HEDONISTIC, TRANSNATIONAL AND MULTI-CULTURAL: PATTERNS AS A SIGNAL FOR A NEW ECONOMY OF VISION

PROF. ANNETTE TIETENBERG

TEXT IN GERMAN. TRANSLATION BY **DR. STAN JONES AND ANJA WELLE**

PATTERNS ARE all around us. There is scarcely a place that we are safe from them: they are rampant on façade walls, they proliferate in our homes, they shape the language of fashion, they even undermine that exhibition space so intent on neutrality, the frequently disparaged, yet indisputably definitive White Cube. Parallel to the inflation of patterns in design, art and architecture, we want to talk and to write more and more about patterns. In recent years, their origins, their function, their meaning as well as their uses have come in for discussion in the context of various exhibition projects [1], book publications [2], and special magazine editions [3].

Patterns have always been part of our culture. And yet it appears that change is occurring before our very eyes. Not in the patterns as such—they are still based on the same regular sequencing of distinguishable forms. And they still come promising they can reach out into infinity. How they define themselves still works by carefully calculating the relationship between figure and background. And they still run variations on motifs rich in traditions, such as blossoms, cloud bands and fabulous beings or on abstract base patterns like dots and stripes. Change is occurring on a different level: a re-evaluation is going on. And it bases itself in cultural politics as well as in economics. There is no way of fully considering both aspects as in any way detached from one another—which should not surprise anyone. You only need to glance back briefly into history to convince yourself that the aspects of technical production and of reception aesthetics have always been correlated in patterns and ornaments [4].

In the course of the so-called Ornament Debate [5], which took place around 1900 predominantly in the German-speaking world, anything decorative, anything hinting at the superfluous, fell under the suspicion of being hopelessly over-ornate knickknackery. That is because there was far more bound up with the condemnation of the decorative—which reached its zenith in 1909 with Adolf Loos' polemical piece "Ornament and Crime"—than a guide to good taste. First and foremost, it was a matter of posing an ethical-moral problem: how can you recognize the true, good life? Surprisingly, it was, of all people, Adolf Loos, an architect sated by Viennese Art Nouveau, who responded to this question in a good Protestant way.

It is in renouncing everything superfluous, so his insight maintained. First and foremost, all decorousness. And for two reasons: on the one hand, because the symbolic language of pattern and ornament is rooted in history, therefore invoking patterns from the past and thereby blocking a promising future. And on the other, because in turning out pattern and ornament you have to plan for an additional production stage, which affects the price of goods.

The bad taste Loos saw as arising from a nostalgic longing was then made responsible for the production of junk. And here we are dealing with practical economic interests. When all was said and

done, people still believed at the beginning of the 20th century that you could only secure the European predominance on the world market with high quality, innovative products—keywords: “high class German workmanship”—but not with overpriced, inferior goods. Consequently, Loos only granted those who, in his eyes, were incapable of strategic-economic thinking—children, women and non-European primitive peoples, like those of Papua New Guinea—the right to decorate their environment and their bodies. These people stood, according to Loos, on the lowest step of cultural development. The citizen who might be striving after higher things, would, however, have to restrict himself to what was essential. Whoever succumbed to decorative urges revealed that they had no self-control. In other words: if you decorate your home, you admit to yourself and others that you cannot control your instincts.

So the Protestant work ethic and psychoanalysis forged an inseparable bond: everything that threatened to undermine cultural evolution and working discipline was located on the side of patterns: the instinctual, the non-European, the female, the inferior and the deceptive. And vice versa this means: anyone furnishing their home puristically and following the “less is more” agenda of classic modernism as put into words a decade later, has nothing to hide. Their thinking is as neat and tidy as their homes. With deft irony, Robert Musil put it succinctly in his “The Man without Qualities”: “Modern man is born in a hospital and dies in a hospital, so he should make his home like a clinic” [6].

In a living space cleansed of decoration, instincts are apparently kept within bounds; here desire does not cause the sense to reel: no, here the intellect rules. In this context, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to the concept of “omnis determinatio negatio” [7]. According to him, taste first develops in the form of revulsion, aversion, abhorrence and a deep loathing of the taste of others.

