



Staatliche Fachschule für Keramik Landshut

CERAMICS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

The difficult balance between inspiration and perspiration

Annette Ody

With this exhibition of work by the photographer Peter Litvai, we have opened our doors to other artists and intellectuals. As a school that offers vocational training and is equipped with first rate, highly functional exhibition facilities, and a curriculum inspired by art and craft content, we considered this step to be essential.

We are of the opinion that it is only through a tête-à-tête with other craftspeople, artists and cultural activists that we were able in the past, are able in the present and will be able in the future to remain flexible and to keep trying to redefine ourselves. Part of this is seeing and experiencing what others are doing, how they work, what they have found and discovered for themselves. And what better forum is there for this than right here, in our house.

Everyone who frequents our building, whether a student, a teacher or a visitor has to face the challenge of being confronted with what is being exhibited; with all the new things that we have brought into our house from the outside and which we are showing in the school's exhibition space.

"Curiosity for the unknown" – a phrase

familiar to us all – sets things in motion for any kind of thirst for knowledge, thus promoting developments, so that any imaginable goals may be achieved.

Issuing an open and cordial invitation to artistic personalities and to other institutions to exhibit on our premises proves that we are by no means afraid of questions being asked of us about "better" things being on show than what has been familiar from ourselves, at least until now.

It is not new if I claim that this usually painful realisation is part of the reality of all people's lives, is it? But... it is possible to use this realisation wisely to discover that one is in the process of following in a master's footsteps.

So let us make a start, pursue new paths. Conversely, this is also true for anyone who subjects themselves to the critical gaze of those who will be coming to see what is on show in our school. In a word, we at the Keramikschule Landshut would like to keep our doors open for those good, creative spirits to alight who set standards so that they take a seat here, and we with them, permanently – just as it should be for a proper ceramics training college.

With the exhibition of the photographic

work of Peter Litvai, we can show the results of a remarkably fruitful contact between two art and craft orientated entities: ceramics and photography. The common denominator is obviously craft, which is present in both cases and forms the basis for a creative interpretation. Two masterly disciplines that meet here.

How near or how far is the lens from the object, the hand from the material, the individual from the object, the piece being worked on as a form from the image?

Do object, image and individual develop a kind of empathy in a direct form of contact, e.g. such as the medium clay through the touch of the hand or a tool? Which forms are created through the translation into another language, into the image orientation of photography? How honest is photography?

These questions were part of Peter Litvai's plans to photograph the school. The answers can be seen in his exhibition: photographic masterpieces have been created in this encounter.

Annette Ody is a master potter, has an M.A. in art history and is the principle of the Keramikfachschule Landshut





ILLUSTRATIONS

large photo - students during a break

bottom row l. to r.

- throwing
- making the body of a drum (drum workshop)
- glaze mix
- "I love Ton" (German for clay)
- working on a plaster mould
- in the plaster workshop
- bottle forms
- sketches

photos - Peter Litvai





“Ton in Ton” - An exhibition of photos by Peter Litvai

Thomas Stangier

With the exhibition “Ton in Ton” (a pun in German: “ton” means both “clay” and “tone”) by the photographer Peter Litvai from Landshut, the Keramikschule is Landshut is showing a “foreign” medium for the first time. There is good reason for this as the school is the subject of the exhibited documentation, so in a sense it is exhibiting itself. At first sight there is nothing remarkable about this, just one element in the public relations efforts of a institution advertising to get students. This is legitimate, and incidentally, the pictures on show are highly suited to this end.

Yet putting on this exhibition is anything but self-evident. Peter Litvai’s photographs were not taken as part of a commission, as

Annette Ody has already pointed out. The subject was freely chosen, and the motivation for compiling this documentation was the photographer’s own. This implies – and I believe this assumption is justified – that this is the work of someone who acts from conviction, who does not regard photography simply as his job but who sees it as a genuine means of expression. If we accept the truth of this assertion, the choice of subject gains particular significance: among the various schools in Landshut, the ceramics school has a special position, or at least, so it seems to me as an outsider. Of course the students at this vocational college receive sound instruction in the fundamentals of their craft, just as you would

expect from such a training institution. But parallel to this, the Keramikschule seems to have at its disposal a certain creative surplus from which a closeness to the world of creative artists around Landshut has arisen. A training in craft skills and the development of creativity, these two contrasting but by no means irreconcilable aims may have motivated Peter Litvai to make the Keramikschule Landshut the subject of a photographic documentation, at least I would like to suggest a much.

We are not of course being told a complete story in pictures that would give us excerpts of and insight into school life.

In her history of ceramics technical colleges in Germany, Sally Schöne published





ILLUSTRATIONS - top row l. to r.

- Examination piece "Hare" (3 images) - Gallery at the *Keramikschule* - table, masterpiece (detail)
 - floor-standing vase, masterpiece (detail) - lidded jar, masterpiece (detail)
 bottom row - workshop of the FS1 masterclass

such a series of photos from the school in Landshut which was taken almost exactly a century ago. The images present a vague idea of school life, with work in the laboratory and in the drawing class, preparing clay and developing glazes, sculpting and throwing: virtually unique documents of living educational history. They were taken at a time the Landshut "potters' school" had to prove it had a future – something that is still topical today.

In cooperation with the crafts schools in Nuremberg and Munich, the school was to train not simple potters but makers of ornamental ceramics.

In 1998, for its 125th anniversary, the school compiled a documentation of "teaching and the complete staff" of the school. In twenty images, the school's wide-ranging curriculum in its various classes and departments are illustrated.

Admittedly, the creative spark no more leaps across to the students than was the case in 1909.

In the photographs illustrated here, Peter Litvai has consciously resisted the temptation to simply depict school life. Neither the classrooms nor teaching situations are documented. None of the staff has managed to find his way into a picture, and only occasionally has the photographer looked "over the shoulder" of any of the students, or more precisely at their hands. In moments such as these, we see intense concentration, attentiveness, such as is necessary when throwing a vessel, before a masterly command of the technique at a later date again liberates the hands. Or we

observe critical gaze, detached judgement, to which the piece that is being created is subjected by the maker. The most demanding task the school has to set is perhaps to train one's own judgement in terms of art or craft criteria.

But Peter Litvai's manner of approaching the school is largely indirect, an indulgent and insistent gaze, looking at details yet not afraid of the triviality of every day life – a pair of abandoned shoes or the dreariness of a school corridor.

The exhibits can be roughly divided into two groups: firstly there are snapshots of an almost still life quality, random compositions that seem to echo the daily life of the school: the results of a test firing in which temperature is determined comparatively with the assistance of Seger and Orton cones, a view of the moulds in the plaster workshop, a course everyone has to take at the *Keramikschule*, or simply the detritus of the workshops that documents the permanent struggle with the medium and at the same time demonstrates its unique plasticity. Only the initiated are aware of the situational context, their prior knowledge interprets the image. For the outsider, on the other hand, the focus is on atmosphere, which can perhaps give an impression of the balance between inspiration and perspiration, as the well-known saying goes. But even if the image is not fully understood, it has a subliminal effect that is stronger than any abstract curriculum.

Along side still lifes like these, which may perhaps be understood as a forensic search for the commonplace yet characteris-

tic, there is a large coherent group of close-ups, which capture the viewer's attention most readily. Part of this is the enigmatic game with architectural details, right in the entrance, and the photographic analysis of the students' examination pieces from the previous year. In Peter Litvai's photos, the tactile and graphic qualities of the surfaces gain an intrinsic value, which makes us curious to see the whole, but which does not need the whole: it can rely on the strength of the chosen detail. But the strength of the pictures of hares, for instance, does not come from the myopic detail, which interprets the specific quality of the individual piece of work, but rather more from the concept of space, a sounding out of the spatial and sculptural. Playing games with space in this manner, with extreme close-ups and sudden changes of perspective as demonstrated most clearly in the two three-part series of hares, is perhaps the most characteristic feature of this exhibition of Peter Litvai's photographs, which perhaps gives an impression of how a lump of clay can be turned into a vessel or a sculpture. It was the best thing that could have happened to the *Keramikschule*.

Thomas Stangier (M. A.) Landshut municipal museum

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