Don’t vilify cannibals ...

A Conversation between Nicole Fritz and Mariella Mosler

NF: Mariella, you studied philosophy and art in Hamburg from 1985 to 1993. Why did you opt for that particular combination?

MM: Out of youthful naivety, as part of a search. Only yesterday I read the following in Henry James: “Can you tell me something you really think is true?” That sums it up.

NF: Did you study those subjects simultaneously? Was that not a balancing act between theory and practice?

MM. At first I studied them parallel, then I alternated; one semester philosophy, one semester art. It was indeed difficult to be studying the agenda of German Idealism and German Enlightenment and producing art at the same time; they were almost mutually exclusive for me then.

NF: How did you happen to focus on Stanley Brouwn, a concept artist who was born in Surinam and grew up in the Netherlands? Why did you choose his class?

MM: I had not been at the Academy for over a year. I had meantime moved into a studio of my own, at the end of the Große Freiheit, but I still went to see the Academy exhibitions. The only classroom that interested me was that of Stanley Brouwn.

NF: What was it exactly that appealed to you about his class?

I saw things there that I could not categorise, that were outside the bureaucratic ordering systems of post-minimalism, that were totally surprising for the time, with links to everyday culture and also to anthropology – that was not art with an agenda, nor was it formalism; it was full of life.

NF: What do you still remember about Stanley Brouwn? What did you find persuasive about his work? Was there perhaps a particular work that has even been influential to this very day?

MM: Yes, one of his best known works, *This way Brouwn*. A light, almost casual work, as if out of nothing.

Today, a conceptual framework is part of every artwork, nothing is possible without it. (There are a few coordinates which one can also teach or learn at the Academy.) “Concept” has become a kind of mannerism. To put it another way: There is a conceptual manner that is reeled off like a recipe. There is even a “conceptual” framework in painting, although what you see is just cats or crying dogs.

NF: In *This way Brouwn* Stanley Brouwn extended the work out in the direction of the viewers, including them in it. For that work he asked people he met by chance on the streets of Amsterdam if they could draw him the way to a particular destination on a piece of paper. The interesting point was that he asked different people about the same destination and so obtained very subjective and diverse descriptions of one and the same way to go.

MM: And these drawings hung on the gallery wall made up the exhibition. Each had a stamp on it that read: Brouwn.

NF: It was something very simple, yet it opened up whole worlds and also enabled insights into subjective route guidance and life careers. Like *mental maps*.

MM: The whole world is contained in them. On the one hand, the drawing keeps to an apparently very precise direction – like the murals by Sol LeWitt. On the other hand, there is an infinite number of possibilities for implementing or reacting to the instructions given. Maximum precision and maximum openness and freedom.

NF: However, *This way Brouwn* had an empirical basis, however. The artist was a participating observer on the street at the same time. He addressed the people and thus made them part of the artistic work.

MM: That is a current concept of sculpture today.

NF: How did you experience the art system at the time, in the 1990s? There was the tradition of Concept and Minimal Art from the 1960s, and that of the Neue Wilden or Les nouveaux Fauves*,* as of 1980s. Did you experience those movements as opposite poles? And above all: Where did you position yourself, what was your standpoint?

MM: In the 1980s the Art Academy in Hamburg leaned strongly towards conceptual art. Painting was considered to be finally dead. Needless to say, a few people were unwilling to believe that. Figuration scarcely existed or else little notice was taken of it.

NF: What group of works were you doing at that time? Was it the *5 Black Cushions*, one of your first sculptural works?

MM: I was preoccupied with *Minimalism* at that time, with function, functionality. But I wanted cushions, not boxes.

NM: Again, something commonplace.

MM: Ostensibly something commonplace: furniture, function-bound. Those cushions were covered with neoprene inside and outside. They were pitch black and swallowed the light. And they were hollow, curvaceous and contoured.

NF: How did you make those cushions? Did you use rings?

MM: Yes, oak rings. The cushions are all hollow and have functional elements like buttons, folds, openings, slits, etc. They combine functional and decorative elements.

NF: An ironic reference to *Minimalism* and a playful handling of the series?

MM: For me it was a logical continuation of the minimal (laughs); I always understood it as minimal, as a necessary completion of the minimal.

NF: But not just formally?

MM: No, also a thematic extension, adding the physical moment, the game. A continuation with ornamental variations, not functional serialism.

