distorted by guesswork and rumour that any attempts at assessment would only increase the density of the fog.”

When you look at me from your own century, I may seem to be strange archaeology.

Beyond the room: The Chant: “Languages are coded, your image is eroded.”

Phil Sawdon: Dick.....this is Robinson..... He's been on a placement near the mouth of the great river of Oroonque.....Dick!?

Dick Hebdige: I for one still find it refreshing to hear a distinguished Parisien intellectual like Lyotard using words like 'maybe', 'perhaps', ‘what if’ instead of seeking to perfect a ‘line’ defensible on all fronts or to lapse back into the assured, disembodied accents of the professional academic.

Phil Sawdon: However.....Robinson!?
How's it going?

Robinson Crusoe: I have great employment upon my hands, as follows, Viz.....

Phil Sawdon: Go on.....

Robinson Crusoe: I have long study'd by some means or other, to make myself some earthen vessels, which indeed I want sorely, but know not where to come at them.

Alison Britton: There is a lot more relativity and doubt around in the 1990s and it is best to try to make some good out of it.

Michael Phillipson & Chris Fisher: Engaging and articulating the dilemmas of contemporary art practice presents formidable problems for the artist because there is no site of writing which easily combines the requirements of analysis and description with the interests of the maker of works.

Phil Sawdon: Robinson!? Please don’t tell us your work is based on..... (Shells, stones, crystals, geology, seed heads, fungi, crustaceans, blah, blah, blah).....try and avoid the frantic.

Peter Dormer: … Post war urgency for self expression and individuality....
Phil Sawdon: Which seems to reoccupy your present day peers. Try to consider the context, tradition, .....your thoughts concerning.....

Peter Dormer: .....Craft knowledge.....

Michael Phillipson: Ceramics shares the fate common to all analytic topics. It is broken down in the course of its minute analysis by those appropriating practices. The pot is assaulted as a pre-condition of its reconstruction according to knowledge makers interests which are quite other to those of ceramists. Under the role of technical appropriation the pot is there to celebrate not its own fragility but the exorbitant all gathering strength of the knowledge machine.

Peter Dormer: For a number of artists and studio crafts people craft knowledge is a threat: According to the modern orthodoxy it applies a brake upon the creative imagination.....there is a view that craft knowledge conflicts with originality.....

Phil Sawdon: .....Herbert!? How long have you been here?!

Herbert Read: .....Pottery is at once the simplest and most difficult of all the arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract. Pottery is pure art.....pottery is plastic art in its most abstract essence.

Robinson Crusoe: However.....considering the heat of the climate, I do not doubt but if I could find out any such clay, I might botch up some pot as might being dry’d in the sun, be hard enough and strong enough to bear handling, and to hold anything that was dry and required to be kept so, and as this is necessary in the preparing corn, meal & co., which is the thing I’m upon, I resolve to make some as large as I can, and fit only to stand like jarrs to hold what should be put into them.

Peter Dormer: Intention is discovered through the process of making the object.

Michael Phillipson: The mute appeal of ceramic objects lies in their essential fragility. In this they ironise all the strength with which knowledge invests them.

Phil Sawdon: Mick!?

Mick Casson: Pottery is art functioning on a daily basis because at its best it provides an aesthetic dimension to a fundamental experience, our relationship with food and drink.

Phil Sawdon: Mick you might like to talk to Herbert while I ask.....Peter!? 

Peter Voulkos: It’s a simple matter to pick out a pots poor qualities, but it is impossible to analyse a good pot.

Robinson Crusoe: It would make you pity me, or rather laugh at me, to tell how many awkward ways I took to raise this paste, what odd misshapen ugly things I made, how many of them fell in, and how many fell out, the clay not being stiff enough to bear its own weight.
Peter Voulkos: I like to work in wet, soft clay. I get into a head trip on it. I just throw the shit on the wheel and see how it comes out and see if I can control it. The point is I like to handle materials that I cannot quite control. When I control it too much then I start contriving. When I am teaching and I see a student get to a certain point, I say take a bigger piece of clay see what that feels like, and struggle along a little further.  

Phil Sawdon: Robinson, do you have a wheel?.....You’re not sure.....’maybe’ then, or ‘perhaps’.....David?!

David Queensbury: Maintaining the link with function is important as it creates an ordered framework within which the potter works and feels comfortable. Potters, who dispense with the traditions of the vessel, and wish to break down the art/craft barrier, find themselves disorientated. They find a freedom they cannot handle.

Phil Sawdon: Yes, ‘perhaps’, ‘maybe’, but we need another ‘what if’ here to help Robinson set parameters for his hand building.....David?!

David Queensbury: Hand building is the most primal ceramic making method.....it may be productively inefficient, yet it offers the potter tremendous opportunities to create forms that are not possible within the restraints of rotational symmetry imposed by the wheel.....there seems little to suggest that in the long history of ceramics technical and aesthetic advances go hand in hand.....The vessel now fulfils its purpose, not by its ability to store materials but by arousing those feelings that we associate with art.

