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Beauty, as a surface On the work of Mariella Mosler

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With a mixture of amusement and piety, Mariella Mosler employs the seductive charms of beautiful appearances to play modernism's anti-ornamentalist position off against the blanket notion of the autonomous work of art. For her, the unreserved astonishment her works constantly elicit from exhibition visitors is also a means of provocation. A kind of beauty that reveals the travesty embodied by the solipsistically self-referential lack of purpose in autonomous 'sublime' art; a beauty that is almost weightless and subversively lined with discretion and delicacy.

I

Given how strikingly few kinds of materials Mariella Mosler works with, yet how utterly diverse they are, her choice would seem to suggest some specific, underlying motive. Fruit gums, sand and human hair: one is an already aestheticized foodstuff; the second is as elementary as it is cheap and amorphous, a substance suitable only for fashioning into fragile and ephemeral forms; the last is a material which is both a part and a product of the human body, as well as evoking a number of emotional associations. Mosler uses these primary materials independently of one another, shaping each of them into distinct formal topoi whose respective developments are intrinsically linked to the attributes of the primary materials.

However divergent these substances might seem on an associative level, they all have the common feature of lending themselves less to compositional than to accumulative use; they are appropriate for generating surface textures by being assembled in sequential patterns, by being heaped, woven or subjected to similar treatment. Beyond their pure materiality, these media are also culturally 'encoded' or capable of furnishing a particular work with a string of connotations. Thus, from the very outset, her choice of material actually represents a strategic aspect of the sculptural form, resulting in complex floor ornaments in sand, colourfully arabesque wall works composed of fruit gums, and minuscule braided objects confected from hair.

II

In Mosler's work, ornament represents formal design, theme and visual strategy all rolled into one. Seen purely in terms of organized texture, which stands for nothing other than what it is as a formula for structure, Mosler's use of ornament – in the aftermath of twentieth-century modernism – highlights a specific representational lacuna in our current cultural context.

Assigned beyond such categories as authorship, individual signature or subjectivity, ornament has long been viewed as a suspicious entity in our modern pursuit of self-expression. It has always been too playful, too much of an embellishment, compromised in every respect by too much excess to be amenable to the thinking of western art which hitherto espoused the ideal of absolute meaning and in its artworks sought 'the sensual appearance of the idea'¹, acknowledging as 'beautiful art' only the 'art of genius'². The validity of an exemplary autonomously creative subject was directly coupled to the notion of autonomous art.

This idea of autonomy that delineated art's potential capacity for expression and representation through to modernism was pursued to the extreme of its own dialectic negativity – as far as such 'unreconciled' forms as fragmentation, ugliness and subjectivism. The notion of artistic beauty spiralled into a highly complex conceptual issue where, ultimately, validation could only be determined by the individual. Beauty became synonymous with radical authenticity, with the logical consequence that a Tachist painter might feel thoroughly insulted if his work were described as decorative. In his eyes the surface was indeed 'expression' in that it bears witness to an underlying subjectivity, representing it as its 'depth'. Fostering the utopia of a universal code and 'abstraction as a universal language'³, this subjectivizing process encounters ornament as an undetermined, empty grammar which responds to the context of its respective deployment.

III

Ornament openly aims to please; as decoration it is the expression of desire. In this respect it is subject to a craving that art in its autonomy ought in fact to be 'reconciling'. The hostility towards ornament that ensues from this antagonism was most notably formulated by Adolf Loos in his outline for a 'hygienic society'⁴, which he justified on both economic as well as moral grounds. By equating cultural achievement with sublimation, Loos challenged the fascination of ornament and proposed its disqualification as a general measure of culture. This subordinating impulse – maybe already heralded in Kant's concept of 'disinterested pleasure'⁵ – was given a radical twist in Loos' line of argument which in the present-day context has now assumed almost seismic qualities. If the idea of autonomy dictates all formal considerations, then embellishment and ornament would amount to nothing but an arbitrary game.

Yet who decides what is arbitrary? Our growing perception of subjectivity as a sign- and media-generated construct means that the knowable certainty of a primal Cartesian ego is gradually yielding to an open process of deconstruction. Instead, from the present perspective the subject is viewed as a polyform phantom shaped by numerous social discourses, such that it can be engaged in along its margins rather than directly addressed as a centred, single entity. This inverted concept of the subject also dispels any notion of aesthetic autonomy. As a consequence, the work of art shifts towards being a signifying point of transit that enables the contributory factors in the discursive interplay of forces to be explored; there is no conceivable fixed position for the work of art outside this discursive context.

