Jennifer Allen

Olaf Holzapfel is fascinated by patterns. He likes to travel. And he has holes in his shoes –at least in the pair he is wearing when I visit him in his Berlin studio. But I find out about his shoes much later. First, he shows me countless patterns, which he has documented from his trips over the years to many destinations, close and far from Berlin: bright yellow sidewalk stripes for the visually-impaired in Tokyo; half-timbered structures from the German Harz region; and the many ways of turning tree trunks into fences, gates and enclosures throughout Patagonia.

To be clear: I see 'patterns'. Holzapfel doesn't use this nomenclature, nor seem to like it very much at all. Maybe because all of these examples teeter between order and chaos: between the regimen of a pattern and its toxic antigen. On the one hand, a harmony and a similarity make for easily recognizable patterns, at least in my eyes. On the other hand, these seem erratic, somehow broken by chance and location. Maybe a bit wonky, like a few dancers in a long chorus line who fall out of step. And so the yellow sidewalk stripes for the visually impaired in Tokyo look tidy – with either round bumps or ridged lines – yet they move all over place, doubling up here, veering off there: obsequious guides who suddenly lose their bearings. The half-timbered structures from the Harz region belong unmistakably together as a traditional, regional, architectural vernacular, yet each structure bears a pattern as unique as a spider web, waiting to be filled with white plaster instead of little black flies. The wooden fences, gates and enfencements that divide up Patagonia constitute a family, yet the shapes of the tree trunks and the changing curves of the landscape distinguish one stretch of fencing from the next, like the countless relatives in an extended clan: tree and family tree. In all of these examples, one senses an intelligible plan – perfected from above, messed up from below.

When we leave Holzapfel's studio, we are both exhausted after our virtual tour around the world. When it starts raining down on Berlin, that's when I learn about the little holes in his shoes, which he usually wears only inside his studio. I wonder if they have become like well-worn charms, whose magic might be rubbed off by the feet instead of the hands. It's too late and too far and too much trouble to turn back for another pair. So, as we continue walking, the artist starts to hop from the flat sidewalk to its cobblestoned edges, where the raindrops run down between the stones instead of gathering together in flat little puddles (and instead of then seeping through the holes in his shoes, into his socks and onto his feet). It's a heuristic method, brought about by a sudden change in the local weather. Here, a plan from below, messed up from above. Yet the similarity is striking between his works and his shoes. A system adapts to a new set of circumstances while remaining true to its core characteristics.

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The word 'pattern' is itself filled with this ambiguity. Certainly not in theory but oh-so-often in practice. The definitions of 'pattern' include a 'decorative design'; an 'intelligible form'; a 'model'; as well as an 'ideal for others to follow'. That all sounds fine, until, for each of these definitions, one starts to imagine some historical examples, which quickly end up contradicting each other. Suddenly, the artisan decorating the white tablecloth with embroidered, coloured threads starts to approximate the scientist refining a formula to describe comet movements, or the hacker cracking a password. The economist quoting statistics can swiftly resemble the politician praising examples of civic courage among the citizens, or even the fashion designer deciding on a dress pattern, not to mention the mannequin wearing the finished dress on the catwalk. If one moves from the people using the patterns to the patterns themselves, then there's not much difference between abstraction and ornamentation, despite their polarized history. Abstraction and many manifestations of ornamentation moved decisively away from figuration, often veering towards the repetition of ordered arrangements. Compare Josef Albers's squares – his fields of glowing colours, embedded into each other – with a baroque frieze, setting off a little storm of swirls at the ceiling. Or place Minimal Art alongside Islamic art: one finds a sweeping rejection of figuration for geometric shapes, from a boxy metallic protrusion to an angular Kufic script. Weigh the pixels of digital images – still or moving – against the stitches of woven cloth or carpets, which are all numerically driven (and which have given rise recently to a wave of contemporary tapestry art works, woven from digital photographs). When it comes to patterns, there's not much separating abstraction from ornamentation and, as the digital tapestries suggest, art from arts and crafts.

