

Never a “beauty-supporting glimmer”!

Decoration, ornamentation and wallpaper as ambient image

Alberti's familiar quotation concerning ornamentation has reinforced a hierarchy among art forms since renaissance, putting free beauty on its own terms first and applied use last, thereby systematically depreciating decoration as secondary. Historians have since adopted this traditional view and regard the renouncement of ornamentation as a purification of form with an entitlement to universal validity. It has been shown, however, that ornamentation of all things has contributed to giving birth to modernist abstraction and its functionalism. In the 19th century already, artistic interest in ornamentation and décor as an individual technique separate from industrial mass production was reinforced, experiencing a heyday in art nouveau's modern ornamentation. During the following decades, decoration experienced a re-evaluation. This can be seen for instance in the histories of the Deutscher Werkbund (German Work Federation), the social utopian movement of the Russian constructivists, the artist/engineers of the Bauhaus or finally in the socio-cultural discussion of popular culture. The contemporary debate on art and design further intensifies the argument. Decoration no longer appears detached from the object but as inevitably linked to its environment. The social system of the middle-class de-/regulates its selfimage and normative values with the symbols of everyday life, which it successfully promotes at the same time: ornamentation's sphere of activity reaches from the decorative piece of façade to the punk's aggressive needle-pierced ear, and was considered in a often cited quote as a crime (Adolf Loos) disturbing pure form.

The much-maligned wallpaper, out of all things that usually are at the forefront of what is considered marginal and excluded in art, rarely finds itself at the centre of an argument of space, place and historical form. Wallpaper – discoveries from pattern books, relicts from abandoned flats, discarded rolls or donated material and acquisitions form the basis of Patricia Lambertus's collages. She assembles leftover wallpaper on walls into new images. The works are mostly of short duration as they are often destroyed when the rooms are used for other exhibitions or events. Some of her collages are traditional images and are developed behind acrylic glass in combination with drawings. The inexpensive material allows Lambertus to realise large-scale projects. For instance, one work she realised with several assistants on a

platform of a station concourse in Bremen measures 94 metres in length. The platform itself is an unusual sight, as it has collapsed and is inaccessible. After the disused concourse had been used for cultural events and as artists' studios for years, one of the platforms was flooded for an elaborate theatre production. One side of its brick-made centre bar could not withstand the pressure of the standing water and burst that night. This resulted in a tidal wave of a volume of almost 1000 cubic metres that brought large-scale destruction to the underlying rooms in the basement. Luckily, no one was injured. The title "Wasserwogenband" ("Band of Waves") alludes to that backstory and is highlighted again by Lambertus's use of the "running wave" pattern that has been popular since antiquity. She laconically dresses the burst platform with wallpaper leftovers and thus connects the ornament to the place without evaluating the events. The context extends her formal, aesthetic intervention into an ambient image open to many potential interpretations: embellishment, subversion, memento, quotation, fragment, cultural politics are possible ones.

But first and foremost, Lambertus's collage establishes a connection to the presentation's location. This basic idea to establish connections between public and private spaces through art is a central theme of her work. The stories behind the wallpaper are not always as dramatic as the one in the Bremen station concourse but "Sophie's Garten" ("Sophie's Garden") also opens up new areas of association through artistic interventions into previously private worlds. Using leftover wallpaper, she creates an idyllic garden installation in the abandoned 4 room allotment of a dilapidated 1970s social housing high-rise in Bremen Tenever. The ornate, exaggeratedly happy collage world seeks to drown out the drabness of the social fringes by giving each room a picturesque title (Wintergarten (Conservatory), Fontäne (Fountain), Schwanenteich (Swan Pond)) while in an indirect way not concealing its gloom. For the pieced-together wallpaper- leftovers do not create an imaginary, unified spatial impression. The collage does not even beautify the place and thus runs contrary to the function of the beautiful form of wall decoration in countless living rooms. In the parlour, the motif wallpaper is supposed to offer sights of a world put into images and, as decoration, create a harmonious mood with a personal touch. Lambertus's image conception utilises a modernistic technique instead of this. With fragments, cuts and rips, she roots out a gap in reality that is not easy to depict. There is nothing to recognising the place's inhospitality. To confront it with

daydreams in order to allow a different view on reality is consistent with the universal reality of life that cannot solely be found in satellite towns. The ambient image connects the traces of social hardship, clad in the miserable dress of wallpaper collage, with the small escapes from everyday life and provides an Ambivalent look on brutalist architecture of the 1970s.

Initially, during the Middle Ages the luxury of covering cold walls with materials could only be afforded by the clergy and aristocracy. Together with the art of rug- and cloth-making, tapestry was introduced from Asia to Central Europe. In place of walls, tapestry and rugs, leathern wallpaper or elaborate handprinted paper now gave courtly appearances a luxurious setting. Later, while the revolutionary French were hanging and guillotining their nobility, the Alsatian Jean Zuber worked arduously but successfully on the rationalisation of wallpaper production. From 1790 on, he developed a wood pattern printing technique for panoramic wallpaper that deeply impressed even Bourbon King Louis XVIII who was restored to power 25 years later and that shortly afterwards came to use in the development of mass production with continuous paper rolls in 1827. Wallpaper production was taken to perfection in France while in Germany, life without wallpaper had become unimaginable since the Biedermeier period of the 1830s. It provided the middle class, the aspiring merchants and craftsmen of Central Europe's cities, with a desired setting for their own four walls. It became a status symbol of social distinction and an item of furniture of good taste. Wallpaper did not become widespread until the advent of rationalised industrial production in the 20th century. New production methods such as screen and gravure printing allowed better processing, optimised by the use of fleece materials as print substrates. Wall plaster, concrete slabs or plasterboard nowadays provide excellent bases. Today's wallpapers are easy to stick on, and above all, easy to remove. Shine, materiality and saturation give them haptic qualities when correctly and seamlessly applied.

