Mimicry with Ornament

By Hanne Loreck

Let us begin with Mariella Mosler's *Cosmic Knots* (2010). In visual terms, these neon loops hanging from the ceiling look like convoluted traces of light in space. Depending on the viewer's position in the room, one and the same neon tube resembles a different constellation of knots. Each construct, as tangled as it is impenetrably organised, conveys the impression of a "wild" three-dimensional ornament. "In Mosler's work, ornament represents formal design, theme and visual strategy are rolled into one," writes critic Jens Asthoff (1) in his summary of Mosler's works with sand, hair and fruit gum in the 1990s. Asthoff was reflecting on the essence of her diverse explorations of surfaces. A good ten years later, the *Cosmic Knots* broaden the scope of the ornamental with the aim of addressing other facets of the same nexus, both formally and theoretically. The link here is that art history considers knot patterns as a segment of ornamentation. Accordingly, knot patterns can be presumed to have emerged interculturally, over astonishing courses of time and geographical distances: from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, from Coptic Egypt via Italy to the British Isles. At the same time, knots are the aesthetic result of a specific handicraft, a cultural textile technique by means of which two or more things are firmly and even exemplarily interlocked. Seen this way, a dominant aspect of ornament, namely its application, becomes superfluous.

Knots are known in the worlds of handicrafts, botany, chemistry, medicine, statics, and astronomy. These different fields scarcely suffice even approximately to reflect the diversity of their functions. Even if Mariella Mosler has specific knots in mind with her *Cosmic Knots*, this abundance of areas of use is symptomatic of the knot itself: so essentially does it depict connections – from the materially safe to the abstract model-like – that these can be denoted in many ways by the figure of the knot. What they all have in common is the spatial dimension. Although I speak here of the knot as the resulting construct, the act of tying knots is of equal importance. The science of knotting surveys this particular practice, so vital to seamen, climbers, paramedics and anglers. Iconographically, knot figures have often been handed down over the centuries, for example, the legendary Borromean rings from the coat-of-arms of the Milan family of the same name. There, the interlinking rings are understood in genealogical terms, as indicative of an indissoluble family cohesion. (2) The decisive thing about this particular constellation of 'knots' is that it shows interlocking to be a movement up-and-down or to-and-fro, hence the relatively planar structure of two elements is transferred to the spatial looping of three elements: if one ring is removed, the two others are also unlinked. Here we touch on the realm of knot theory, a research field of topology. One question that arises in the field

of mathematical constructs is whether two given knots are equivalent, i.e., whether they can be transformed without the line being broken. Applied to spaces: are two spaces to be considered equal if they can be reshaped by stretching, twisting, compressing, albeit without tearing or cutting them apart? After all, a knot is defined mathematically as the embedding of one or several circular lines into three-dimensional space. Consequently, this space is no longer to be understood in the order of Euclidean but in that of hyperbolic space. Operating pictorially with curved planes presents fascinating formal possibilities, visible in the mysterious beauty of the loops of the *Cosmic Knots*.

Visually speaking, knots are still related to the spatial order, even if their dissolution or unravelling is unimaginable (as will mainly be the case for non-mathematicians, regarding topological knots), that is to say, the structure disappears into the puzzling in-between of impenetrability and system. Clearly, ornamentation has savoured this game very artfully where, as in Leonardo da Vinci's *Knots* (1489), it has varied a lacy texture reminiscent of lace-making. (3) These visually attractive sheets present a transfer of spatial dimensions to the plane, which is exactly how da Vinci saw his patterned disks : the projection of the complex n-dimensional cosmic link into a knot script. Yet the marvel remains, even if we eliminate the mythic-religious background: How can the infinite and therefore closed loop result at the same time in such a subtle, holed pattern without the thread ever being lost? Be they uninterrupted or actually dropped, French art historian Daniel Arasse designates da Vinci's weaving motifs as "genuinely theoretical constructs" (4) and ascribes them to a scientific fashion of the time in Milan. As for the course taken by the thread, we would have to outline its complex composition with our finger, given that, at a mere glance, the course of the line eschews our visual grasp. Such a manual following of the line clearly reveals the diversity of the object and lets producer and recipient take part in the handicraft. Like what is achieved by mathematical graphs (which, as in the famous Möbius strip, not only designate paradoxical relations and states from the viewpoint of the conventional system, but even render them tangible), so too the knot-wickerwork signals the simultaneity and non-opposition of inside and out, of top and bottom. But to hell with such abstraction, when knots were used as magic objects due to their structural ambivalence. Then they were considered to be offensive weapons, capable of being used to curse someone or to practice exorcism. (5) It was the context, hence the focus of the ritual, that made the difference, not necessarily the knot itself.

