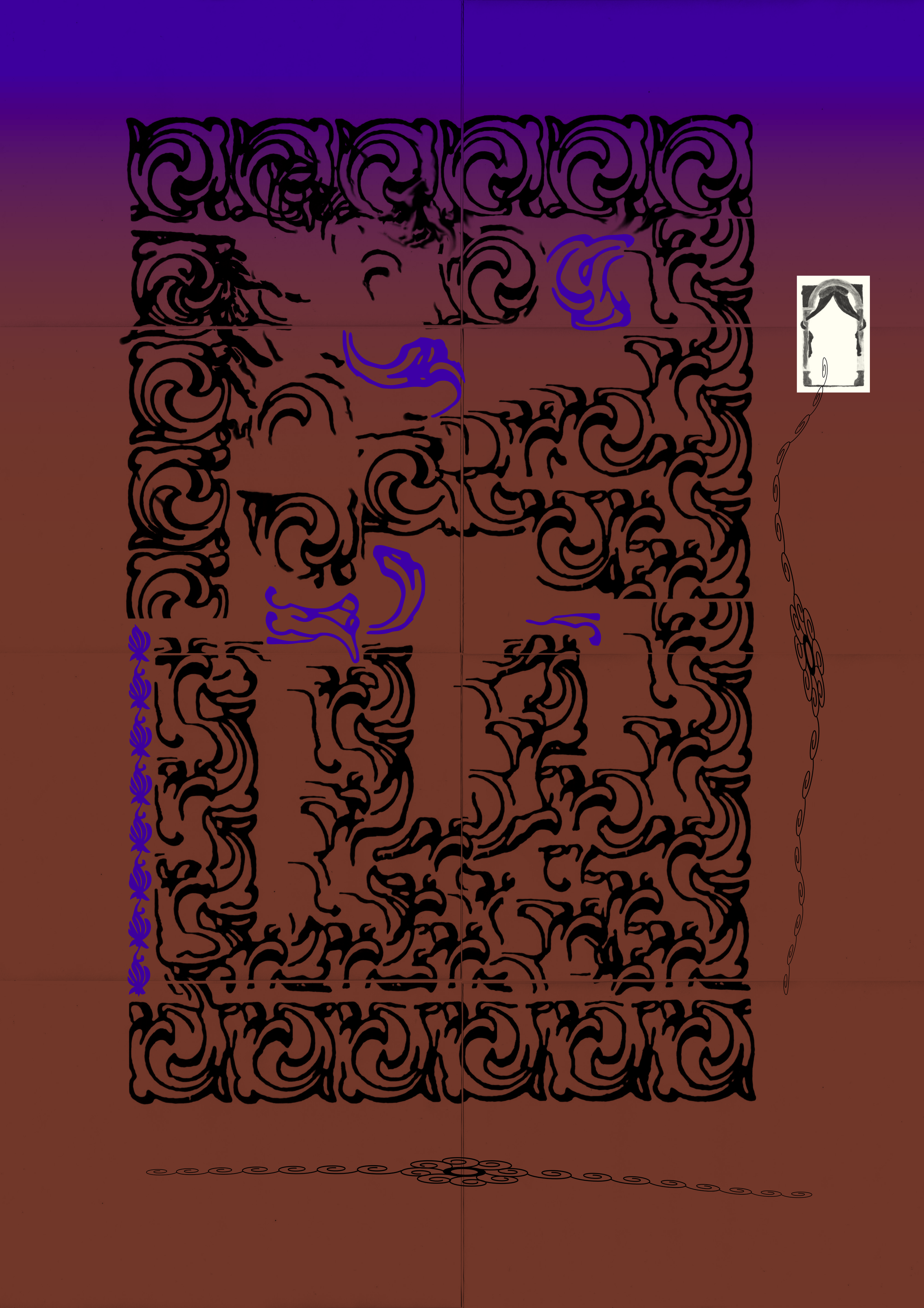

THE REDEMPTIVE QUALITIES OF ORNAMENT

'What has being a hermit brought you?' asked the Governor of the Palace of Typographic Masonry.

We were sitting in the Palace kitchen, surrounded by mosaics, carpets and other richly decorated attributes. The halls around us housed even more objects, posters and other images recounting the history of countless visual motifs. In this building, people come together to admire works of art and ask all manner of questions about design.