Lambertus's use of recycling literally disrupts this unified room composition. The principle of collage aims to create meaningful connections in the viewer's mind through the combination of individual pieces that are different from each other, or in the words of Werner Spies: "Various contents, unconnected outside the image, converge. It is less the linking of forms, which as such can always be assimilated, but

rather of disparate sense-information.”

Collage is used like this in various different media like painting, music, sound and literature and applied in open form on principle since the beginning of the 20th century. This means the cuts and breaks represent visible formal opposites that trigger a process of realisation by opening up new areas of association. Patricia Lambertus’s specific use of collage technique in the two examples mentioned only becomes meaningful in connection with the setting, beyond the issue of simple aesthetic taste. The walls of the rooms are not merely used as support as their historicity becomes part of the collages’ elements that generate meaning. They consequently are one of Spies’s unconnected contents from the outside of the image. Demolition and destruction do not just develop their atmosphere “on-site” but floor, walls, ceiling are the conditions of the ambient image’s possibility, in which Lambertus for instance connects the failed utopia of the small flat with the daydream kitsch of palace grounds, orchard, conservatory, swan pond. Such an ambient image is unimaginable without its context. Its choice becomes a semantic component of the site-specific work. The context elucidates the ambient image as a reflexive intervention that goes beyond the imagined wish to see something beautiful and offers critical insight into the relationship between art and reality.

Lambertus works in a conceptual way with the material’s composition. She opens up gaps metaphorically and concretely not just in her ambient images but also in the smaller format of drawings: her architectural sketches of urban facades, derived from photos, together with the wallpaper clippings behind acrylic glass, appear as if living on alien ground. They are fitted to the wall at a slight distance. This gives the entire structure an impression of airiness, transparency and in a shortened way, spatial depth. The glass is no longer just protection but a tangible support that wants to be considered as well. Such a reflexive handling of materials and formal conditions of presentation connects the wallpaper’s good with its evil, its appearance with its reality because it is not just used as superficial decoration. Wallpaper, seen from the ideological perspective of high art, is “evil” and ill-reputed. Modernists see it as naïve and cultureless (Loos), much like tattoos, as it masks things and makes them appear different from what they are. To put it in an exaggerated way, it appears ambiguous, petit-bourgeois, cryptic and is rejected in terms of taste.

There are antecedents for the technique of rip-collage in public space. The so-called affichistes (afficher being French for paste on, announce, hang up) during the 1960s worked on the wallpaper of cities – large-scale billboards. Artists like Raymond Hains, Jacques Villeglé, François Dufrêne or Mimmo Rotella ripped apart advertisement posters that had been glued on top of each other in such a way that the revealed layers created new messages. At first, these discoveries, also referred to as Décollages, came from the street before they were systematically displayed in exhibition halls. Like archaeologists of the zeitgeist, “Nouveau Réalistes” treated the information on the posters as a material that layer by layer, revealed new, randomly generated subtexts. Whereas in Cubism, the newspaper stood for a collage-made sprinkling of disparate realities, the “New Realists” elevated the massmarket medium of advertisement through poetic abstraction so that it ended up giving different insights into reality, if not to say, “new realities”. If Affichistes came across images and letters in public and aestheticised everyday objects, Lambertus inverts the process: she looks for suitable spaces and connects them to her wordless images made from printed wallpaper. The writing has been lost along the way for the letter is out of place in the interior. Wallpaper aims at an atmospheric effect, not at being deciphered through reading. The dominant significance of the printed image in visual culture is reflected in the ambient images’ mode.

The return of rapport and pure form in modernism has unleashed debates in art and architecture since the turn of the 20th century. It finds its equivalent nowadays in the argument about the entitlement of formalism and the necessity of social reference in art. The delimitations between disciplines, the viewpoints and evaluations of autonomously interpreted positions and applied art currently meet a critical response among contemporaries in art, fashion and design. With her wallpaper collages, Lambertus takes up the modernistic idea again to “marry” art and life in decoration. This temporary marriage only succeeds as a fragment because it alone questions the redundancy of information through collage technique on the one hand and decoration’s empty form with its sense of place on the other. Through the bond to a place, Lambertus’s wallpaper works reveal themselves as space-shaping artistic practice that counters the depreciation of the decorative in the arts and reveals its critical potential.

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1 Maria Ocon Fernandez: Ornament und Moderne. A discourse on the development of aesthetic theory and the ornament debate in German architecture. (1850 – 1930) Berlin 2004.

2 Hanne Loreck argues for a reappraisal of the decorative, one that is not determined by gender specific klishees or valuations based on hierachy. Hanne Loreck: VorWAND. Ein kunstkritisches Plädoyer für das Dekorative“. In: HfbK Newsletter, issue 41, October 2007; also published in: Bettina Allamoda (Hg.), model map. Zur Kartographie einer Architektur, Haus des Lehrers Berlin, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 110 – 117.

3 Werner Spies: „Collage – Verwendung des generellen Begriffs“ (Collage – use of the general term). In exhib-cat. Max Ernst. Collagen – Inventar und Widerspruch (Collages – inventory and contradiction). Published by Götz Adriani, Kunsthalle Tübingen, Cologne 1988, p. 11-27, here p 16