From the viewpoint of cultural theory, the ornament aims at communication and presentation, for inherent in it is a binding dimension, in both the literal and metaphorical sense. Starting with the object, the ornament addresses the viewer, albeit without dictating the direction of the reception. (6) This intermediary aspect is borne by an aesthetic surplus which is not easily deleted – something

that even modern economists have admitted. The theory of evolution was also forced to recognise that surplus as an inexplicable, biologically pointless aspect of survival and the preservation of the species – an acid test for the efficiency of the relationship between expenditure and success. Darwin distanced himself from the phenomenon of decorative plumage or beguilingly refined pattern mimicry in the animal world by discounting it as mere fashion – this disqualification of an essentially social form of game with aesthetic ciphers gave expression to his cultural unease. (7)

To creatively reorganise the ornamental today in no way condemns the aesthetic delight of certain visual orders. However, contrary to the current finding that in general all realms of life are being indiscriminately aestheticised (one symptom being the return of the ornament), Mariella Mosler's specific recourse to the ornament involves a deconstruction of the history of its discourse, including the traditional value judgements that it has handed down. Her updating of the ornamental focuses above all on the ambivalence inherent in the historical verdict of primitivism. In the cultural and social ostracisation of the Other – the most general definition of primitivism – so-called "primitive" forms oscillated between condemnation promoted by colonialism, and recognition as a vision and utopia of so-called civilized cultures. Both projections are remarkably similarly organised. In both cases, aesthetically simple elements, including the "primitive ornament" (8), represented a digression from the European canon and were regarded as lacking complexity on the one hand, and as refreshing in their simplicity on the other. Mariella Mosler's concept of the ornamental takes a stand against such polarizing judgements. The artist argues visually, using the ornament as a mediator, a third party. No longer is the theoretical and practical truth content of the ornament examined. Instead, transformation structures are produced in the knowledge of its histories. Thus Mariella Mosler also shifts all considerations of purity – which in the current discourse of ornament repeatedly revolve around liberating an essential carrier from superfluous additions – onto an aesthetic articulation of the politics of the ornamental and the ideological in the discourse of the pure or abstract. What become visible are the construction and passing on of symbolic capital, which consists of separating small forms from grand designs, of hierarchically categorizing producers, and of geographically sounding out aesthetic practices.

In a work begun prior to *Cosmic Knots* and which has meantime evolved into a more than 100-part complex, Mariella Mosler devotes herself to the mask (continually since 2006). In this laconic, multifarious and ironic-witty series, the first association is not with the ornamental, in the sense of repetitive and usually well ordered forms. Instead the ornament serves as an implicit reference point.

For the artist has separated out aspects of both its practical and theoretical dismissal and its cultural assessments, which she short-circuits with evaluations of the mask – we have only to think of Adolf Loos' *Ornament and Crime* (1908) and, in our particular context, his visual aesthetic-racist argumentation using the full-body ornamentation and masks of the tattooed people of Papua New Guinea as a didactic shock-image for modern western man. To this very day, (non-European) masks represent the prototype of the primitivism that coloured the rhetoric of art ethnography and modern art around 1900 – that era of fierce discussions about ornament, the advent of non-figurative pictorial concepts, the last uprising in favour of the primacy of high art, before the "Mass Ornament" (Siegfried Kracauer, 1927) was to redefine the mythical with the support of what were then the new media. Such a primitivism lies at the heart of modernism, literally symbolizing its ambivalent structure. After all, used historically to both disparagingly and approvingly characterise artefacts from non-European cultures, some of the magical-natural forces attributed to those objects in what was considered their simple, direct and original form, could be exploited, vampire-like, in an attempt to 're-virilize' a bourgeois subjectivity regarded in the late 19th century as anaemic.