Holzapfel not only collects patterns but also combines vastly different types, as if to underscore their similarities, especially in the realm of craft. His monograph *Region – die Technik des Landes* [*Region – The Technology of the Land,* 2012] presents the half-timbered structures of the Harz alongside Sorbian embroidered shawls and what he calls „Light pictures - *Lichtbilder*" – painting-like frames filled with tightly-woven hemp ropes, produced according to a traditional Polish-German method for twisting dried grasses, herbs and wild flowers together. Through Holzapfel, the builder meets the embroiderer meets the farmer and his farmhands; the houses become akin to the clothing which is worn by their inhabitants and which is in turn like the landscape surrounding them. These three patterns – architectural, textile, agricultural – form a kind of cosmos, an organic continuity between the natural world and the constructed world. The structures, the shawls and the ropes exist as fibrous lines, from large (beams) to medium (ropes) to teeny-tiny (threads). Perhaps to emphasize such shifts in scale and application, the artist produced the half-timbered structures in a range of sizes: as big as the final structures themselves and as diminutive as architectural models for them. Of course, whatever their size, these structures also exist as sculptures. Although Holzapfel's efforts become works of art, they remain bound to craft and to nature. The half-timbered sculptures and the light pictures were actually made together with farmers and craftspeople; the works still carry the strong scent of their origins as wood and grass, as trees and fields. While turning age-old handiwork into contemporary art work, the artist unsettles the division between nature and culture, between tradition and modernity, especially in its highly industrialized chapter. The much-celebrated break with tradition that was modernity – the migration of labourers from fields to factories, the shift from handiwork to mass manufacturing with machines – starts itself to break down, because these realms are all infused by a geometrical-material principle of patterns. Whatever the labouring power – nature, human hand, horse, machine, microchip or a combination of these forces – the products are marked by an unmistakable visual echo: again, again, again... again, again, again...

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Two arguments seem important to mention here. First: Adolf Loos's essay 'Ornament und Verbrechen' ['Ornament and Crime'], which was first performed as a lecture in 1908 and which broke with ornament in an almost brutal way, shoving architects, designers and even artists out of the gilded afterglow of the 19th century and towards the modernism, functionality, abstraction and industrialization of the still fresh-faced 20th century. Loos – starting with Papuan natives who decorate absolutely everything from their boats to their bodies – denounces ornament among his contemporary Europeans as a refusal to be part of modern civil (also civilized) society. While the Papuans are innocent natives who really don't know any better, according to the architect, 'modern' humans who decorate their bodies with tattoos must be either criminals or degenerates. His proof: eighty percent of the inmates in some prisons sport tattoos. Moreover, those with tattoos roaming around free in the streets must be latent criminals or degenerate aristocrats – although Loos might have changed his mind if he'd considered the omnipresence of tattoos today. From Papuans and prisoners, it's a tiny leap to... artists. For Loos sees ornament as the ur-origin of visual arts, which are driven by an equally primitive eroticism, even though that drive led Beethoven to pen his Ninth Symphony (1824). Ergo: "the man of our time who smears walls with erotic symbols from an inner drive is a criminal or a degenerate." Loos seems to be talking about painters, but he isn't naming any names. His mantra – "*evolution of culture is equivalent to the removal of ornament from useful objects*" (his italics, my translation) – could be seen as an attempt to banish artists, their embellished, useless art and their erotic, smeared urges from the Paradise of design, be it architectural, industrial or graphic. Yet Loos's condemnation of ornament is so total, so dev-

astating – he can't even stand the figurative decorations on top of gingerbread – that his message was bound to have a broader impact. Instead of liberating design from art, he seems to have given the impetus to liberate both design *and* art from ornament. And instead of leaving Paradise, many artists threw out not only their gold paint but also figuration in order to be able to stay.

Of course, a few years after the lecture, Loos backed up his mantra with an architectural manifesto: a bank completed in 1912 on the Michaelerplatz in Vienna. Back then, as the legend goes, the building caused a scandal because of its clean facade – a public uproar that eventually forced Loos to add quaint flowerboxes to the 'eyebrow-less' windows. Yet, by today's standards, Loos's facade verges on Rococo – at least at street level – with its heady combination of marble, glass and gold, topped off with serpentine-stemmed lamps and heavy-metal plaques: part coat of arms, part exotic fetish mask, protecting the bank against evil spirits. Today, the Loos building suggests not a crime-stopper for ornament and its gang of criminality, degeneracy and eroticism, but a convincing case for the civilized cohabitation of an ornamental tradition within an architectural modernity. Who does that better than Loos? Certainly postmodern architects tried – and failed all too often. Loos's rejection of ornament – however contradictory, hypocritical or misguided, however colonialist, elitist and racist – looks like the first step on a path that leads not only to *Bauhaus* but also to the International Style realized by an industrialized generation nurtured by machines. Clean, simple ideals could be built in any city, from Montréal to Buenos Aires, whatever the local traditions, weather, tastes and regional ornamental practices – come what may to curly-wurly kitsch. The cleaner, the simpler, the more universally appealing. It's another little step from Loos's mantra to Kazimir Malevich's 'Black Square' (1915), the square that pushed the religious icon out of the coveted room corner, or even to Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' (1917), the infamous urinal decorated with nothing more than a black fake signature. A few more little steps first – and some big ones later – come Abstraction, Minimalism and then Conceptual Art.

