

## Thomas Wagner

### Time Suspended:

### Eleven Observations on One Thousand One Hundred and Eleven Bowls by Young-Jae Lee

#### One

Bowls, bowls, many, many bowls. An archive? A field? A universe? Bowls everywhere. Simple bowls. Vast in their great variety. Bewildering and intoxicating. A garden of similarity and difference. Nothing but bowls, and yet, no two are alike. These vessels all belong to the category *bowl*, yet, they also exceed this category through the tremendous wealth of their variation. Rigor and richness are combined. Bowls, bowls, different bowls, over and over again. Shallow discs resting on cylindrical foot rings that turn inward only at the outermost rim—as if suddenly startled by their openness. Gentle, pale-pastel goblets balancing timidly on small rings. Broad cones, which nevertheless open reluctantly in their irregularity, seeming to hover above slightly conical bases. Bulbous cups that hide their interior only to offer it after all in a jaunty swing of the lip. Bowls that expand and stretch their clay skin as though wanting to breathe in and draw in everything around them in a single breath.

Delicate goblets of velvety gray; rustic freckled goblets next to fragrant glacier-colored ones. Some visibly patterned by the fire's vigor, others unblemished like rare gemstones. Bowls that conclude harmoniously in their rims, as if, perhaps, capable of collecting the space around them, and bowls that widen only in counter-sweep. Bowls that briskly conquer their volume in the steep incline of their sides, and modest bowls that build volume steadily and evenly. One bowl after the other, placed on the floor. A sea of bowls, a field of goblets, a ring of particles around an empty center, a small galaxy filled with shining vessels.

#### Two

The throwing of clay vessels is the controlled centrifugal acceleration of matter with a view to lending it form. What is needed: a lump of clay, two strong and deft hands, a potter's wheel, some water, glaze, a kiln, imagination, know-how—and time. Nevertheless, a single bowl or vase does not take shape unconditionally. It is not suddenly there, but rather seems to grow from the shapeless matter through the actions of pulling and stretching. Yet, even when this process appears to have succeeded, there is still the uncertainty of firing. As the procedure is not an automated industrial one—with the goal of producing copies that are as identical as possible—how could one thousand one hundred and eleven bowls be made without a conception of all subsequent bowls and without a memory of all preceding ones? Isn't time also shaped when space is released from the unformed matter? Isn't intuitive creation governed as

much by intrinsic as it is by extrinsic purpose? Do both then go into the shape of the bowl? Space and time? A slow throwing speed leads to a different form than a fast one. In the case of the artist, times of hard, determined work exist alongside those of hesitation and doubt. Or a quiet perfecting of the oft tried and tested gives way to the exuberance of trying and testing. This excludes the no less crucial time that fired ceramic ware needs to cool. Time is no more clocked than space and volume are predetermined.

But what sort of time is pot-throwing time? Throwing the same vessel type a thousand times results in a paradoxical situation: The potter thinks both forward and backward, over and over again. Memory and imagination counterbalance one another. If the memory of the already thrown pots were to prevail, restraint and the threat of repetition would result. Left to imagination and invention, the series would burst open, the unity of the whole would be jeopardized. Time can only be suspended when anticipation and back-referencing are in balance. Only then can a new bowl be made that contains all past and future bowls without this obstructing the present of creating.

### Three

Young-Jae Lee's bowls are not just containers that open toward the space around them, that circumscribe and retain a volume in an individual form. They also generate and embody a space-time of sorts. It could almost be said: production time, making time, is given a container in which the space that the bowl encloses is inseparably bound to the time of its production. Spatial-container and temporal-container cannot be separated. It is this unity—that has taken form—of space-time, made up of complex individual moments, and which has an impact on reception.

### Four

Aristotelian tradition held that all laws governing the universe could be worked out by pure thought: It was not necessary to check by observation.<sup>1</sup> Newton—like Aristotle—still believed in absolute time. If such a thing existed then the interval of time between two events could be unambiguously ascertained and this time would be the same whoever measured it—provided they used a good clock. Einstein's theory of relativity put an end to the notion of absolute time. Since then, physicists and cosmologists work from the assumption that each observer has his own time measurement, his own clock, as it were. Even the same clocks do not necessarily agree when they are used by different observers. When a body moves or a force acts on it, the curvature of space and time is affected. Nothing that occurs in the universe occurs independent of space and time. And everything that occurs has an effect on space and time.

## Five

The intent here is by no means to claim that Young-Jae Lee's bowls might illustrate specific aspects of physics or describe a cosmological model. Yet, just as time became, on the basis of Einstein's theory of relativity, a personal, relative concept dependent on the observer measuring it, each pot-throwing-time gives rise to a separate unmistakable bowl. To put it in the language of physics: Each bowl describes a particular curvature of space-time. This becomes visible, however, only when a sufficiently large number of bowls are produced and when these bowls are presented simultaneously. It is therefore more than a demonstration of industry and ambition when instead of exhibiting a small group of bowls, Young-Jae Lee presents one thousand one hundred and eleven of them.