IV

Mosler operates with the multilayered and to some extent contradictory referential connotations of the material with which she – both playfully and mischievously – baits the emotional responses of her viewers; at the same time she can always fall back on the material's deployment within the formal surface of the ornament. Her visual strategy is based on the ornament's semantic import being exclusively focused on its surface, on its express manifestation that there is nothing hidden 'behind' this semantic coating, no ulterior symbolic valences of meaning, no promise of a subject embodying aesthetic autonomy.

Ornament is free in an entirely different sense: far from representing individual authorship, it issues from the domain of public ownership. It is the product of anonymous lines of tradition to which

countless many have contributed. By transferring such forms into the context of contemporary art, Mosler has created a hybrid structure. For on the one hand, she develops the patterns she has chosen in a non-authorial manner, hence following in the steps of this tradition; on the other hand, as a participant in art discourse she also represents an individual intervention, selecting and combining material from diverse cultural backgrounds and ahistorically sampling them, thereby releasing herself from the embrace of tradition.

Her work combines the absence of semantic depth with a characteristic demonstration of beauty. She deliberately addresses hedonistic categories such as wastefulness (of time, or in the appearance's non-referentiality as a consciously ephemeral form) or temptation (to transgress the borders of the 'disinterested' gaze by seeking pleasure), categories which stand in latent conflict with the proposition that beauty is rooted in the notion of artistic autonomy. In Mosler's repudiation of representation, the beauty of her work is indeed self-sufficient – it imposes no ulterior meaning on the act of looking. Inversely, however, this introversion is challenged by a skilful blend of opulence and frugality.

V

Ornaments made of fruit gums that sparingly cover entire walls: on approaching the colourfully linear works one is stunned in the very moment of recognition. This surprising amalgam of material and form immediately fuses into an image once it is decoded. Ornamental structure and its sweet confection lend each other emphasis and affirmation in their shared role as means of stimulation. They converge in the beautiful surface that reflects 'taste' instead of 'gesture'. They are associated with the lightness of a child's game in which colourful sweets magically turn into magnificent jewellery and dazzling crystal – while never ceasing to represent a precise artistic adaptation performed along the lines of the culturally refined formal language of ornamentalism.

By being arranged into an ornament, the direct enjoyment of consuming sweet articles of pleasure is demonstratively transformed into the immediate enjoyment of looking. The exemplary gesture of self-denial attached to the notion of beauty succinctly rehearses that metaphoric sublimation which elsewhere stood as a precondition for what is 'Spiritual in Art'. In terms of nutrition, sweets represent nothing but an appeal to craving, quite the opposite of the earnest status of our 'daily bread' or the caution to children of 'don't play with your food' – which is exactly what this toy food encourages us to do. As dependent on our senses as they are on our taste, the chewy fruit gums represent food as decor. Indeed, Mosler extends this implicitly ornamental principle by using them as wall decoration: even further heightened by the denial of oral pleasure, this example of pure waste is presented here in a decorative form, hence as pleasure in a different sense, and as unattainable. Although such a treatment of edible substances might be viewed by some as latently offensive, by being withdrawn from access by art, they are simultaneously transformed into beauty through art, while nonetheless remaining palpably and temptingly close to our craving.

VI

The accustomed distance from which a viewer usually sees Mosler's wall ornaments renders the effect of certain other works all the more dramatic – as for instance in her installation in Schloss Solitude near Stuttgart. There Mosler coated a narrow lift from floor to ceiling with fruit gums. The tightly packed

rows were assembled from a single variety of fruit gum, stylized red 'kiss lips' appetizingly enhanced by a background of white foam rubber. On entering this cubicle – which without warning might abruptly close its doors and start moving – whatever strikes the viewer first, be it the individual objects or the arresting overall impression of the gleaming red space charged with a saccharine aroma, the effect could be described as a confluence of physical experience and reflected understanding.

In contrast to the frugal designs of her earlier wall works, Mosler's approach to this installation followed an 'all-over' principle of entirely covered surfaces. The 'lips' are arranged in a pattern that guides the viewer's gaze across the edges of the walls; seen from a spot just inside the lift this movement surges asymmetrically up from bottom left to top right, ending in an off-centre point on the ceiling. The space feels entirely enclosed and caught in an upward spiral spin. Emotionally, the viewer's vantagepoint constantly shifts between the sense of being enveloped by a protective cocoon and being exposed to a claustrophobic menace. In either case, the question of 'disinterestedness' loses its relevance.