As a result, members of the ambitious middle classes, who wished to distinguish themselves demonstrably from petit bourgeois taste, developed strategies to elevate themselves over and above the taste of the under-privileged, those whom Adolf Loos already despised. They rejected floral ornamentation, sofa cushions and knickknacks and they erected a symbolic order of the life ascetic: white walls, tables made of glass and steel, and black leather couches.

Well into the 1980s, artists like Anna and Bernhard Blume from Cologne were making use of similar clichés. In their search for the petit-bourgeois residues in their behavior and their souls, they crammed themselves into the uniforms of the housewife and the local worthy.

In 1982, the boot of their car filled with props, they repeatedly drove out into the Brühl forest near Cologne and pulled on dresses with floral patterns and highland check jackets. In order to match the type of Rhenish housewife she used to meet in the street all the time, the artist Anna Blume also donned wigs, earrings, handbags in conservative taste, and high-heeled shoes. Thus equipped, Anna and Bernhard Blume had no qualms in performing what 1980s Germany regarded as a clear sign of smoothly functioning family life: the Sunday stroll in the woods. The patterns on the industrious housewife’s dress bloomed luxuriously. Anna Blume remembers: “Before we started working together I was already in search of an artistic approach to finding an optical and sensual visualization of the situation I shared with housewives all over the world. Every day I went shopping I took quick, secret photos of my 'sister sufferers’. I was above all fascinated by the brash ‘tattoos’, all those dress patterns and ornaments attached to women’s bodies which had been deformed by age and work. Particularly women of the older generation show a preference for splashy patterns made of iridescent blossom and

Anna and Bernhard Blume
Waldeslust from the series Im Wald, 1982
78.7 x 49.6 in / 200 x 126 cm

Courtesy the artists

floral and abstract motifs. Perhaps to compensate for how the body withers and loses shape. But it is exactly these gloriously pollenatory patterns which clearly strike me as 'intuitive' self-dramatisations of an uncomprehended subjugation" [8].

The subversive effect from Anna and Bernhard Blume's artistic routines consisted of using a comic-ironical role for creating images of the very thing that had been weeded out in both better-off social classes and in the context of art: patterns on pinafores, tablecloths and headscarves. Today, however, artists have recourse to established patterns for quite different reasons. That is because patterns are not an embarrassing index for a narrow-minded, regressive way of thinking anymore. On the contrary: Wim Delvoye conjures up geometrical patterns, like the sort of thing we are familiar with from the floors of churches or from slices of sausage. Philip Taaffe celebrates the unending interchange of figure and ground, where he takes inspiration from patterns traditionally residing in Islam, and Jochen Twelker constructs pictorial spaces, which owe their origins to stripes on shirts, blouses and T-shirts. Indeed, artists are even rediscovering wallpaper, which has long seemed the by-word for embarrassment, as it represented, after all, patterning and covering for your wall in one, hence the quintessence of lies and deception. In the footsteps of Andy Warhol and Yayoi Kusama, who were already celebrating wallpaper in the 1960s, they do not create pictures in the shape of three dimensional, restricted objects anymore, but cover whole walls with gaudy motifs.

If these motifs, seen superficially, do nothing more than appeal to the senses, then they are, nevertheless, not without purpose. Let us now have a look at the work "Berliner Tapete" (Berlin Wallpaper), developed by artist Stefanie Bürkle in 2003. Following the decision by political authorities to pull down the "Palast der Republik," a relic from GDR times situated in the heart of Berlin, Stefanie Bürkle set about preserving a piece of history in danger of disappearing. She found a way to at least ensure that the pattern of the copper-glass façade continues to exist by reaching back to photographs and subjecting them to a rapport. Setting out from this pattern, she produced rolls of "palace wallpaper" and papered one entire wall of each of a selection of offices belonging to well-known Berlin

Jochen Twelker, Chinatown, 2003
Watercolor on paper, 21.2 x 28.7 in / 54 x 73 cm

Courtesy © Jochen Twelker /
Thomas Rehbein Galerie, Cologne and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Jochen Twelker, The Excursion, 1997/2000
Oil on canvas, 114.1 x 681.1 in / 290 x 1.730 cm