NF: What were you next works? How did the ornament get into your work?

MM: My involvement with functionality led me to the superfluous, to decoration, ornament. I worked with surfaces and imitation, with stucco marble, wooden decor, veneers, veining. Richard Artschwager was important for me. I wanted to make objects that eschew all classification, that are totally unnameable, in which signifier and signified cancel each other out, as for example in the work *Gummibälle/Bälle (Rubber Balls/Balls)*. Objects that do not have any specific meaning.

NF: Did architecture also play a role for you?

MM: Yes, architecture and space began to play an important role at the time.

NF: You addressed the theme of the ornament and thus also reintroduced the aspect of sensory perception into your work at a time when the dominant approach was conceptual. How did you yourself see things?

MM: First of all, I wanted to escape a perception that was focussed *a priori* on expedience. Then I believed that function, as a justification in the sense of 'form follows function', itself constituted and created an ornament. An example of this would be the Centre Pompidou, in which all the functions are placed on the outside of the building and represent décor, decorative features. They would do so, what is more, even if they were not colourful …

NF: That is how Markus Brüderlin also argued with regard to the ornament. In his exhibition "Ornament and Abstraction" he asked whether abstraction did not assume the function of ornament again, given that, like ornament, it serves as a carrier of meaning for moral and social concepts. He deconstructed that again. Is that what you mean? Is the modernist claim itself another stylistic form?

MM: If we look at Mies van der Rohe's Nationalgalerie building: the architectural structure is completely oversized, it is a show architecture conceived with a view to impact. As for the argument that the building only follows the static and architectural rules and functions, a more lightweight mode of construction could also have been used.

NF: And again, it is almost decorative, a decoratively monumental style.

How did you go about reintroducing ornament into art, taking it up again? Or did it come from working with fruit gum as your material?

MM: At the time I had started photographing a whole collection of sweets and confectionary: spirals, lines, lozenges, squares of black liquorice. Flowers, fruit, animals, "savages" …

NF: That's almost folksy ...

MM: Precisely. Symbolic meanings had been preserved in these peripheral products. For example, the work *Seepferdchen und Negerkopf (Sea horses and Negro's head)*: African faces made of liquorice.

NF: Were they eaten?

MM: Symbolic anthropophagy ... the desire to symbolically consume the strong wild man (the savage). The colonial masters were actually copied, something that is understood today as appropriation, and as a political act. Just think of the film *Les Maitres Fous*. In the 1980s the Sarotti-Mohr* was not yet politically incorrect, and the liquorice Negro was also ok.

(*The "Sarotti Mohr (moor)" is one of the most prominent figures in the history of German marketing; this figure of a small African boy with a huge turban carrying a tray full of sweets was developed in the 1920s for a chocolate company. Due to ongoing criticism for being a racist stereotype, the figure was finally changed in the year 2004.)

NF: Were you ever asked about that political aspect of those works? Were they debated at the time or not?

MM: Some colleagues were aware of the theme of the work – the white, almost transcendent sea horses and the coal-black face, like thesis and antithesis, chained inseparably to one another. The original head was only two or three centimetres high, but the macro-photograph makes it look like a portrait with an almost individual expression; every pore was visible.

NF: You transferred the material into another medium, namely, photography. Why the butterflies in your next works?

MM: Mimicry, the mimetic aspect of the butterfly wings, the extreme, magical beauty. I was fascinated by this aspect of beauty that obviously went beyond all function. Roger Callois believed that the need for decorativeness has its end in itself and goes far beyond the evolutionary functions of mimicry, like camouflage or reproduction. It is a basic need. And then of course there is metamorphosis, the process of transformation.

NF: In *Entwurf für eine Tapete* (Wallpaper design) you arranged butterflies in lines. Is this another reference to minimalism?

MM: Yes, the basis of the pattern is a grid. But all the butterflies are different, which subverts the principle of the industrial series and interprets sequencing in rows as an infinite variation without a prototype, or as an evolutionary narrative.

NF: In the 1990s the works of Rosemarie Trockel were very popular, her electric cooker pictures and her knitted works. Another work I saw then was by Silvie Fleury: she had placed high heels on a floor-work by Carl Andre, thus complementing his minimal gesture by a gesture of female-erotic symbolism from the consumer context. That way she made an ironical comment on her artistic predecessor. To this very day, those works are interpreted in a feminist context. Did you take any notice of those works, and did they play a role for you?

