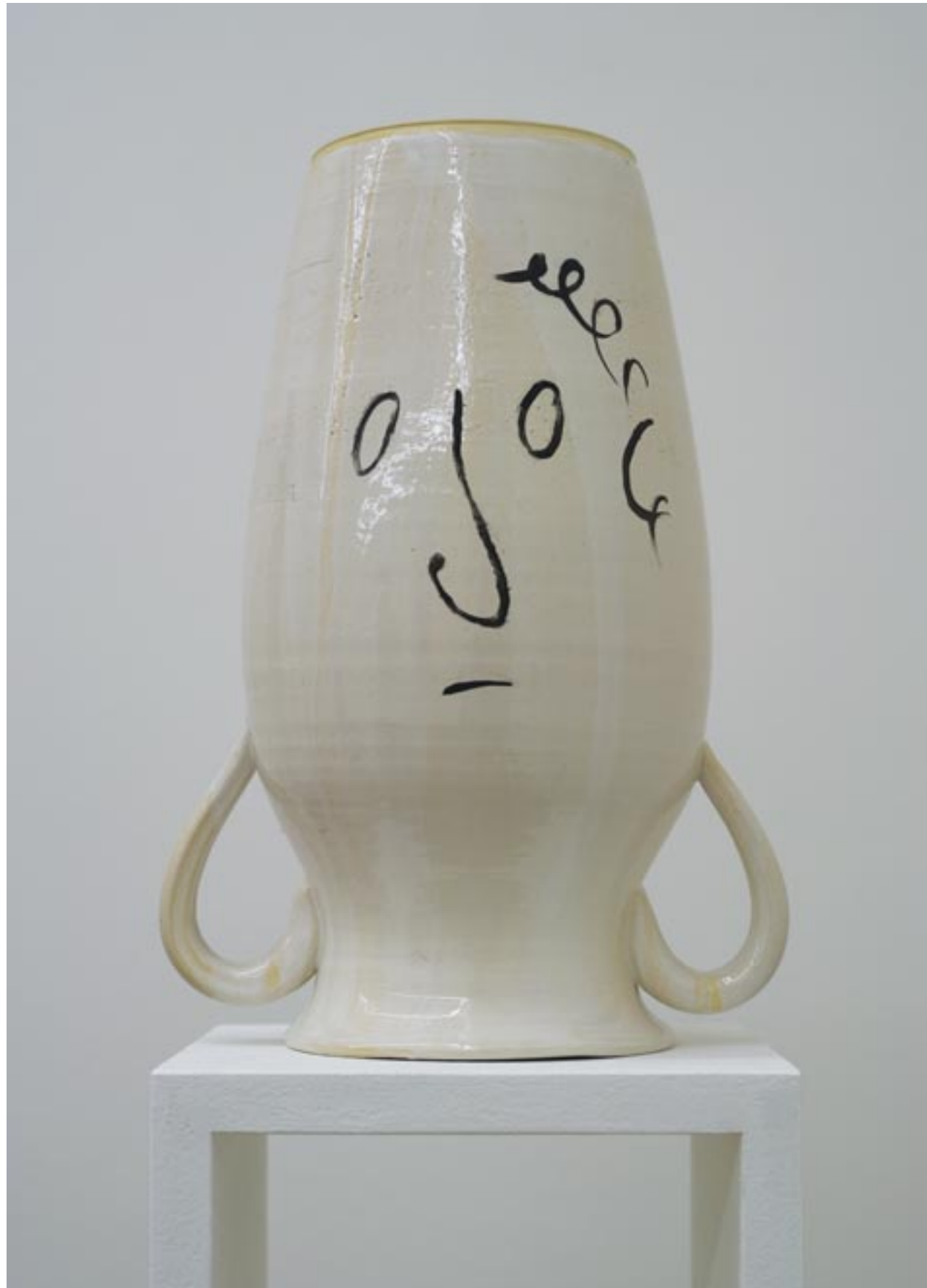


## Judith Hopf Faces

BY CECILIA CANZIANI

In a book by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben titled *Idea della Prosa*, which collects a series of short essays built as dialectical images, the face is a recurring term that stands for language, and, at the same time, for silence. The face is the thread that I followed to explore Judith Hopf's work.

The first time I encountered her work was through her piece *Trying to Build a Mask*, on the last weekend of dOCUMENTA in September of 2013. A mask is generally understood as the opposite of a face, an object that hides the features of the person wearing it, conferring another – fixed – expression that emphasizes one aspect by canceling all other possible ones. Yet, the features of these heads by Judith Hopf preserved an individual quality. The pallid, serene surface of these masks makes me think of the face as it is interpreted by Agamben: a place of withdrawal and rest, yet one of dialogue and encounter, almost a figure of the relationship between the artwork and the spectator.