As with the knots, there is also an art-historical link between the mask and the ornament: in the art form of the grotesque. In this sector of ancient Roman ornamentation we find masks intertwined with tendril motifs, human figures, animal shapes and fabulous creatures, which we perceive as part of a symbolic order of the bizarre, the enigmatic. Comparable to the contradictory function of "simple forms" in primitivism, the grotesques were also understood arbitrarily, not only as an expression of something fascinating, but also as a means of defence against all that was fearful and threatening. Thus, like certain knots, they incorporate a magical dimension.

Masks make use of facial features so as to turn to the Others. They themselves, however, are not a face, but a go-between – between two faces. We can see them as one level in a layer system in which the top/bottom are linked by the voice resounding through the mask, and by the gaze possible through the eye holes. Moreover, even when hanging on a wall or lying in a display case, every mask signals its use, allowing us to fantasize about the ritual of which it could have been, or could become, an element.

Mariella Mosler's masks, with their cheap and banal materials and their mode of production, feign something cult-like. In the shade of the anachronistic and the exotic, they avail of all means so as to

give a face to civilization's waste. It is left to the viewers which contemporary "primitivisms" they project (onto a group) through the masks. To make these faces, the artist uses bubble wrap, melts strips of wine gum as well as leaf garlands of plastic or sugar. Spaces are left for schematic eyes and mouth, or holes are burnt in the carrier; rarely is a nose added. Each intervention is directed at the borderline between the big bluff of passing as a mask in the "high" sense, and the obvious delight taken in trashy materials. Mariella Mosler not only singes wood shavings, she gilds them as well. Her materials range from the classically valuable, like bronze, to handicraft and packing materials, like corrugated paper and hempen ropes. At the semantic level, allusions to popular myths and subcultures, be that Halloween or Gothic, are mixed with allusions to racist stereotypes, which, like the Golliwogg (a toy representing a cute little black boy) around 1900 once gave a comic face to a primitivism with colonial connotations. It might almost be overlooked that the artist's mask mimicry, despite the deliberately diffuse timeframe of its emergence, includes the mythic reception, as it were, of modern art. Yet can we be sure that the longitudinal coloured stripes on a grooved sheet of bronze have something to do with Bridget Riley, and not perhaps more with patterns in Missoni knitwear? (9)

The connection between ornament and language that Mariella Mosler has repeatedly presented as the basic component of her materialisations becomes visible in such allusions to canonical non-figurative "modern art". Along with the structural aspect, however, we now also perceive the aspect of the respective concrete articulation of links and bonds. So the grandiose slogan about abstraction as a global language, coined by Werner Haftmann on the occasion of the second documenta in 1959, may well take on a whole new meaning in works like those by Mariella Mosler. For the ornament we are speaking of here, without a cultural specification, for strategic reasons, is capable of critically underscoring abstraction's unmentioned and exclusively western reference, of working through it "from behind", so to speak, by confidently using the cultural techniques of different previously marginalised producers (arts and crafts people, women, "oriental" or African producers) at the point where their communication value and the practices associated with, indeed actually attached to them, come into play. Primitivism, artistically colonized and blithely appropriated and exploited as the art form of the Others, then also undergoes a critical revision.

Mariella Mosler used the cheapest of baskets from Vietnam to make some of her masks. Those utility items are attractive not so much because of their low price, as because of their ability to successfully appeal to the western desire for a décor that is inconspicuous, yet still clearly ethnically-tinged.

Mosler meticulously unravels the hand-made yet materially almost worthless objects herself and rearranges the components to make a mask. In doing so, she works with the exotic-wild aura, with the result that, in its new woven form, we are faced with the ethno-cultural capital that is the driving force of a cynical economy. At first the value systems seem to be of different scales – aesthetic versus economic; through Mosler's transformative mimicry, they turn out to be interlocked. The old debate about the necessity for, or superfluity of, ornament is thus given a second face, on which the fascination for the Other turns out to be integrated into global economic processes.