VII

Mosler's floor ornaments made from meticulously modelled sand propose yet another approach to the appearance of beauty. These complex reliefs modelled with naturally coloured sand are extended into unbroken surfaces without any additional means of support. Sand is a formless and anonymous material beyond aesthetic suspicion. Mosler makes no use of additives which might, for instance, fix or bind the sand. Instead, her range of possibilities for sculpting is rigorously prescribed by the sand's natural properties, and she exploits these to the extreme in order to produce highly complex ornamental patterns. She starts her work by carefully analyzing the installation space at her disposal. The ornament is not developed as an autonomous sculpture but as unique site-specific decoration with the power to (re-)organize and assert a spatial arrangement. It does this as a structure which is imposed decentrally on a surface and implies a potentially infinite expansion of the pattern without a central point of emanation. Instead, it is the room itself that provides an interface where the structure can assume concrete form.

The exact geometric designs are carried out by hand, a process of secondary artistic importance as long as it is executed with the greatest possible care. Her rendition of the designs bears no trace of expression. The differentiating precision with which Mosler proceeds becomes evident when one compares individual works. In some cases the ornamental surface might be sharply cropped by the outer limits of the room, as in the free design she made for documenta X in Kassel based on a set of overlapping and interconnected circular patterns. Elsewhere, the position of the floor ornament's uninhibited expansion might respond to certain features of the room, as in her work for the Oldenburg Kunstverein, where Mosler constructed a meander pattern interspersed with interwoven knotted ornaments. Her open repertoire of forms includes motifs borrowed from extremely different cultural backgrounds – geometric star-shaped elements, swirling floral patterns or highly intricate rosettes and arabesques. She always uses ornament as a means of structuring space and integrating the form's position inside the room with the design's own internal structure. The space gains a palpably new meaning through her evocative intervention.

The sand works' susceptibility to destruction, something one almost physically anticipates just by looking at them, is a significant aspect of their beauty and capable of arousing conflicting feelings:

immediate circumspection is mingled with the strong desire to inflict some minor, but maybe also more serious disruption, like leaving traces of one's presence in the sand, marks that overwrite or erase others. The impulse to intervene as an anonymous author is an intrinsic dimension of these pieces.

In some of her works Mosler consciously plays on this feature in her initial conception. In the domed hall of the Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart she created a circular ornament of enormous dimensions which matched the diameter of the dome; yet she shifted the hub of the ornament away from the room's central axis in such a manner that the pattern stood in irrational correspondence to the prevailing layout of the space. The ornament's size and the decentred displacement of its pattern prohibited any of the motifs being executed in full entirety. The available space simultaneously represented their interface and their demarcation. The surfaces between each motif were covered with a smooth layer of fine sand that was intended by the artist to be walked on. The latent tension implicit between the fascination of the work's immaculate state and the desire to desecrate it was passed on to the viewers as a potential scope for action; the marks caused by crossing these areas became part of the overall composition.

With their fragility, Mosler's sand ornaments are also realizations of time. It is not only that on each occasion their production (purely for the duration of a single exhibition) requires a vast amount of time, and that their visible delicacy also magnifies their intrinsic transience. The question of whether such Sisyphean labour, which from the outset is doomed to be short-lived, makes any sense immediately springs to the viewer's mind. Mosler's work is indeed emphatically focused on the passing moment, a factor that forms part of this experience of beauty. By falling back on the work's surface qualities and at the same time absolving it of any form of subordinate functionality, her works turn this question of economy into an issue of particular friction. They obviously represent a waste of time, a manifestly huge investment of energy in something that for the sake of theatrical effect deliberately and provocatively gambles away their 'incremental value' – success and beauty. But beyond purely aesthetic criteria, the sand works also point to an antagonism between their sculptural perfection and their short-lived temporality that disqualifies them from being fed 'directly into the commercial circuit that exploits 'art' as a commodity'⁶. It is from this friction that Mosler's ornamental arrangements gain their anti-monumentalist gesture.