MM: At the time, I was looking for a space for myself, one that was not determined by dogmas, a free area. I am an artist and I am a woman, and I took my environment and my interests as my foundation. Feminism was not the motivation or the point of departure for my work. In retrospect, however, things fall into place, like a puzzle: the subversion of minimalist principles and of male- associated stylistic principles and production techniques; my lack of interest in the grand gesture; the turn to ornament and to the integration of realms marginalised as crafts; the rejection of hierarchies and of conventional value creation in art.

NF: Did you engage more intensely with Adolf Loos, for example?

MM: What is always cited is just his purely rhetorically brilliant condemnation of ornament …

What is scarcely ever mentioned is Loos's basic theme: the radical rationalisation of society by maintaining a social, gender and class hygiene … I was interested in the ideological source of this devaluation of the surface, the ornament, of beauty. Truth and surface are played off against one another as early as in Cicero's writings on rhetoric and oratory. A speech should be direct and true, like a simple country girl, and not deceptive like a made-up city woman. Anyone wishing to seriously persuade listeners must use a true and clear mode of speech, not one that is misleading and elaborate.

NF: That can also be found in Winckelmann's classicism ...

MM: It's more than two thousand years old and still persists. Loos also chose the negative example of the made-up woman, together with that of the tattooed savage, only that now the concept of truth is replaced by that of progress.

NF: Above all, the body has been increasingly ostracised over the course of history. Your ornamental works bring the body back into the equation. They involve viewers both at the cognitive level and at the physical level of sense perception.

You introduced this into your art at a time when the latter was very much shaped by discourse. In Stuttgart in the mid-1990s, for example, you lined a lift with fruit gum. That caused consternation at the time.

MM: For *Kissing Lips* I lined a small narrow functioning lift with fruit-gum lips. This produced an incredibly intense, tantalising aroma in the lift, and the walls were soft and cushion-like. A mobile boudoir …

NF: A physical and a threatening space. It made a strong impact at a time when everything else was just conceptual or formal. You were one of the first to make use of ornament to organize space and thus create a completely new experience. Your work gradually extended out into the given space, first the walls, then the floor … How did that spatial expansion of the ornament to include the floor come about?

MM: In 1992 I was invited for an exhibition at the Künstlerhaus Hamburg. My intention was to render the ornament physically and spatially perceptible, and at the same time to structure the space ornamentally. I conceived the ornament as accessible, walk-in, and for this I created vacant positions.

NF: For visitors moving around in the installation, it was both a very spatial and a physical experience. To fully grasp the ornament and the space, they had to orientate themselves and move around.

MM: Moreover, the visitors' movements in the space left traces, giving rise to a second ornament.

NF: There, the visitor was part of the work, which leads us back to Stanley Brouwn … You have quite a number of floor pieces that cannot be accessed, for example, your sand installation at documenta X. It combined with the room to make up a sculptural unit.

MM: I conceived that design in Kassel especially for the square room, and integrated a classical meander pattern into a circular ornament; the diameter of the circle is in tune with the room's measurements … as are the distances between, and the number of lines …

NF: Have you engaged with the cultural context of your different ornaments, or did you make them up as a kind of bricolage from different cultures? Where are the origins of these forms? Have they been altered and adjusted, and have they been artistically transformed?

MM: I do without all symbolic elements in my works. I regard the ornaments as an abstract construct of lines. What is specific to ornaments is that they rarely have a clearly defined cultural source, or the latter can no longer be accounted for. So, not having authors, they are public property and are being constantly changed. They turn up simultaneously in different places and travel from continent to continent. I sample fragments from the most diverse places and historical contexts.

NF: You do not wish your ornaments to be understood primarily as a work of cultural reminiscence?

MM: No, not as a work of reminiscence. They are about memory, yes, about the instigation of a subjective and personal memory process. About images of recollection. My floor works stick in your mind.

NF: Yes, you store things much more intensely when trying to synthesize the individual parts into an abstract whole, which involves a specific experience of space and time. In the course of that experience, reflection and sense perception initialize memory processes.