There is more to the structure of knots and masks than the transposition, in terms of top or bottom levels, of two (or even more) strands or two faces. Such an exchange, conceived as a process of to-and-fro and not as a single act of changing from here to there, translates a classical system of dominance into interdependences. What is being materially and semantically negotiated in the masks as cultural assessments is present in the *Cosmic Knots* in a more abstract form. They still appear constructive thanks to their constant visual surprises, and above all they appear non-narrative compared to the masks. But in this recourse to topological figures and their potential to give techniques that combine design with metaphor a chance, under the premise of the space, we ascertain at least one point of contact – folding, threading, denting, bulging, looping and tying recall handicrafts and bring something textile into play. Above all, however, these techniques take leave of the classical mode of knowledge that is self-reflection. No longer is the image opposite evened out by a distanced surface. Here someone presses, compresses, pulls – all of which are none too elegant techniques with a view to the ideal of the subject and of culture. Seen mathematically, they may not change the space or the object, but not such sameness is revealed when looking at their reshaped exterior. Mariella Mosler's works aim through their appealing beauty to permanently intertwine two sides normally considered to be opposed; the hierarchies and hegemonies spoken of here become negotiable through such a non-orientated standpoint.

[1] Jens Asthoff, “Beauty, as a surface. On the work of Mariella Mosler” in *Mariella Mosler*, exhib. cat., transl. Matthew Partridge; for a detailed and persuasive treatment of ornament see Andrea Klier, “Leidenschaft und Langeweile. Mariella Moslers Haarornamente” in *Mariella Mosler*, exhib. cat. Kulturstiftung Schloß Agathenburg 1999, 9-11.

[2] Art historian Ursula Panhans-Bühler speaks of another use of the Borromean knot into which I cannot go in detail here: Jacques Lacan’s use of the figure for the all round dependence of the subject’s three registers, the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. Cf. Ursula Panhans-Bühler, “Mariella Mosler: Cosmic Knots – Illuminated Knots” in *Mariella Mosler, Semiglot*, exhib. cat. Kunsthalle Giessen, ed. by Ute Riese, Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag 2012, 48-51, here 49, transl. Judith Rosenthal.

3 See the informative essay on the history of the discourse of the knot: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, “The Iconography of Dürer’s ‘Knots’ and Leonardo’s ‘Concatenation’” in *The Art Quarterly*, Detroit, VII. 2, Spring 1944, 109-28; reprinted in *EYE of the HEART. A Journal of Traditional Wisdom*, Issue 4, 2009, 11-40. Here the historically known link with Islamic ornament is made: “G. [Gerolamo, note HL] d’Adda [1815-81, note HL] says that Dürer’s ‘Knots’ have been called embroidery designs, but are really lace patterns (“veritable patrons de passementerie”); in any case, ‘Knoten’ suggests a textile application. […] Amongst other books which d’Adda cites in his bibliography is one by Balthazar Sylvius […], published in 1554 and entitled (in Latin): ‘A Little Book of Geometrical-Designs, commonly termed ‘Moorish’ ... very useful to Painters, Goldsmiths, Weavers, Damasceners ... and also to Needle-workers.’ From all this, it is clear that it must have seemed to Dürer’s contemporaries that his ‘Knots’ were such as could be employed in a great variety of techniques; and that their likeness to Moorish arabesques was generally recognized.“ (12; alle Schreibweisen vom Original)

[4] Daniel Arasse, Leonardo da Vinci, Old Saybrook: Konecky & Konecky 1998, 134.

[5] Cf. Gilbert Lascault, “Quelques informations et rêveries autour des nœuds et ligatures” in *nœuds et ligatures*, exhib. cat. Fondation Nationale des Arts Graphiques et Plastiques, Paris 1983, 4-15, 10-11.

[6] The historian of Islamic art Oleg Grabar foregrounds this essentially open structure of the ornamental in producting meaning via its sensorial-direct side. Cf. Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (1992), Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995.

[7] Interestingly, Adolf Loos, who focussed not just on the (architectural) ornament, but also on (male) fashion, later became an advocate of an unmodern fashion, a timeless elegance of the inconspicuous.

[8] Cf. Franz Boas, “Primitive Art (1927)”, New York: Dover Publications 1955, 15.

[9] Riley was so horrified at the combination of Op Art and textile patterns, at least in 1964, that she wanted to sue a fabric manufacturer who had used one of her paintings for a design. See Hanne Loreck, “Mode als Zeichnung im Raum – Streiflichter” in Angela Lammert, Carolin Meister et al (Eds.), *Räume der Zeichnung*, Akademie der Künste, Berlin and Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg 2007, 223-235.