VIII

In her most recent series of works Mosler has taken to using human hair. As a material it has ambivalent connotations, and is to some degree the object of various taboos, even capable of causing distress simply by being called a 'material'. As an integral part of the body and an expression of individual identity, the act of removing hair is implicitly associated with violence, except when the hair is offered as a gift – like the lock of hair as a token of love; hence the correspondence between hair and intimacy. 'Throughout all cultures hair has always enjoyed a special status. As long as it is attached to the body, it is a sign [...] of vitality and sexual energy [... Elsewhere] hair has been used as a means of social restriction and punishment – by being cut off or by shaving the head.'⁷ Using imported (female) hair from Asia, Mosler is playing on a mercantile variant of such correspondences. The act of acquiring anonymous merchandise represents a conscious artistic choice. Available in standard lengths and mainly used for wig making, there is far more to this material than its mere

commercial value. It embodies a reflection of individual integrity, even without personifying it. Its relation to human longevity is one of this material's intrinsic features. Hair grows by about one centimetre each month and thus embodies accumulated, individual time. The biological dimension offers every viewer a line of emotional involvement, an elementary bond with the material. This aspect is compounded by its subsequent artistic treatment: in its original state, Asian hair is black, but as a commercial commodity it is available in virtually all shades of colour, including the palest blond hue and grey. What on first sight might seem to indicate a distinct personality is in fact an artificial product of chemical processing. Intimacy and individuality are projections.

Laboriously and meticulously fashioned by hand, these minute, delicate hair objects have been conceived as unique ornamental figures independent of any relational context. This notion of 'unique ornaments' is a contradiction in terms, since in Mosler's hands the application and repetition of a motif in relation to its background, so characteristic of the ornamental tradition, has been turned on its head and taken to the extreme of an entirely unrelated, solitary form. Mosler has created but a single specimen of each motif without multiplying its geometric or elementary floral structures. Bereft of any relation to a specific external spatial context, these unique specimens are concerned only with their own internal structure – like a decor that echoes itself. Mounted at head-height on evenly spaced, thin metal rods, the objects seem to float unaided in front of the wall.

This individualized use of ornament acts as an idiom for self-referentiality running on the spot. It paraphrases the autonomous work within the surface of its decorative preciousness which, however, far from being presented as an abstract entity, is 'staged' by Mosler as a venue for emotional connotations. Whereas in the original commercial material all the hair's individual characteristics are in fact simulated and anonymous, Mosler's modelling of the hair echoes old craft traditions such as nineteenth-century hair ornaments and hair pictures, which served as individual 'ornamental mementoes'⁸ and thus were highly sentimentalized. In Mosler's objects the decorative form acts as a focus – like the memory of an unspecified person worked into a decoration, like an embroidered fictional snippet.

In contrast to the room-filling sand ornaments, the hair objects act as foils for personalized projections – which clearly offer no guarantees of fulfilment. They inevitably reveal themselves to be vacant love tokens of museum origin which, from the outset, awake memories of nothing and nobody. Nevertheless, the time actually and evidently invested in them – both the time it took the hair to grow and the time the object took to make – is linked to the fictional lacuna of self-aware subjectivity. The only evident anonymous traces of authenticity to be found are the bodily origin of her material and the individual lifetime sedimented in growth and processing. A chain of open fictions might nonetheless still attach itself to this in the embellishment of structurally unsaturated introspection – Mosler's objects mark the exact border between both possibilities.

Translated by Matthew Partridge

¹ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (orig. ed., Berlin, 1835–38). Hegel defines (artistic) beauty as a product of the intellect – i.e. as the ‘sensual appearance of the idea’ – hence as that form given to reality in which the idea (the absolute) becomes visible.

² Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (orig. ed., Berlin, 1790), Part 1, § 46: ‘Beautiful art is the art of genius.’ Kant describes this as an individual attribute in the sense of a ‘natural gift that assigns rules to art’ and which as such ‘itself belongs to nature’ – in other words, by no means the result of an individual’s arbitrary will but of his authentic capacity for expression.

³ Article: *Abstraktion als Weltsprache*, in: Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939* (Cologne, 1981), pp. 172–179

⁴ Adolf Loos, *Ornament und Verbrechen* (orig. ed., Vienna, 1908)

⁵ Cf. Immanuel Kant, op. cit., § 2. ‘The pleasure determined by the judgement of taste is entirely without interest.’

⁶ Suzanne Prinz, article: *Mariella Mosler*, in: *Kurzführer zur documenta X* (Ostfildern, 1997), p. 154

⁷ Mariella Mosler in an interview with Frank Nikol, *Passage* (cat.) (Hamburg, 1998), p. 55

⁸ Bettina Roggmann, *Haarige Objekte*, in: *Mariella Mosler* (cat.) (Agathenburg, 1999), pp. 5–8; *ibid.*, p. 6: ‘The ornament was made from the hair of a beloved person, either still alive or deceased, in their memory. [...] As a gesture of love one gave a piece of oneself to one’s sweetheart in the form of an ornament made of hair.’