A month earlier, I had suggested building a hut in the Palace garden. 'Your palace wouldn't be complete without a hermitage,' is how I put it. And the Governor proved receptive to the idea – after all, any half-decent castle should have a Zen stone garden, cosmetic mosque, faux ruin or some other place of contemplation.

I built my hut using willow branches, which I wove around young willow trunks stuck in the ground in a circle. A layer of flax provided insulation, and a tent cloth would help keep out the rain. I had decided to stay in this hut for an entire month, doing nothing. I would neither read nor speak: I was curious to find out what I would come into touch with if I was no longer connected to anything.

'What being a hermit has brought me?' I repeated the Governor's question to buy time. As I spoke, I saw red cogs turning in front of his friendly, puffy face. After a month alone in silence, being so close to another human being and talking to him filled me with emotions I could barely contain.

'Not even a week had passed before I began to see patterns', I told the Governor. And I was still seeing them, although by now the dark purple wheels and sails that seemed to hover above the kitchen table were fading. Our fabric of words had started to cover them. Soon – when I would turn on my worldly screens again – this stream of patterns in my mind's eye would be washed away by a flood of external, material images.

'Recognising a pattern is a source of joy', said the Governor.

In the darkness of the hut, after only a few days, I started to see endlessly varying things. A ship with a chimney that tapered off and turned into an arrow, which then shot into a body of flesh – the structure of which appeared to be an apple – from which a black drop was squeezed. During the day, these evanescent images merged with my physical surroundings: in the sand outside my hermitage, shoots of horsetail swirled in a fan of colours and rose like miniature propellers. Inside the hut, illegible letterforms intertwined with its wall of woven wattle.

With nothing else to do, I spent hours simply taking in what appeared on this screen in my mind. I recognised prehistoric series of painted dots on rock walls: red prints made by lightning-fast fingers. I saw cartoonish, iconic creatures that reminded me of the drawing styles of cultures much older than ours.

As a hermit, going to the toilet becomes an event in its own right. And with a composting toilet you have to carefully complete a number of steps: it seemed as if I could spend the entire morning on these mundane tasks. In the outside world, I tended to watch the image streams on my technological screens during bathroom breaks. In an unexpected reversal, my visits to the back of the Palace garden became a break from my stream of internal images.

Having allowed myself to do nothing for an extended period, I gradually realised that without knowing it, I had spent years preparing for this new susceptibility – through the study of countless ornaments. Their effects had always mesmerised me, made me feel dizzy. Mosque gates surmounted with pixelated calligraphy, mosaics in underground stations, a lorry covered with reflective stickers. I immersed myself in the history of ornamentation, trying to gain a better understanding of this feeling of ecstasy.

Of course all this hard work taught me nothing, and only now – sitting cross-legged on the dried twigs that I had formed into a carpet of sorts – did I start to see things differently. If you are receptive to the delight that went into making an ornament, if you can recognise the hand of its maker, then whatever you're looking at could never be considered kitsch. Two prerequisites for the creation of an ornament are pleasure and peace.

And yet there have also been critics, who – in formally rich language that contradicts their statements – saw all those pleasing patterns as a form of dissipation. For over a hundred years, ornamentation was condemned as a waste of energy. Sober products were built to last; unadorned flatness was alleged to express equivalence. In a twist of fate, a century later a minimalist design language had become completely unconvincing. Slick, metal consumer computers no longer exuded a simple honesty, but rather a smoothing over, stripping bare and flat out exploitation. Simultaneously, wastefulness had been adopted as the key rationale behind wrinkle-free products – to be thrown away and replaced as soon as possible. Non-ornamentation had become criminal: a veil used by minimalism in an attempt to disguise the exploitation, extraction and pollution required to produce ever more laptops, interiors and lifestyles.

Shielded from the hustle and bustle of everyday life in the silence of my hut, I started to reflect on other cultural patterns as well. Which yielded new reversals: while the complex, body-decorating tattoos of indigenous cultures had long been condemned as primitive, members of a dominant and so-called developed global culture now had their tattoos applied en masse. Graffiti – the frequently suppressed expression of a spontaneous desire for form – has moved from illegal application in public space to canvasses on gallery walls. And a hundred years in, the most high-minded, modernist compositions are used to decorate cheap coffee mugs, souvenirs and train toilet doors. 'Ornament has been criminalised,' wrote a critic-art historian – in a pared-down, academic tone of voice that seemed to distance the statement from its own thesis.