Courtesy © Jochen Twelker / Thomas Rehbein Galerie, Cologne and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Jochen Twelker, The Fans, 2004
Oil on canvas, 86.6 x 78.7 in / 220 x 200 cm

Courtesy © Jochen Twelker /
Thomas Rehbein Galerie, Cologne and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

personalities. Taking photos of the people who work there, having them pose in front of this particular wall, is an integral part of the project. Gradually, a kind of photo album develops, which brings together faces of the city—faces of people, to be precise, who are willing to take part in an art project that deals with a difficult chapter in German history: with the way we treat the architectural and symbolic remains of that German state, that had in 1989 gone down without any fanfare in the competition between two political systems. Is the Palast der Republik falling victim to ecological or to economic necessities, to the desire for a reckoning late in the day or to the 'victor mentality' of the West?
Let us look at another region of the world. Parastou Forouhar, an artist who was born in Teheran and now lives in Germany, has also designed a wallpaper pattern. At first glance, this wallpaper appears cheerful and decorative. Until you step closer and look at the motifs in isolation. You are looking at an infinite sequence of scenes of torture, all neatly aligned, but no less horrific for all that. With her work, Parastou Forouhar makes reference to the high regard still afforded to patterns and ornaments in her home country. At the same time she indicates a gruesome message, which is an integral part of the pattern: the individual does not count, he or she has to become part of the whole. So for her, the pattern speaks simultaneously of beauty and of the terrible—it is an ambivalent sign of Persian tradition. Paul Simmons, a designer and co-founder of Timorous Beasties studio in Glasgow, pursues a similar angle. His wallpaper "Glasgow Toile" follows examples from the 18th century. However, the village backdrops acquire an unexpected form of topicality: big city life has arrived here, with supermarkets, high-rises, women pushing prams or junkies lying on park benches. Thus the bucolic spectacle of the pre-industrial world runs up against the anonymous, cynical urban culture of the post-industrial world.

In fact, taking wallpaper as an example makes clear how it has meanwhile become easy to refute Adolf Loos' supposition that pattern and ornament cause wasted material and productivity. That's because producing wallpaper in these digital days has become quicker, simpler and cheaper. Specialist knowledge is not necessary any more, and making it by hand even less so. Individual wallpaper publishing has meanwhile become common everywhere, and that means all you need to do is scan in a motif and have it reproduced digitally. A computer program then calculates the rapport. All you need now is an efficient printer and the wallpaper is done. It can be produced in any desired amount and can be printed in any country around the world, provided that the data is available and the printer cooperative.

The border-hopping, luxuriating principle of patterns has long since migrated into ways of producing and distributing wallpapers. That is something you can observe on lamps and materials created by Tord Boontje, for instance, or Stephen Burks. The reason being, it is no problem nowadays to generate decorative elements digitally via a design program. They are etched out by computer-controlled machines, cut with water jet, engraved with lasers or knitted three-dimensionally.

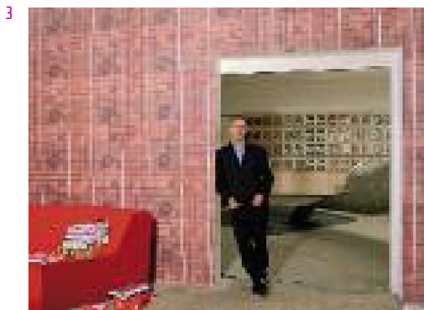
However, how do things look in the area of reception aesthetics? Are patterns, as corollary to the previous enthusiasm for the ascetic life, now embodying the promise of affluence, irresponsibility and indulgence in color and form? An index for a hedonistic approach to life? Not really. It seems to me much rather that the enthusiasm for patterns has got something to do with the way we are used to seeing things today. Patterns are, no doubt, the ideal pictorial elements where it is a question of the big picture. Because details are seldom registered consciously and the overall impression dominates, Ernst Gombrich talks about an "economy of vision" [9] in the context of patterns. Patterns suit a quick, casual, superficial glance. Gombrich justifiably defines patterns as the "unregarded art" [10] which is only rarely considered with the same attention we devote to a classically structured painting. So, patterns

5

1

2

3



4

6

7

1 "Office of Thomas Krüger, President of the Federal Agency for Civic Education; Wallpaper since 09.10.2003"

