

CREATING

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As for myself, I experience a sort of terror when, at the moment of setting to work and finding myself before the infinitude of possibilities that present themselves, I have the feeling that everything is permissible to me. If everything is permissible... then any effort is inconceivable, and I cannot use anything as a basis, and consequently every undertaking becomes futile... What delivers me from the anguish into which an unrestricted freedom plunges me is the fact that I am always able to turn to the concrete things that are here in question. I have no use for a theoretic freedom. Let me have something finite, definite—matter that can lend itself to my operation only insofar as it is commensurate with my possibilities. And such matter presents itself to me together with its limitations. I must in turn impose mine upon it. So here we are...in the realm of necessity.

— Igor Stravinsky

What have I gotten myself into, I'm thinking as I contemplate this essay. The flattering idea that I *could* write about creating has turned to dread at the presumption and abstractness of the task. Like most artists, I have a collection of eloquent quotes by others, and I'm tempted just to pack this survival kit and hand it around. Besides, I'm a potter, and thus inclined to focus on what you might call the process and product end of things. My mind almost immediately asks, creating what? How? With what? It feels more manageable—more seemly, perhaps—to speak of *making*, a tangible activity, than of the generative spark behind it. Process is concrete, as Stravinsky says—a path. To start down a path is to forgo, at least for the moment, all other paths, and to bend one's attention to what is ahead, around, and underfoot.

Clay is a generous medium: abundant, soft, and endlessly malleable. Most of us who work in clay had, at some early point, a tactile epiphany—an experience in which we literally put our hands on possibility and were pulled in, pulled along, by the qualities of the material. The power of that encounter—its promise and truth—sustained us through the long lessons in clay’s other truth: that doing something *with* this wonderful stuff requires skill, attention, and respect for its nature. How hard, how soft, how high, how hot: we learn and re-learn these things, pushing our ideas up against the physical facts of the clay and having it push back—or slump away. When, out of laziness or impatience, we try to suspend those facts or sneak past them, we get reminders, little refresher courses, on gravity, time, or the mysteries of the eutectic. It seems, paradoxically, to take accepting certain limitations to get to that free and creative place promised by the unformed clay. Ten thousand years of ceramic history—of transcendent objects made of the available clays with the available technologies—attest to this, to the creative use of limitations.

These limitations are tied to structure—to the bedrock, you might say, of physical reality. Both clay’s strengths and its frailties come out of its chemical and mineral structures: its flat particles holding water between them, sliding along each other in one dimension but clinging, not crumbling, when squeezed. Some wonderful and suggestive scientific research has recently put these aspects of clay, so intimately known to people who handle it daily, in a new light. In searching for

the origins of life—of complex, energy-transmitting structures—some scientists have begun to look at clay as a possible link between inorganic and organic chemistry. Clay’s crystalline structure, unlike that of most minerals, has what one scientist called “microdomains of disorder”, where catalysis, *i.e.* change, can occur. Its enormous surface area and the slight irregularities in its latticework allow for reactions, replacements, and the storage of information. Anyone who works with clay would recognize what these scientists have to say about its nature. A structure that is not too structured, that allows for disorder, change, energy in and out, would seem to be the ideal metaphor and vehicle for creative activity.

Form languages are another kind of structure. Furniture-making has one, architecture too. Like verbal languages, they are a groove down which our ideas flow, and like languages, the vocabulary may change over time without altering the basic elements that define them. This framework—this set of givens and boundaries—holds our thinking and our making when we are in the studio. The history of ceramics shows us that pots can take an astonishing number of forms—but not an infinite number. Not everything can be a pot, except perhaps metaphorically, and not every idea can be expressed as a pot. Pottery form is like a boxing ring: its ropes are stretchy and there’s ample room to move around, but fundamentally you are either inside the ring or outside it, and if making pottery is to mean anything, we have to respect, and be engaged by, that fact.

I’m not talking here about rules and prescriptions, but about the combination of exhilaration and determination that comes from having chosen one’s line of inquiry and one’s tools well. Annie Dillard, quoting Paul Klee, says “You adapt yourself to the contents of the paintbox”, and therein lies a lifetime’s worth of work. Or maybe not. Much as I need, believe in, and am interested in limits, I know they can immobilize and stifle as well as energize and focus. One of the cyclical rhythms of the artist’s life concerns the changing relationship with the limits imposed, internally or externally, upon the work. When I first began working as a potter, function provided a set of parameters that was thrilling to me. Moving around inside those parameters, examining my own ideas about them, and pushing against them kept me busy for many years. Then somehow it went slack on me. I began to feel constrained and resentful, aware that I had some ideas that couldn’t be explored in this language. My work left utility behind, and finally seemed to want to abandon pottery itself; my commitment to that form-language seemed arbitrary and habit-bound, and the work showed it. When I finally realized this and let the work go where it was pulling, it became sculpture. Connected to the pots, certainly, because the core sensibility at work was the same, but conversing with a different history, in a slightly different language, and engaged with different limitations.

When I had pursued this direction for awhile, a strange thing happened: I began to understand more clearly and

appreciate more deeply, the particular language of pottery. I saw the use of boundaries, and got interested again in what pots are, how they are different from sculpture, and what I might do with that. I climbed back into the ring, newly energized by the space inside it.

This is how it is in the studio, or wherever we live out our creative lives: like one of those complicated eighteenth-century dances where the partners circle and shift positions, and then come back together. One of the partners is possibility, that expansive energy we are always trying to tap. It pulls us along to unexpected places, whether what preoccupies us is grandly world-altering or something more private. The other partner is limitation—the forces, internal and external, pressing in on us. For each of us, there are boundaries to be probed, unthinkable steps to be imagined then taken, public and private humiliations to be faced. Creating, we know, is about defying those boundaries, about freedom, risk, and “venturing outside the box”. But first, we build the box.

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Notes:

Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*. Harvard University Press, 1942

James Gleick, “Quiet Clay is Revealed as Vibrant and Primal”, *New York Times*, May 5, 1987

Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, Harper and Row, 1989