

“...compress energy within the object...”<sup>1</sup>

(Mariella Mosler, 2001)

## **Katja Lenz . Signs of Time**

### **Mariella Mosler, *Hair Objects*, 1990-2002**

Mariella Mosler (born 1962) makes *Hair Objects*, ornaments that are tied, woven, or knotted. They are mounted on the wall in a single line to give the impression of floating freely.<sup>2</sup> However, these delicate objects, each measuring four to eight centimeters, are not the catch of entomologists, but works of art made from human hair. She turns to traditional techniques of working in bobbin lace, crocheting, and weaving to make arabesque, figurative, symbolic, or descriptive ornaments. To an equal degree they draw on an existing formal repertoire and develop a new set of signs and symbols. In doing so they reflect on questions of origin and authorship, as well as on their own cultural and historical background.<sup>3</sup>

Mosler selects widely divergent motifs from nature, society, culture, and history, and then reduces these to their structural form. Systematized and classified according to their genus, the artist presents her small compendium of human knowledge as a *Wunderkammer*. In this she brings together vegetative forms (*Coral, Fern, Core, Trefoil, Beech Nut*), geometry (*Enneagram, Sphere*), abstraction (*Quantum*) and figuration (*Monkey's Fist, Snowflake, State Cell*), as well as symbols (*Triskelion*). While some of the *Hair Objects* have similar structures, their meanings are, at times, fundamentally different.<sup>4</sup> The artist is mainly interested in the universal connections and regulations shared by natural sciences and the arts as well as politics, society, and language. Her working procedure underscores this: “I think that the structure of ornaments ... [in] certain cultural techniques like weaving and braiding, stands in a strong association with language, with different verbal structures, different systematic orders of grammar and tense that are superimposed, woven together and able to switch hierarchy with each other.”<sup>5</sup> The *Hair Objects* use spatially compressed knots and combinations to visualize this complex interlacing and to indicate the infinite possible combinations.

Mosler's choice of material further evinces the universal-cosmic background of her work. A product of metabolism, hair contains mankind's codified genetic make-up. According to molecular biology, the genetic information of all life forms derives from the DNA molecule's distinctive structure, while our figure, our appearance, and our character is based on the combinations of the individual, double-helix DNA constellations. All life is based on their coincidental interweaving. This is the codified key to cosmic existence.

Additionally, Mosler's *Hair Works* refer to the material's historical-cultural, aesthetic, and religious significance. Human hair has a highly charged symbolic meaning, whether it is covered with a head cloth, used as a fetish, a relict, or jewelry, or even employed in magic or serves to remember someone. In Northern Europe it played an important role in the context of memory and mourning. During the Romantic and Biedermeier periods, delicate hair bands and brooches were knitted or worked in bobbin lace with the ceremonially cut hair of a dying person. This jewelry was then worn as votive offering to mourn or commemorate the deceased.<sup>6</sup> Mosler formally evokes this tradition only to contradict it by eliminating all

individuality. She intentionally uses hair imported from Asia that has already undergone several processes of industrialization and is being utilized as a 'commodity.' Once again it is bleached, colored, and knotted and then used to make hybrid artifacts with different symbolic meanings...signs of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Mariella Mosler, "Filiations of Ornaments and Memory. Interview with Ursula Panhans-Bühler," in: Julia Otto (ed.), *Skulptur als Feld. Carl Andre, Polly Apfelbaum, Leni Hoffmann, Mariella Mosler, David Rabinowitch, Raffael Rheinsberg, Adrian Schiess, Heike Weber, Kate Whiteford, Ostfildern-Ruit*: Hatje Cantz, 2001, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> "It was very important to me that they seemed to float in front of the wall. By means of the material and of a physical proximity to the object, an almost immaterial detachment takes place." Mariella Mosler, *ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>3</sup> "...ornaments have always drifted from one culture to another—just as modern ornaments and logos constantly migrate—in many cases their origin or authorship cannot be determined, have often been lost by being taken over culturally. Sometimes ornamental forms have appeared at the same time in different cultures. These migrations of form across continents and cultures in association with imperial and religious conquests correspond today to the signs of global capitalism and its product imperial." Mariella Mosler, *ibid.* p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Both *Triskele* and *Farn* have three-armed spirals with radial symmetry that differ only in their orientation. Here the connection is based not so much on the form as on the linguistic link made in the title. This is what indicates a possible interpretation. *Triskele* is a traditional symbol with origins in the Neolithic period, while *Fern* dates back to the Carboniferous era and is one of the oldest plants.

<sup>5</sup> Mariella Mosler, *op. cit.*, (fn. 1), p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> For the hair to maintain its force, it needed to be cut before death. At special events such as beginning military service or celebrations such as christenings and weddings, it was common to cut off and preserve a strand of hair. When created in mid-life, it was a *memento mori*, while at the end of someone's life it was a votive picture. As a piece of jewelry it symbolically stood in for the person, which recalled their life after they had died.

Selected Literature:

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Annett Reckert, *Iris wall. Mariella Mosler*, Göppingen: Kunsthalle Göppingen, 2004.  
Karsten Müller (ed.), *Mariella Mosler. Volapük*, Hamburg: Ernst Barlach Haus, 2008.

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