

## Opening Speech: *Murmuri*

by Sofie Marhaug

Humans have been making ceramic bowls for thousands of years. They have been found in the ruins and excavations of ancient China, Greece and Crete, as well as in some Native American cultures—and we even find traces of ceramic bowls from the old Mesopotamian empire. This particular way of shaping and changing the world around us, and of interacting with nature, seems to be widespread across the world from the very beginning of what might be defined as human culture or civilization.

Pottery is thus strongly connected to human labor, to what the young Karl Marx would claim defines humans as human animals: labor is our way of interacting with and shaping the natural world that surrounds us, whether this results in large-scale industry products, handcraft or even fine art. Working with and through nature is fundamental for understanding the human condition. Marx famously wrote that “[m]an *lives* on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.”

Yet humans have been estranged or alienated from nature in general and therefore also from themselves, through various modes of production, and increasingly so through the capitalist mode of production, the times in which we are living.

When he introduces the notion of commodity fetishism in *Capital*, Marx rhetorically asks *what would a table say if a table could speak?* The answer is of course that a commodity does not have human powers—the table cannot speak—but if it hypothetically could speak, it would tell that it is made out of human labor, and that the table itself possesses neither human nor magical powers.

If we dwell on this rhetorical question, or try to expand on it, several questions arise, in particular when looking at all the handmade pottery covering the walls of this gallery. What would the pottery say if it had a voice? If a wall possessed human speech, what would the wall tell us? Or, in the spirit of Marx, if human labor could speak, would we be able to grasp the meaning of its words? Would these words sound different from the voice of a single human being? Can a collective speak as one, with one voice?

Perhaps the title of Eve Ariza’s piece could suggest a possible answer: *Murmuri*. Maybe the sum of the many would sound more like a whisper or murmur, merging into a

collective oneness. Each ceramic bowl is handmade and unique, each has its own structure, color and, at its bottom, its own void reminiscent of a human mouth. But put together, we can see how they form a greater pattern, changing from one side of the room to the other, in a rhythmic continuation and variation over the same material—stretched out like a human pottery map. Together they also affect the sound in the room: how our voices reverberate and how we, as an audience, are able to listen to the art work itself as well as to each other.

In Norwegian, as well as in French, the word *murmur* sounds like a repetition of the word *mur*, a *brick wall* in English. The etymological meaning of the word *mur* stems from Latin, *mūrus*, meaning “to strengthen.” In this sense, *Murmuri* can be understood not only as a sound, but also as a wall of sound, as a strengthening of both disparity and unity.

We are living in a time in which capitalist production, on the one hand, *economically*, reinforces standardization and oneness: all must conform to the same market laws, where profit seems to be valued over human needs and over the sustainability of nature. On the other hand, we seem to experience a *political* production of differentiation, where right wing populists and extremists worship some imagined, ideal identity, that demands special protection, that needs—metaphorically and physically—to be safeguarded by walls, in order to separate certain human beings from others.

Yet I think it is still possible to believe in, and work towards, a counter-position: one of economic equality, which still values the differences between us: we can listen to each other’s differences, forming another type of unity, a murmur, that demands us to listen especially carefully to one another.