MM: On the one hand, you have an intense sensual-aesthetic aspect through the material and the perfect implementation, but at the same time the layout of the lines is abstract and highly complex in structure. If you are not trained, it requires an awful lot of effort to follow the lines. You have to repeatedly locate yourself anew within the context. That is a process, a perceptual process and simultaneously a knowledge process, and these cannot be separated from one another.

NF: It is not a matter of *either-or*, but of *both*. An important quality of your works is that they attract people at first sight because of their beauty and their perfection. At the same time, they are about something quite different, namely, they are an intellectual challenge. They raise the question of the source, of where it all comes from.

MM: There is something that is immediate, that is sensually perceptible. And then there is the staging of something immediate. You need to handle it conceptually if you are to be able to produce something very original, authentic.

NF: There is also the approach. One could call what you create a conceptual approach to the emotional.

MM: Yes, that's what it is about.

NF: Your own emotions do not play a major role in your art, but the 2002 work *I hate you* could almost be described as emotional. Not because it revolves around and exposes your state of mind, but because it has a very emotionalising impact on the viewer. What is the relationship between this work and your ornamental space works?

MM: All these notes and letter fragments, all the elements the installation contains, I found by chance. The formulations or the emotions behind them seemed so extreme to me, partly also so absurd or comical, that I kept them. Over time, patterns – in the sense of patterns of behaviour – emerged out of them, schemata in which the myth of individuality, individuality itself, got progressively lost.

NF: Through the presentation, the blow-up, you shifted something from the private to the public sphere. You could have presented the originals as well. This transition from intimacy to public space is like an outburst. The installation *I hate you* worked well as a space.

One great aspect of your works is that they elicit a process of awareness, be it through emotions of a social nature, or in the handling of the ornament. That is not always immediately recognised in your work. A process of reflection is triggered about the function and context of ornaments. This was brought home to me very clearly by your mask works. I asked myself, what function do masks have? What materials are they made of? For example, you take rush baskets hand-made in Asia to pieces and put the pieces together again by hand and transform them into masks. This involves a complex engagement with the mask, and with its reference system. The exciting thing about these works is that they can be perceived at several levels. One can engage visually with the surface of your masks, possibly finding them beautiful, but also with the concept behind them and the questions they raise. It functions both ways.

MM: That's very important. But I do not like…

NF: Didactics?

MM: Yes. An artist may only offer something ...

NF: In the context of western art's uptake of "primitive" clichés from other cultures, the art historian Beat Wyss uses the term cannibalisation of the "primitive". Do you see yourself as a cannibal?

MM: Don't vilify cannibals ... and I mainly cannibalise my own culture …

NF. The hybrid has meantime become a common form in many art positions, albeit much more global and multi-layered now. Today the source is not just one cultural space, but numerous cultures.

MM: I am interested in the continual shifts in value: in Vietnam people weave those baskets out of water hyacinths, a local weed, for their survival. Here they are bought because of their hint (*haut gout*) of a lost paradise. You see these root dishes all around the place, symbolizing a longing …

NF: … for the authentic, the primordial

MM: But clean, not dirty.

NF: The longing for the primitive. This has greatly increased – if you think globally. In the early 20th century, it was also a longing for folk art. Gabriele Münter and Wassily Kandinsky moved to the country in search of it.

MM: A time when folk art still existed, a culture and tradition in which people still really shaped objects individually and did not just produce them mechanically – in the sense of the Arts & Crafts movement.

NF: Not necessarily. At that time too, artists believed they were looking at something hand-made, traditional, in reverse glass painting or wooden figures. But things were already partly made by machine as

well. It is interesting that artists have always idealised that aspect and projected something onto it that was no longer there.

MM: African masks, for example. Once the indigenous people realized which masks were popular, they immediately produced just those, leaving away the usual painting on the masks because that was not in demand. Or else the paint was later rubbed off in Paris. Colour, décor was not wanted. Only a pure, restrained work was a true work. Even the “Primitives” were not pure and primitive enough, when it came to their own products. The cleaned mask was then cast in bronze by Picasso’s dealer Ambroise Vollard, manufactured as an edition and integrated into the western art canon. For the original producers, of course, that mask had no cultic value at all once it was removed from its culture-bound praxis and its involvement in tradition.

NF: Which only goes to show that your works are about precisely these issues, and that they always raise that question.

MM: Phantom pain? I am part of that culture. But the authentic is only to be found in the moment. Right now, as we sit here, this is authentic.