Today, it may be difficult to understand why so many generations of artists seemed to follow the call of Loos – more foe than friend of the visual arts – by banning ornament from their art works. Or why so many artists equated the death of ornament with the death of figuration since so many manifestations of ornament were abstract. Perhaps it was that comment about those figurative decorations on the gingerbread... Or perhaps the steps that artists took following Loos's mantra moved not only sharply away from ornament and figuration, but also gently towards architecture and design, if only towards its new-found clean simplicity. Malevich's square, suspended in the corner of a room like a brooding boxer ready to do some damage in the ring, has an unmistakably architectural quality, while Duchamp's fountain, even if dried up, remains a product of industrial design, with a shock delivered by its bare-naked utility, hidden by the little fig-leaf of being turned upside-down. Whether or not artists were inspired by Loos, to call an art work 'ornamental' is to deliver a stinging critique. Even today, calling a work 'decorative' still constitutes an insult. At least, I've never met an artist who liked to hear those adjectives live. Except Holzapfel. Again, as his selection of patterns demonstrates, there's a fine line – if any line at all – between ornament and abstraction, between the gilded traditions of ornament and the sleek modernity of abstraction, precisely because both have been historically marked by a drive to eliminate figuration. The super sad true paradox? Even if artists had hoped to escape the crime of ornament by trading in figuration for abstraction, they essentially ended up right back at square one. Instead of painting big bad black squares, Holzapfel is more than happy to fashion such abstract squares out of the ornamental tradition by crafting hay ropes. With this combination, the artist suggests that Loos was not so much *against* ornament as he was *for* patterns.

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The second argument concerns orality and literacy along with their impact on crafts and the visual arts. Literate societies are marked by writing and reading skills; oral societies lack them. That absence does not mean that oral societies are lacking intelligence or memory; they simply have different ways of learning and of recollecting the past. Yet much like Loos's criminal and degenerate ornament, orality tends to be associated with culturally backward societies – if not indigenous peoples, like the Papuan natives whom Loos exonerates despite their tattoos. By extension, it's difficult to imagine modernity in Europe and beyond without widespread literacy and the mass mandatory education that it made possible. Orality knows no difference between crafts and art, although products of handiwork are usually classified by literate societies as crafts, for their usefulness and for the anonymity of their makers. While visual arts are always changing, crafts, by contrast, evolve very, very slowly over time; the similarity of craft products excludes them from visual arts because these products look not only the same but also timeless – so old and unchanging that they are outside of history. Visual arts manifest the historical moment of their creation while crafts seem to refuse the passage of time. In the absence of literacy and its textbooks, the oral products of craft are created through traditions, passed on verbally and mimetically, from one generation to the next. Tradition resists change, first, because changes cannot be written down and set aside for future consultation; second, because things have always been done that way. Yet there is always some room for manoeuvre, which comes about through ever-shifting circumstances and craft's stubbornly organic connection to one particular place – the need for adaptation, a sudden lack or abundance of

natural materials, their heterogeneous shapes, the necessity of a cold winter, an exceptionally wet spring, a sudden rainfall in Berlin... Orality must manage to make a compromise between the weather, the landscape, the natural materials found there and its own traditions of handiwork, which have been re-enacted in the same place over centuries – not imported from some faraway place with a set of instructions, let alone a team of experts, like the International Style. In short, oral crafts are linked to place, for better or worse, while literate arts are bound to time and the unstoppable passage of every single moment into history. And just as oral societies resist the march of time, literate societies have often proved allergic to the contingencies of place.