And so, quite a beautiful pattern emerges in decoration's fluctuating fortunes: from waste and crime to beauty and redemption and back again. A revival undulates into a decline, like a gargoyle cast in a concrete column. An ascent appears out of nowhere, like a stucco putto, half hidden in the wall. Just above the hut I could see the young willow branches with their newly formed leaves had turned into a green crown.

Ornaments seem to be attracted to boundaries, to those liminal zones where opposites meet – if not literal transitions then figurative ones: the top of a column is delineated by sculpture; carved wood is used to frame a picture; curly compositions on canvas mark the boundaries of painting. The motif of the changing appreciation of ornament indicates the shift from cultural criticism to naturalistic observation. Only angels and hermits untrammelled by time can fully enjoy this all-too-human pattern.

'What happened to those patterns after your first week?' asked the Governor.

When the Governor came to collect me after my month of silence, I started to blabber about something called a 'primal pattern'. He must have thought I'd lost it. He took me to the Palace kitchen, which was filled with various patterned objects and other elements of ornamentation: forms that recur throughout time and which different cultures have used as motifs, each in their own way. Everything from peasant fabrics to reliquaries. He wasn't sure why he had put them in his kitchen. Maybe because they fitted so well with the tiles, or because they formed a collection like the spice rack. Or maybe because they reminded him of a cook's ability to fuse ingredients and traditions from around the world into interesting new combinations.

'What happened to my patterns after the first week?' I repeated, 'well, the first three days I thought I was losing my mind. I tried to ignore the apparitions, but of course they didn't go away. As they blended with my physical environment, I started seeing them as extensions of these surroundings. I saw ghostly petals on real stems, semi-transparent leaf formations dancing around decayed tree branches'. I'll never forget that I have this image-making entity inside me: something that sees life in any object – no matter how static it seems.

'Do you have any idea where they came from, these hallucinations?' asked the Governor, 'and did they have any meaning?'

Sitting in front of my hut in the evenings, I would watch the sun disappear behind the Palace. Its roof sank into the shadows, accompanied by incorporeal but no less visible ripples that would rise up before my eyes. They transmuted into what I can only describe as the blue space-time flames that appear when someone is teleported in a science fiction film. I felt richer than the Governor, who did have the abundant worries of taking care of the property, but had neither the time nor the opportunity to enjoy this view.

Those ripples reminded me of the quivering ridges you find on that high point of graphic ornamentation: the iconic Dutch banknotes with their colourful graphic codes that gave a worthless piece of paper its alchemical value. In their highly functional – and at the same time singularly weird – visual language these drawings presaged yet another reversal. After this graphic orgasm, money encoded with computer code instead of visuals would take over the function of paper currency.

Not having to worry about money or food for a month, simply eating what I could find in the cache of potted soups and dried nuts and fruits the Governor had left me, I remembered how I had initially dreaded the idea of spending so much time alone – without any companionship, the proximity of another body. In time I eased into it however. I started feeling comfortable in my isolation, enjoying only the company of dreams and memories. To pass the time I would reflect on the past. I would revisit art works I had seen in real life but not fully experienced due to lack of time. At times it felt like I could make them interact with the newly formed patterns in my imagination.

Another high point of graphic ornamentation that I turned to in my mind were the grey window surfaces with black-and-white frames of a series of digital, scalable images – pseudo-buttons in office baroque, based on the formal language of early computer interfaces. These faux-user interfaces were themselves surrounded by a virtual frame of unreadable computer codes that gave worthless jpegs a seemingly magical power. Like many works of art, they served as tools for financial speculation: pseudo-currencies. But regardless of who made a profit off them, these digital pictures could be appreciated by anyone. To meditate on an ornament you don't have to own it, they seemed to say.