Robinson Crusoe: .....how many cracked by the over violent heat of the sun, being set out too hastily; and how many fell in pieces with only removing, as well before as after they were dry’d; and in a word, how after having laboured hard to find the clay, to dig it, to temper it, to bring it home and work it, I could not make above two large earthen ugly things, I cannot call them jarrs, in about two months labour.

Daniel Rhodes: Clay working admits of spontaneous, rapid, intuitive methods but does not tolerate carelessness.....what the potter needs in order to get the ceramic process under some measure of control is an understanding of the principles which govern the behaviour of his raw materials.

Peter Dormer: My concern is with art in which handicraft is the crucial, the only link between intention and expression.

Pamela Johnson: I cannot understand practitioners who don’t wish seriously to analyse and consider the relevance of what they are doing – how they relate to the economy, how they relate to other practices.....

Phil Sawdon: Robinson? .....Janet’s (Wolff: The Social Production of Art) in next week ..... 

Michael Phillipson: We might, however be able to approach the pot from somewhere other than within the security guaranteed by knowledge.....
Phil Sawdon: Hang on Michael! We have a video link with Paul Greenhalgh at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York.

Paul Greenhalgh: …..the endless art/craft debate (ie, Am I a Crafts Person? Am I an Artist?) and other related diatribes are absurdly ahistorical in their premises and assumption: So much so that we can say with depressing confidence that we have wasted 20 years in meaningless discussions on the topic…... 29

Phil Sawdon: Paul…..sorry, Paul you’re breaking up, we’ll have to move on…..Michael!?

Michael Phillipson: (As a visiting artist) 30
So perhaps the ante postmodern artists problem is to know theory the better to be able to recognise and skirt its seductions and promises. 30a

Michael Phillipson: (As the terminal surgeon) 31
I prefer an aesthetics of silence…..despite everything the artist can do, the work will be recovered by the culture, will become conventional. 31a

Phil Sawdon: Choose your masque…..choose your masks and choose the side that you’ll be on….. 32

Sorry, where were we? Oh, yes…..that rather confuses the postundergraduates chant…..I want my work to be unique, original, new…..we were hearing from beyond the room, but I agree…..Michael!?…..(Which one?)

Michael Phillipson: (As the terminal surgeon)
Appropriation is about power and ownership, and to be seen to have art in your pocket carries considerable prestige in these discourses…..Art exemplifies the realm that is other to theory. Art is that practice which in its utter uselessness, constantly escapes, exceeds, all attempts to press it into the service of theory and knowledge. How powerful would that discourse be which could persuade us that it had finally grasped art. 33

Robinson Crusoe: …..As the sun baked these two very dry and hard, I lifted them gently up, and set them down again in two great wicker-baskets which I had made on purpose for them, that they might not break, and as between the pot and the basket there was a little room to spare, I stuffed it full of the rice and barley straw, and these two pots being to stand always dry, I thought would hold my dry corn, and perhaps the meal, when the corn was bruised.
Tho’ I miscarried so much in my design for large pots, yet I made several smaller things with better success, such as little round pots, flat dishes, pitchers and pippkins, and any things my hands turned to, and the heat of the sun baked them strangely hard. But all this would not answer my end….. 34

Michael Phillipson: (as the terminal surgeon)
For art to be drawn into the play of use and usage in such a violent culture could be to precipitate its literal death. I am suggesting that the only life open to art in an icy culture is a half-life, in which its celebration and exploration of its own impotence, exemplify the other voice. 35
Phil Sawdon: Impotently representing impotence!

Michael Phillipson: (As the terminal surgeon)
It’s not even a matter of passive resistance but of impotently asserting the necessity of impotence. 36

Phil Sawdon: Robinson!! … ..Let’s assume you adhere to the premise that….."The Artist’s Commitments have been formed, at least in part, through grappling with the challenges posed for making by modernism…..” 37

Do you wish to ironise the work of institutions? Preserve some place beyond meaning, within representation but not gatherable within the discourses of culture? Otherness? Avoidance as a critical issue? Are craft and skills on a road to nowhere, a glimpse of otherness? …..”A rear guard resistance through weakness”. 38

Robinson Crusoe: But all this would not answer my end, which was to get an earthen pot to hold what was liquid….. 39

Phil Sawdon: The video is making Techno Tropic Optical Murmurings…..

Paul Greenhalgh: Perhaps the starting point for ceramic theory is to be found in the way that ceramic objects are perceived rather than conceived. I suppose I am saying that we should look carefully at the relationship between people and objects, since it is at the site of this interaction that ceramics is most interesting. 40

Phil Sawdon: Paul…..sorry, Paul you’re breaking up, you’re falling apart, you’re floating away, we’ll have to move on…..Michael?

Michael Robinson: The whole field is riddled with ambiguities and insecurities…..there is an aggressive self consciousness about being artists and an unwillingness to be categorised as a maker of the functional, the decorative or the art object. 41

Robinson Crusoe: But all this would not answer my end, which was to get an earthen pot to hold what was liquid….. 42

Phil Sawdon: Was that a depressingly loud cheer from outside…..?