Holzapfel – who keeps a firm foot in craft and art through his techniques and through his collaborations with craftspeople and locals – manages to fuse orality and literacy: the contingencies of place and the celerity of time. This fusion is no small feat: the historical antagonism between orality and literacy is far more stubborn and entrenched than the polarization between ornament and abstraction. I'm not quite sure how he manages this trick, but I'm one hundred percent certain that he makes an incredible amount of work look like a faint sleight of hand. Holzapfel is neither the artist who is expected to fly in and out for an exhibition opening with an art work that could be exhibited pretty much anywhere, as the designs of the International Style were built pretty much anywhere. Nor is he a full-fledged site-specific artist, customizing his work to a particular location, reacting to a found set of circumstances or even adapting his work to them. And he's definitely not a relational aesthetics artist, producing art works as social interactions with locals or with visitors at an exhibition because these social interactions – with craftspeople and locals – remain invisible to the viewer of the final works. I'm guessing here, but I would liken him to a kind of ethnographer who has refined the classic methodology of 'participant observation' with what might be called 'participant production'. Instead of flying in with his own designs for art works, he seems to take them from or to shape them to the particular labours – from craft to technique, from hay ropes to sidewalk stripes – that he finds in a particular location, be it metropolis, village, countryside or region. Even if Holzapfel isn't keen on the term 'patterns', his gift seems to lie in being able to arrive somewhere – anywhere, from the Harz to Patagonia – spot the organic patterns and then figure out who makes them and how.

The next part is trickier: getting other people to collaborate with him, convincing them to change their traditions, to adapt their crafts to a change that does not come from the weather, the landscape, the natural materials, the necessity of a cold winter or even from an exceptionally wet spring, but from Holzapfel himself. The artist is not the weather but another entity that can descend from the skies, usually from an airplane: the stranger. As any ethnographer will tell you, it's a challenge to

insert oneself into another society, especially oral ones or orally marked ones which tend to mistrust the stranger – if only for his novelty, which threatens to unsettle collective memory. Holzapfel – who speaks only German and English – has not tried to integrate himself into all of the places where he has worked, to 'go native'. His strangeness must appear somehow unassuming, curious, even earnest. So when he asks, say, in Patagonia, "Can we make one of your gates as a free-standing gate – a door to nowhere?" the answer is, "Why not?" Embedded in all of Holzapfel's works – yet impossible to see – is this labour of observation (picking up the patterns) and of participation (getting other people to adapt their crafts to his art works).

The light pictures are a perfect example of balancing craft and art, orality and literacy, space and time. The hay ropes and the method for making them have been handed down across the generations according to the rules of an oral society, even if the locals have long learned to read and to write. As the artist explains, the ropes are made for him in a village on the border between Lower Silesia and Poland. The villagers have explained that the ropes are not a Polish tradition but might be a German one or even a Sorbian one. Right away, one can see the telltale signs of orality: many know how to make the ropes, but no one knows where the practice came from, precisely because the technique has not been written down or transmitted through literacy as historical information. This craft is remembered by the body, not learned by the book. Another sign of orality, albeit its dissolution: the ropes were once used to make beehives and to insulate houses. But today, like many craft techniques replaced by technology, the ropes have persisted in ritual alone: namely, the spring celebrations when they are used for the costumes of the mythological 'hay men', who announce the end of winter. It's hard not to think of Loos's Papuans – right in the heart of Europe! – for whom fully useful objects, from boats to bodies, can also be ornamental. Yet just as there was no problem in using the ropes for food, housing and costumes in the past, there seems to be no division between working and celebrating in the present. As Holzapfel notes, the method for making the ropes – which can measure seven to eight metres – involves seven to eight people twisting the right combination of hay, grass and wild flowers, with one person per metre to maintain the twisted tension. Yet the young men who make the ropes don't make them for a living; they meet at the barn after work, listen to music, drink beer and twist the ropes together, as if they were at a party. While the artist relies on locals to select the right hay – perfectly coloured, aged and dried – he then uses the results for his own art works, weaving them into a frame of ash wood. This job is also a collaborative, labour-intensive one: one person weaves while the others feed the rope, keep twisting it and keep it taut. The artist calls the results "light pictures" because hay symbolizes light and sun in many cultures, not just in Poland and Germany. Finally, this

title – however literate – manifests the integrated organic cosmos of orality: a continuity between the sun in the sky, what grows on the earth and how the people who live there use it and enjoy it. What we see in the end is a craft turned art as well as an oral history recorded in a visual way instead of being written down. While Holzapfel removes the ropes from their environment, he does not transfer their memory from orality over to literacy. That may be his compromise, his madness. But certainly our pleasure.

Dr. Jennifer Allen is a writer living in Berlin.