And yet, every visual ornament is connected with money and power. At the very least an ornament tells the story of the circumstances of its own creation. With their gargoyles and grotesques, New York's high baroque, late-capitalist Gothic Revival towers are permanent embodiments of the exploitative logic, winner-takes-all mentality and 'wealth rises' ideology of their investors. While the fake marble wings and alien lobes of these buildings may draw attention away from the waste and alienation caused by the system from which they emerged, they cannot hide them altogether. Similarly, when a fabric is designed for a famous global manufacturer, even the most sincerely drawn motifs of woven wisdom are linked in some way – accusation, regret, redemption – to the company's colonial history. And even the most extraordinary printed book with handmade, enchanting endpapers has still sprouted from small pools of funds that eddy in the wake of much larger cash flows.

I had expected to miss reading. But I soon discovered that there was more than enough around me to interpret in lieu of text. The branched walls of the hut had started to resemble alien letterforms. They reminded me of a carefully calligraphed painting I had seen on the wall of a bank building. A work that not only reflected the strong hand of the painter, but also – in yet another breath-taking inversion – how much it was an integral part of a financial system ruled by an invisible hand: flash transactions carried out by opaque algorithms, disconnected from every form of human interference.

Similarly, I had seen a Renaissance book in the Palace library filled with calligraphy, comparing the relative merits of handwriting and print. Decades later, another artist had added drawings of flowers, fruits and beasts – showing the value of images compared to text. The book was paid for, possessed by and made in honour of two successive Holy Roman Emperors. Once you look at ornament this way, there is no harmoniously balanced decoration that doesn't double as a representation of inequality and chaos.

So to whom does an ornament belong? Ornaments are tributes made to the body or domain of a sovereign. Who or what is sovereign can be defined freely, imaginatively – even spiritually. The craftsperson has the pleasure of creation; the viewer has the pleasure of viewing; but here there isn't really such a thing as the pleasure of possession, for pleasure exists in the degree to which it is shared. Ownership is a category that is ridiculed by ornament. Perhaps that's why, after completion, Tibetan monks blow away their coloured sand mandala dedicated to the Great Mystery: it belongs to no one.

In my mind I thanked the Governor for allowing me to stay in the hut, as an ornament to the Palace.

'This little wavy line', I said, pointing to a detail in the colourful fabric of the Governor's suit, 'this already contains the entire story'.

The Governor sat opposite me, arms resting on the kitchen table.

'The patterns on your suit tell me how permeable our bodies are by the wavelengths that float through the air and through us – all those codes, data streams, electromagnetic radio waves used for communication, constantly penetrating our bodies'.

'It marks the boundary with the invisible', said the Governor, stroking his decorated sleeve with the back of his hand. 'Ornament begins where communication ends', he went on, 'it uses forms in a seemingly useless way, allowing it to address things beyond the functional everyday'.

Talking and listening, I increasingly returned to ordinary, patternless reality. As our conversation overwrote the beautiful images in my mind, I felt the mental clarity that I had gained through my month's silence slip away from me. While I still wanted to talk about how there's a limit to what we can know, how rationality only goes so far – with whole territories remaining impenetrable to calculation – I could no longer find the words.

'In conclusion', the Governor said, 'ornament celebrates'.

I did not immediately answer, and so the Governor asked: 'What were you seeing by the end of your month? What were your patterns celebrating?'

Beyond the Palace garden, the noise of the distant city sounded like a faint echo of a long-forgotten, fantastic jungle. My mind turned to the architectural urban decorations that refer to the extreme strangeness of wild nature – so heat waves and floods don't have to serve as our only reminders. Blob-shaped, organically designed furniture; algorithms based on plant growth that have been used to generate balcony railings and brick patterns. The processes have been tweaked by designers, whose hand can only just be discerned in automated, large-scale construction processes that are otherwise obscure, disconnected from any human scale. Ornament itself is a living thing, as organic as our nails and hair. It is an externalisation of internal processes: an extension of our living imagination.

While I had grown used to the boredom, I could not accustom myself to sitting still for long. I kept going over memories and fantasies. The dots and lines that danced before my eyes reminded me of similar patterns on dozens of screens, seamlessly affixed to the walls of the departure lounge of our nation's largest airport. Every day, these drawings would change into new, vibrant form combinations. After a while it seemed you were no longer looking at the images themselves, but at a direct manifestation of the energy that coursed through the hardware behind the screens.