## Six

The way Young-Jae Lee throws pots is beyond words. It is an intellectual exercise in which repetition surpassing all monotony reaches a dimension of quiet and concentration all its own. Even the concept of meditation, which seems easily applicable to the individualized process of production, acquires a cosmogonic dimension here. It is not in the trivial way of creating something, but in a structural equivalence—hard to see and hard to grasp—between the expansion of the universe and the expansion of clay to make a pot. In a single flash of inspiration, different moments of duration are contracted into a unity. A double ritual of time is performed: production time is joined by reception time; in museums, the reception of viewing; in everyday life, the reception of use—whereby production and reception possess something unobtrusively ceremonial. Paul Valéry noted in 1902 in his *Cahiers* that time has to be understood the way space has been understood.<sup>2</sup> Space as exterior distance would then correspond to time as interior distance.<sup>3</sup> Matter has its own memory.

## Seven

All the bowls stand on the floor. They rest on a foot and for this very reason do not require a pedestal. Nor do they, however, stand simply in front of us. From the outside, we see a body, a thick enclosure describing a volume. At the same time, however, we look inside at what is enclosed. Our gaze is thus never just outside the bowl but is also always inside it. Interior and exterior cannot be separated. A bowl—is it not two hands pressed together filled with water? A simple gesture of holding and containing?

## Eight

In "On the Preeminent Dignity of the Arts of Fire" Paul Valéry writes: "In every created work there is a union of desire, idea, action, and material."<sup>4</sup> As far as firing is concerned, Valéry states that all the craftsman's vigilance, all the foresight learned

from experience, from his knowledge of the properties of heat, its critical stages, and its reaction of materials, “still leaves immense scope for the noble element of uncertainty.”<sup>5</sup> But precisely this element of uncertainty, of its immense scope, which is never foreseeable and never predictable and is therefore noble, is a double uncertainty: one of form and thus, space, and one of “affective state” (Befindlichkeit), or the constellation of circumstances, hence, one of time. When one speaks of the wealth of variation of the more than a thousand vases, each one being different, each one being itself and, at the same time, part of an open series of types, one must not overlook the moment of time that governs the process of production. A time that cannot be separated from the production of space and therefore can be called space-time.

Valéry continues: “Dare I confess that often enough an *objet d’art* which has passed through the fire seems to me to resume a whole planetary history? They remind me that a habitable Earth, a Mars, are after all, nothing but cooled bodies, on which the innumerable highly restricted, highly composite conditions of life have happened, in a highly improbable manner, to come together.”<sup>6</sup>

## Nine

Doesn’t this confession indirectly bring Valéry’s enthusiasm for the arts created by fire closer to the question of the idiosyncratic temporality (Temporalität) of throwing many pots? Might it be part of the particular temporality (Zeitlichkeit) of throwing pots to put up with precisely this improbability of success? Is the truly meditative element of the throwing of over a thousand bowls part of this? Do the indeterminate and the predictable coincide in the execution of what is only seemingly the ever-same? Valéry says: “The planets, it may be, are nothing but objects serving some purpose which the living unknowingly promote or interfere with. The arts of fire might thus be the most venerable of all, deriving directly as they do from the transcendent operations of some demiurge.”<sup>7</sup>

## Ten

In *A Brief History of Time* Stephen W. Hawking describes the expansion of an event in time with the help of a stone that is thrown in water. If one thinks of a three-dimensional model consisting of the two-dimensional surface of a pond and the one dimension of time, “the expanding circle of ripples will mark out a cone whose tip is at the place and time at which the stone hit the water. Similarly, the light spreading out from an event forms a three-dimensional cone in the four-dimensional space-time. This cone is called the future light cone of the event. In the same way we can draw another cone, called the past light cone, which is the set of events from which a pulse of light is able to reach the given event.”<sup>8</sup> Everything that is inside the future light cone can be influenced by the event; everything outside of it cannot be, because nothing is faster than light, in the same way the scope of the past light cone circumscribes everything that can influence the event.

The rim is critical for the successful outcome of a clay bowl. This is where the upward aspiration of the contour reaches completion and the body comes to an end. Sometimes the rim provides a thin, razor-sharp conclusion to the volume; sometimes the perimeter appears to swing gently out. Sometimes the backward swing turns inward again to invite drinking; sometimes the rim itself forms a lip by turning the inside out; sometimes space-time, captured in a bowl, seems to escape like fog slipping over the rim; sometimes it is held in a balance of inside and outside at a thin border. But the rim is always the crucial place. A border of space and time. A seam; an event-seam.

## Eleven

A universe of bowls. A field of space-times. One thousand one hundred and eleven bowls help explain the time of pot-throwing.

## Notes

- 1 See Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York, 1990), p. 15.
- 2 Paul Valéry, *Cahiers/Notebooks*, ed. in chief, Brian Stimpson; associate eds. Paul Gifford, Robert Pickering; trans. Paul Gifford, et al., based on the French *Cahiers* edited by Judith Robinson-Valéry (New York, 2000–).
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Paul Valéry, “On the Preeminent Dignity of the Arts of Fire,” in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 12: *Degas. Manet. Morisot*, trans. D. Paul. (London, 1957–), p. 169.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.172.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 See note 1, p. 25.

In: *Young-Jae Lee: 1111 Schalen*. Edited by Reinhold Baumstark. Exh. cat. for the exhibition *Young-Jae Lee: 1111 Schalen*, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006.