Robinson Crusoe: …..and bear the fire, which none of these could do. It happened after some time, making a pretty large fire for cooking my meat, when I went to put it out after I had done with it, I found a broken piece of one of my earthen-ware vessels in the fire, burnt as hard as a stone, and red as a tile. I was agreeably surprised to see it, and said to my self, that certainly they might be made to burn whole if they would burn broken. This set me to studying how to order my fire, so as to make it burn me some pots. I had no notion of a kiln such as the potters burn in….. 43

Peter Voulkos: What is this big mystique around firing methods. Making a thing of it is like describing a painting by saying it was painted on linen with pine stretchers. 44
Phil Sawdon: Hang on!! This opens up a set of big ones. I suggest we leave this for Friday. That suit you Robinson?

Robinson Crusoe: .....Glazing.....

Peter Voulkos: It’s not how many glazes you use. It is how you use what you have got. If it comes out of the fire, it is good if it turns you on.

Robinson Crusoe: But I must needs say, as to the shapes of them, they were very different, as any one may suppose, when I had no way of making them but as the children make dirt pies, or as a woman would make pies that never learned to raise paste.

Phil Sawdon: Gender! .....now then..... Griselda!?

Beyond the room: From Limbo-on-sea: Shut up! There’s no more time. The pyrates have returned.

Barely audible above the noise of the waves:

Michael Phillipson & Chris Fisher: For practitioners, artists to recognise that this is the way the Museum ‘works’ (that it is a machine for converting all times to past times) is already to open up a possible gap between practice and the institutional life. Realisation itself can mark the decline of the institutions seductive power and provoke artist’s withdrawal to an elsewhere. It is not, of course, that institutions will literally disappear or will cease to represent and appropriate; doubtless on their own terms they will go from strength to technical strength, convincing themselves that they have art firmly in hand, since this is what they are extremely good at – over-developing their singular instrumental appropriating powers. Rather, withdrawal will be marked by artist’s reclamation of their ‘own’ subjectivity and interiority (an owness which will always escape their searches) in the course of and through the work itself. But the emergent ‘subjectivity’ will be neither the ‘expressive’ subject of romantic-modernism nor the deconstructed textual non-subject of contemporary critical theory, nor the ‘witty’ surface ‘subject’ of mediatised appearances. Interiority will be reconstituted elsewhere (right there where the work of art ‘takes (its own) place’), to one side of the rhetorics of expression, textuality and appearance. It will eschew all games of ‘wit’ (through which it snarls itself up immediately in institutional snares) in favour of an absolutely ‘silent objectality’. Towards unspeakable, unrepresentable, unrepresentative, utterly weak, lost, catatonic objects, objects that have nothing to say, objects that slip away from ‘meaning’ at every turn into a zone of non-plussedness, where nothing can be added to them without detracting from them – an objectality for an unfixable migratory subjectivity – in process, on the move away from itself. The joy and promise of such objects would lie precisely in their inert resistance to all narratives: Avoidance by indifference to continuity and connection; indifference through openness to the uncanny gaps between things, between words and thing, between words and words, between words, things and subjectivity. They could only be fragments outside any whole, held together by lack, and relying for their take up on the dizzying uncertainties they provoke in a world where institutional certainties seek to dominate and provide for the everyday life of art.
Later: Whilst writing up the learning contract for Robinson: A rotating virtual vessel turns through 360 degrees to reveal the inscription: – ‘A sense of loss!’

Sources, Ghostdance


2 Hawkwind Log: In search of space, Re-issue 1996

3 Hope, Roy Harper. Taken from the album “What ever happened to…..Jugula. A collaboration with Jimmy Page, 1985

4 Coded languages (Bainbridge/Moorcock), Hawkwind. Taken from the album “Sonic Attack”, Re-issue 1996


6, 7, 15, 20, 24, 34, 39, 42, 43, 45, 47 Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe Penguin Classics 1985 (first published 1719).

8 The Lost and The Free, Continuity and Disruption in Ceramic Art, Alison Britton: Catalogue essay The American Way 1993/94


10, 11, 13, 16, 26 The Art of the Maker, Peter Dormer. Extracts from the introduction

12, 17, 28 To ceramise. Michael Phillipson. Ceramic Contemporaries 2 Exhibition Catalogue 1996

14, 22, 23 Magdalene Odundo, David Queensbury, London 1991

18 The future of function, Mick Casson. Catalogue essay: High Table.

19, 21, 44, 46 Peter Voulkos, Rose Slivka. First Edition 1978


27 Comment, Pamela Johnson. Crafts issue No 135 (July/Aug)

29, 40 Discourse and Decoration: The Struggle for historical space, Paul Greenhalgh. 7th International Ceramics Symposium 1993

32 Choose your masks (Steele/Brock), Hawkwind. Taken from the album “Choose your Masques” Reissue 1996