In fact, this airport portal designed by an artist-programmer was what first inspired me to set up a hermitage. I had spent an entire work day in front of its screens – doing nothing, simply looking and trying to fathom what went on behind those dynamic walls. The computers' neural networks encode, calculate, mutate and adapt. These processes are hidden from view, but when they gain visual form the emerging patterns tell us something about what goes on beneath. At first the multi-layered images had struck me as some weird user interface on board an alien spaceship. But in fact, they shed light on the most impenetrable inventions of our dark age: the invincible chess computers with their superhuman strategies, the countless satellites displacing the stars in the firmament and the mindboggling results of artificial imagination.

This ornamental portal marked the entryway between Earth and the heavens – similar to how the indecipherable inscriptions on the Viking gate Valgrind announce the boundary of Valhalla, how the Cosmatesque mosaics in Catholic churches connect the secular world with the sacred, or how the blocks of colourful image markings on the facade of the national Institute for Sound & Vision signify the transition from the here-and-now to the forever-after. All of them serve as a boundary between our unequal and fleeting, wordly empire and that other – at least in the mind – eternal kingdom of equality.

In the solitude of my hut – my captain's quarters without a ship – the arrows, stripes and colour fields I saw soon appeared to me as the constituent parts of a single, ever-changing and infinitely larger ornament. In silence and peace I saw busier, wilder and stranger images than anything I had ever seen in a city filled with advertising displays. A primordial pattern, in which every motif – made or as yet unmade – had its place.

Something resembling a bull stood on a rock outcrop, its head turned away, rising up. An alien spaceship captain with the face of a 17th-century grotesque. A craft made of points of light, with some sort of control panel from which living algorithms could control people. Two machine elves curved into each other, holding something in their raised hands. A strange silence, like when a bullet that has been shot straight upwards hovers still for a moment before descending. The elves wordlessly communicated that structured skill and flamboyant pleasure that blend into one another elicit vertigo. For a moment, this reeling sensation allows the enjoyment of a mystery that generally remains hidden beneath the surface of the everyday.

I could try to interpret all these images, or simply let them pass for what they were: forms with an inescapable harmony, without meaning, without precedent. Forms that simply are: a pattern with no message, like wormholes in deadwood, a pattern *as* message.

In the intertwining branches around me, I recognised the ancient scribbles of an alien species, writing extra-terrestrial fables in a primordial language that somehow, through aeons of evolutionary processes, had found its way into the neurons of the human brain. But of course, I could only see it that way because I knew I was looking at accidental forms, generated by a lively but under-stimulated imagination. I had turned to a storehouse of remembered treasures, acquired through experience and culture, and projected onto whatever it found in solitude, silence and darkness.

By the end of the month I had learned to let the apparitions come and go. The freely swirling snowflakes and flower petals marked yet another transition. As these shapes darted into the corners of my eyes, I wanted to jump into the emptiness that I saw behind them. This is what most of our universe looks like. Emptiness is the norm, the splendour of our surroundings the exception. Zooming in, we find an alternating pattern of tremendous activity and relative inactivity, extending from the most distant galaxies to the smallest nucleus in the body of a man sitting still in a hut. I felt at peace, as if I myself had become a field of blinking dots: part of an endless weave, the primal ornament that celebrates how everything around us is animated.

A bell rang in the hall, and the Governor excused himself. On my own again, I felt a remnant of the calmness of the past month. I looked at the decorated tiles above the sink with new sobriety. No maker could deny being part of a system based on extraction and exploitation. Decriminalisation of ornament was a dream. Yet there were also makers who managed to cultivate the abundance of their times and share it with others. And because most of what was produced today would eventually disappear – apart from some things that are deemed worth preserving – future historians would have a distorted impression of our age of decadence: 'the age in which sustainability emerged'. As with erotica, the art is not to waste your excess, but to transform it into the pleasure of others.

I could hear enthusiastic chatter coming from a nearby hall. By now I knew my way around the Palace, and I quietly sneaked out through the terrace doors. Fortunately, the Governor hadn't asked me what I had come in touch with by having no contact for a month. Because frankly, the mystery surrounding the source of this desire for form had only increased. Still: the wealth I had experienced – of the celestial primal ornament – remains accessible to anyone who chooses to sit quiet for long enough.

As I walked out of the garden, I saw the silhouette of my willow hut outlined against the sleek Palace wall. The play of branches suddenly spelled out a sentence: Ornament is abundance, dreaming of a world without scarcity.

DIRK VIS

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