2 "Office of Hortensia Völckers, Artistic Director of German Federal Cultural Foundation; Wallpaper from 29.10.2003 until 12.11.2003"

3 "Office of Klaus Biesenbach, at that time Artistic Director of Kunstwerke (KW) Berlin; Wallpaper from 29.10.2003 until 06.11.2003"

4 "Hoyer Schindele Hirschmüller, Architecture Office, Berlin; Wallpaper since 24.09.2003"

5 "Christiane von Gilsa, Director of Kunstbank, the Gallery run by the Senat of Cultural Affaires, Berlin; Wallpaper from 04.03.2005 until 01.04.2005"

6 "Study of Daniel Barenboim, Director of Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin; Wallpaper since 11.11.2003"

7 "Study of Matthias Flügge, at that time Vice president of Akademie der Künste, Berlin; Wallpaper from 07.08.2003 until 08.08.2004"

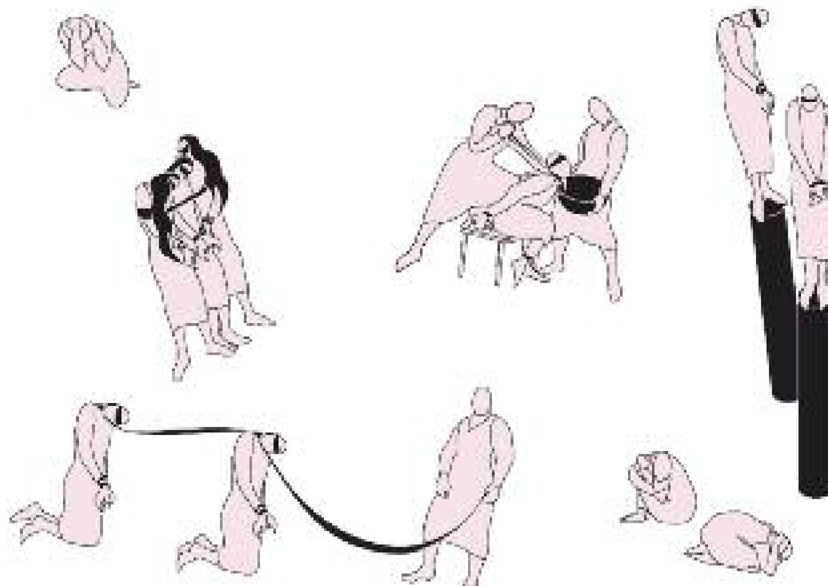
All Courtesy Gallery Vero Wollmann © Stefanie Bürkle, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Parastou Forouhar

Top
Thousandandone Day, 2007
Wallpaper, Brooklyn Museum, NY

Left
Thousandandone Day, 2007
Digital Drawing

Courtesy © Parastou Forouhar



are the ideal "pictorial program" for users, who sit most of the day in front of a computer and let digital images roll over them more or less indifferently. But are they then nothing but pure superficiality? As projects by Stefanie Bürkle or Parastou Forouhar can show, they are well suited to transmitting profound political messages. Yes, they even have a further, incalculable advantage: in the post-industrial age, when master narratives have become suspect, they present themselves as a welcome instrument for generating narrative structures. Since they have for a century had the reputation of epitomizing lies, falsehood and concealment, any claim to authenticity is foreign to them. They aggressively acknowledge they are stereotypical, repeatable as often as you want, well ordered and historically codified several times over.

This is exactly why artistic strategies can be developed through reflecting back on traditional patterns, in order to trick out the apparently neutral White Cube with masks from history. It is, namely, unmistakable how artists exploit an existing repertoire, and be it anonymous creations too like floral or geometrical patterns, reproducible without copyright fees and comprehensible across all frontiers of language and culture.

Artists particularly like motifs evincing national or local traditions. It seems to me as if, in our globalized world, where the same goods circulate consistently through any given location and the same brands promise total happiness, patterns hold out the hope that some national identity, local color and character is still there. Whether it is Stefanie Bürkle, Elke Haarer, Parastou Forouhar or Paul Simmons, they are all reaching back to patterns anchored firmly in the tradition of their respective homelands and already possessing their own history. And it is one that does not need inventing or spelling out, because everyone is familiar with it—at least, everyone in the know is, which means people versed in local traditions.

Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht has defined such intersecting processes in politics, commerce and culture as "paradoxical convergences" [11]. As he has been able to illustrate through the example of the EU, trying on the level of the administration to establish uniformity has meant symptoms of fatigue spreading among the citizens and even resistance taking shape. That resistance, according to Gumbrecht, finds expression in the return of multiple national sentiments and in the tendency to barricade yourself behind your regional cultures and languages. So the return of patterns could well have something to do with the paradoxical desire on the part of artists and their admirers to be present on the international stage but at the same time to insist on your own ways and to want to retain your distinctive local characteristics. ■

REFERENCES

[1] Ornament und Abstraktion. Kunst der Kulturen, Moderne und Gegenwart im Dialog, edited by Markus Brüderlin. Exhibition Catalogue (Riehen/Basel: Fondation Beyerler, 2001); Ornament und Versprechen, edited by Johann-Karl Schmidt. Exhibition Catalogue (Stuttgart, 2001); Patterns and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art, 1975-1985 (Hudson River Museum, January 2008).

[2] "Lachlan Blackley", Wallpaper, London 2006; Drusilla Cole, 1000 Muster: aus allen Epochen und Kulturen (Bern ,2005); Drusilla Cole, New Surface Design (London, 2007); Edgar Lein (ed.) Das große Lexikon der Ornamente. Herkunft, Entwicklung, Bedeutung (Leipzig, 2004); John Maeda, The Laws of Simplicity (Cambridge, 2006); Farshid Moussavi/Michael Kubo (ed.), The Function of Ornament (Barcelona, 2006); Petra Schmidt/Annette Tietenberg/Ralf Wollheim, Patterns in Design, Art and Architecture (Basel, 2005).

[3] Archithese. Zeitschrift und Schriftenreihe für Architektur, H. 2, 2004; form. Zeitschrift für Gestaltung, H. 197, 2004; du. Zeitschrift für Kultur, H. 782, 2007; werk, bauen + wohnen, H. 11, 2007; Detail, H. 12, 2007.

[4] Pattern and ornament are not always rigorously differentiated in the histories of architecture and art. A current definition runs: the ornament is something added subsequently, an application, as you find in the area of sculptural decoration on buildings, whilst the pattern engages with the load-bearing substance in an indissoluble unity.

[5] See Isabelle Frank/Freia Hartung, Die Rhetorik des Ornaments (Munich, 2001); Maria Ocón Fernandez, Ornament und Moderne. Theoriebildung und Ornamentdebatte im deutschen Architekturdiskurs (1850-1939) (Berlin, 2004).

[6] Robert Musil, Man without Qualities (New York :Capricorn Books, 1965), p.16.

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, translated by Richard Nice (Boston: Harvard University Press), p.110.
[8] Anna Blume, "No Message, Utopia Perhaps? Replies to Questions by Hans-Joachim Lenger", in: Anna und Bernhard Blume, Transsubstanz und Küchenkoller, edited by Carl Haenlein, Exhibition Catalogue (Hannover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1996), p. 147-150.
[9] Ernst H. Gombrich, The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art (London: The Phaidon Press, 1979), p. 95.
[10] Gombrich, Sense of Order, p. 116.
[11] Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Das Phänomen paradoxaler Konvergenz", in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, April 18, 2007 (our translation).

Annette Tietenberg is professor of art history at the University of Art in Braunschweig, Germany. Modes of cultural production that combine theory and practice are central to Annette Tietenberg's work approach. Among the fields of research with which she is currently preoccupied are the relationship between art and design, concepts of artistic work, the aesthetic, social and political possibilities of curatorial work and the implications of globalization for the cultural sphere. She initiated exhibitions, amongst them: "Frankfurter Kreuz. Transformations of everyday life in contemporary art" at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt/Main (2001), "Joan Jonas. Performance-Video-Installation" (2001) and "Office Hours" (2005) at the NGBK Berlin.

Jochen Twelker, The Painter, 2003
Watercolor on paper
28.7 x 21.2 in / 73 x 54 cm

Courtesy © Jochen Twelker / Thomas Rehbein Galerie, Cologne and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn