

By Nicolas Trembley

It began by chance. A few years ago, everyone was talking about eBay as a huge marketplace where you could get a good deal. It had become a common topic of conversation, regardless of your social class or personality. Anyone could participate by sharing how they had bought an out-of-print art catalogue, a "vintage" item now in style, a film you couldn't find anywhere, or a piece of designer furniture. It didn't take me long to figure out that the buying process - based on a real-time auction whose winner was the highest bidder at a designated moment (You Are the Winner!) - was as important as the object itself, the price of which was often a modest sum. It was a time when contemporary art auctions were creating a frenzy of speculation. Unknown buyers flocked to them, becoming collectors thanks only to their financial means. The parallel between eBay and the large auction houses seemed logical to me: I didn't have the financial means, but I too wanted to be "in on it."

The first time I visited the site and perused the different categories of "collectibles," I discovered an astonishing picture of a rather ugly vase made in Germany in the 1970s. Like Proust's famous madeleine, the object took me back to my childhood in Switzerland and gave me a sense of déjà-vu. I was looking at something cultural that was both personal and collective, an identity marker. I registered and, following a brief moment of suspense, won the auction and acquired the object for less than 10 Euros. I didn't need a vase; I just wanted to play. Soon thereafter, I began receiving information about items related to my first purchase from the search engine. I began to look at these objects not as vases but as sculptures, as art objects. That is, I looked at them from an artistic, rather than a functional point of view. A total novice in the field of "Porzellan und Keramik," I began to do research on the production of objects "Made in West Germany" between the 1950s and the 1980s. I discovered that there was not much left from that period, since most of the manufacturers had gone out of business and their files had disappeared along with them. Their history had yet to be written.

Although the manufacture of these objects was related to the utopian revolutions of the post-War period - revolutions that were social and economic, as well as formal and artistic, in nature -, they have never been examined or evaluated from a historical point of view. This is probably for two reasons. First, these objects, the product of the decorative style popular at the time, did not satisfy contemporary taste. Second, these vases were mass-produced knickknacks, cheap and anonymous consumer products destined to wind up in the basement or the garbage.

But there are vases, and then there are vases. If some of them were inconsequential, others were quite simply extraordinary and clearly more innovative beyond the scope of design. Forty years of economic growth allowed the authors of these objects to benefit from an unprecedented freedom to create. As heirs to the historic porcelain, they reinvented the future of a German society in the process of reconstruction after the Nazi period. These designers knew how to capture the forms of the times: the Cubism of Braque and the Op Art of Vasarely. The designs were geometric, borrowing fluid lines and primary colors from Verner Panton and futuristic forms from science fiction and its UFOs. The "soft" dissent of the Hippies was formalized in biomorphic vases reminiscent of Antti Lovag's psychedelic architecture and more prosaic wool and macramé handicrafts.

G A L E R I E G I S E L A C A P I T A I N

In their decorative cosmogony, with its tree bark, mushrooms, crystals, fossils and stones, and sea beds (shells and corals), these vases evidence the spiritual search of the times and the attempts to return to nature. Some designers reflect Bauhaus modernist architectural experiments, creating brutalist objects covered with rough plaster.

It is, however, indisputably the famous glaze today known as "Fat Lava" that best characterizes the production of this period. This glaze was made from several coats of enamel and chemical components that reacted differently depending on how the article was baked, producing surfaces suggestive of lava and the craters it forms. Beginning in this period, German ceramics took an original path in the history of decorative forms to attain the visual exaggerations and unique bulges characteristic of this style.

Though the idea of a collection as such never crossed my mind, the act of collecting vases ultimately yielded a good paradigm for constructing one. Still, I had to make a selection in choosing from this vast sea of production that represented more than sixty studios. At first, I was guided only by my subjectivity, by questions of taste and an instinctive attraction to one form over another on the basis of their references to other creative fields. It quickly became evident that there was a coherent whole in the making. I would reconstruct families of objects where the ugly could become beautiful and the pariah the prince. There were different sizes and variations in volume for each form, and variations in color for each size. Throughout the project, I had to limit the number of choices, as in a puzzle. There were alternating phases of exaltation, disappointment and even disgust, related to the acquisition or loss of a rare piece. Regardless of how modest this series of vases is, I have never stopped building and un-building it; I am constantly discovering new combinations and paths. The pieces have taught me about the chemical composition of enamel, about interior decoration and even about the emancipation of the German housewife.

Four years ago, when I started this collection, the Air de Paris Gallery asked me to participate in its Domino project in which critics and artists proposed one work in response to another. I had chosen to present a ball vase by Kerafina (Royal KPM) which, through the use of format and position in the exhibition space, would function like a sculpture. There was an immediate and positive reaction, and everyone wanted to know who had made it. This is how reevaluation begins in the visual arts. And that is what happened here. When the Centre d'Édition Contemporaine invited me in 2010 to design an exhibit, it was only natural that I proposed my collection of multiple variations, especially at a time when more and more artists were rediscovering this medium. Perhaps ceramics embodies nostalgia for a physical relationship to the work, a materiality that forms the last rampart against virtual representation.

Let's take another look at this body of decorative and so-called ordinary objects, heirs to the supermarkets of the 1970s, to see if their move to the exhibition space will find them a place in contemporary art.