Erschöpfte Vase, 2010, pottery and lacquer, 35 x 12 cm

**Fig. 01**

Each *Mask*, part of a series yet individually formed, is realized using discarded packaging originally protecting common digital devices, on which the artist intervenes by way of cutting, modeling, and shaping. Yet the resulting face is not final, since this, which we could call an arguable original, is then scanned; it is the 3D-print that we regard as the (debatable) original.

Judith Hopf's sculptures and films – and I am tempted to include her immaterial works too – all have this quality in common: they seem so carelessly and easily realized, and yet are, rather, carefully crafted, the results of long processes and preparation. At first glance it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern whether *Trying to Build a Mask* is a modified ready-made, or a made object, which it in fact is. Then, a closer look into the passages that this particular work undergoes highlights the fact that these masks belong to the realm of sculpture. They are produced *per via di levare e per via di porre*, by cutting and molding, which are the two approaches that Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *De statua* stigmatized as medium-specific. These white, solid, and concrete surfaces stand between an ethnographic quotation and an evocation of Brâncuși's pristine and compact volumes, and the subject of the work indeed evokes the moment of rupture from which modern sculpture stems.



Erschöpfte Vase, 2010, pottery and lacquer, 31 x 15 cm

**Fig. 02**

Rodin started his apprenticeship in a pottery workshop, from which he borrowed the idea of modularity, which he then applied to sculpture: contemporary sculpture stems from this intersection between consumption and originality. Seriality stands as a privileged term bringing to light the relationship between art and craft, and the role of author versus artisan, through which we still continue to think sculpture today. The *Masks*, formed from discarded serially produced shapes, bring to the forefront the notion of the relationship between copy and original (and by extension of originality and seriality) – an issue that sculpture has traditionally addressed since its beginning. In *Trying to Build a Mask*, as well as in other series such as the *Schafherde*, the artist employs industrially made objects – the packaging of electronic devices or the standard moving box for example. Instead, in the case of *Erschöpfte Vasen* (2009) the vases are not exactly common – as Judith alerted me – as each of them is custom made and produced after ancient Greek and Roman prototypes. So what at a first glance looks an archetypical form of the vase, once considered more carefully reveals itself to be modeled after an *oinochoe*, a *hydria*, a *pelike*, a *dinos*, a *psykter*, a *skyphos* or a *kantharos* (the memories of a course on Archeology taken almost twenty years ago slowly resurface!). Typically, each of such vases belongs to a family and its shape was developed according to a specific use. There were vases to hold liquids and vases to pour it, vases for ointments, vases for liquids or for wheat, and which constitute a very precise taxonomy. The *Erschöpfte Vasen* have been produced by an artisan: while following the artist's indication based on the originals, the craftsman has inevitably translated into its own style, thus complicating the notion of reproduction through interpretation. Lacquered in off white, and put upside down, the vases are painted with faces based on illustrator Saul Steinberg's drawings, and rest on specially made high and hollow – just as the vases – plinths. As in *Trying to Build a Mask*, in *Erschöpfte Vasen*, the way in which the works are displayed, together with the proportions of the plinth, facilitate a physical relation between the spectator and the object. In the apprehension of sculpture, of all arts, the body is assumed as measure, these thin and tall forms, surmounted by heads – or faces – seem to inhabit the exhibition space as if they were pallid members of the public.

But at the same time the plinth is there to remind us that no matter what our impression is, we are still in the presence of artworks, and of a very codified modernist exhibition complex, which is critically addressed while been mocked.



Erschöpfte Vase, 2010, pottery and lacquer, 20 x 31 cm  
All works Courtesy the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan

**Fig. 03**

The series *Trying to Build a Mask* stemmed of the discovery of a series of masks made by the girls of a reformatory in the area of Kassel fifty years ago: exhibited in the context of an art institution, this series claims the contiguity between education and control, the museum and the prison. The objects on show make use of the display in order to seduce us, inviting us in at first, making us alert to the boundaries and discourses that the exhibition context interprets and addresses.

*Schafherde* is a flock of concrete sheeps, made by casting in concrete through a laborious process, a standard moving box. Standing in precarious balance on thin metal rods, they are drawn on one side a stylized face.

As with all of Judith Hopf's pieces, this work seem to offer two sides: a mockery of the way in which an exhibition space is inhabited, on the one side – when we are face to face with the herd of animals; a minimalist derived installation, if we consider the pieces from another point of view. In both cases, what is in full light is the dynamic between space and object, context and work. The three bodies of work considered for this *Show and Tell* address in different ways the notion of production, originality and authorship which, far from having been resolved in the years of the discursive turn, come back with full force in times of global (art) market.

**NOTE:**

This text departs from the first of a series of Papers commissioned by PRAXES Center for Contemporary Art, in the frame of a cycle of exhibitions dedicated to Judith Hopf.