

Jürgen Raap

“Cascadas” and “Cañas”

(Cascades and Canes)

About the works of Janina Lamberty

The artist Janina Lamberty worked previously as a topographer and this experience in the field of surveying still is reflected in her creative art work today. Observation of nature and the measuring of natural phenomena and processes is an existential necessity, rooted in the basic anthropological makeup of mankind. Watching out for impending changes in the weather was already of vital importance to Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer cultures, and even more so for the later, settled farming cultures. Without their knowledge of astronomy, the Phoenicians would not have been able to embark on any of the sea voyages they undertook, over distances that astound us today, given the conditions they faced. To measure one needs general orientation points and standard measures, in other words, a reference system. For elevations, sea level is taken as zero. In the aesthetics of antiquity we find an idealisation of things balanced, of pleasing proportions, and corresponding philosophical arguments for this. Thus, the word in ancient Greek for “souls”, “**sophrosyne**”, actually means “health of the diaphragm” and relates to an inner virtue of moderation, the “golden middle way” between strength and flexibility, between indulgence and ascetism, profligacy and meanness...

What has crystallised out of this continual endeavour, throughout the history of aesthetics and art, to find the “right balance” is an understanding of **harmony** that is of key importance today in the art and design concepts of Janina Lamberty.

Special note:

To this end, Lamberty uses a definition of design that rejects any distinction between “pure” and “applied” art, which since the 19th century has been the norm in German-speaking countries but which is not used in Anglo-American countries. When, for instance, the British designer and social reformer, William Morris founded the Arts and Crafts movement, their guiding principle was not based on belief in an ethos of craftsmanship versus mechanised mass production but chiefly on an endeavour to infuse everyday life with art to such an extent that through attention to aesthetics, the tastes of society would be refined. When Morris devoted himself simultaneously to a reform of typography, to poetry and architecture, and to making furniture, he made no distinction between art and craftsmanship.

1. Fields

Geodesic methods for defining reference systems, by placing empirically observable points in a certain relation to one in order to determine topographical differences in heights and depths of the terrain, are taken up by Janina Lamberty in a series of art works in paper (2002/2003): The patterned structures represent the Catalonian landscape, as we might perceive terraced fields from an aircraft. The starkness of these abstract, coloured fields and lines anticipates the basic principle of her later sculptures.

While in everyday reality, rural landscapes are arranged according to practicalities such as administrative redistribution of common agricultural land or the agricultural principle known as the three-field system, by which one of every three fields is always left for a season to regenerate, in painting the arrangement of coloured fields can be dictated by purely artistic criteria, e.g. light-dark variations or contrasts. Lamberty's works in paper are a departure from the representational function of the classic flat picture. As with American colour field painting of the 1960s, the aim of her works is not to form a "picture window" but to function purely as part of a wider continuum.

The rhythms created by these coloured fields are reminiscent of the grid-like appearance of maps, in which a network of degrees of longitude and latitude is filled with outlined continental areas. These outlines are variously coloured, individual colours each having an indexing function and indicating a certain elevation (green = flat landscape, yellow = medium elevation, brown = hills, white = high ground, above the snow level, blue = sea level). For Janina Lamberty, however, the colour is stripped of such semiotic meanings. Even when she refers to natural life in all her work periods, the rhythmic pulsing of these colour fields here is a matter of an art-immanent pictorial language.

2. Cascades and Wind-Signs

Since 1998 the artist has worked chiefly with Japanese paper. She has even used paper she has produced herself from plant fibres. Paper samples brought back from her travels have often specific links to their place of origin, e.g. Florence: the Florentine Lily.

These sheets of paper are bent, folded, made wavy or put together as in a collage. The corrugations give the two-dimensional sheet of paper a spatial-relief quality, while the collage-like patches of paper set up a rhythm through the repeating of sections of the colour pattern.

The distribution of broader signal-red or bright blue stripes on a pastel background or of floral ornaments and patterns with thin stripes on these wavy paper forms is reminiscent of certain trends in new music, where John Cage, as a prime example, gives the operation of chance the same importance as the conscious composition of tonal sequences.

Special note:

John Cage (1912-1992) is considered to be the founding father of aleatory in contemporary music. His method of composition involved chance operations such as the tossing of coins or throwing of dice, which was a throwback to the oracle script "I-Ging" from Ancient China and to principles of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. In so far as the determining of acoustic events to be heard in a piece of music is subject to chance (indetermination), the composition should be seen as a *process* rather than an object set in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end" (David Wendland). Cage's ideas may have stemmed from Dadaist and later, Surrealist experiments with chance operations in art and poetry in the 1920s.

The Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) published a poem in 1897, entitled "*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*" (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance), which, both optically and in its subject matter, is conceived as verse and performance poetry, with complex typographical

puzzles spread across double pages of the book. This fascinated the Dadaists, while Raoul Hausmann's dadaistic collages of letters later inspired John Cage. When incorporating elements of chance, Janina Lamberty aligns herself with the Modern tradition initiated by Mallarmé, a tradition upholding the equality of created forms and found objects, of the rational and the subconscious.

2.1

From 2001 to 2002 Janina Lamberty was occupied with her works in paper known as "**Cascadas**", the Cascade series, dealing with the transformation of waterfall motifs. This led on, in 2003/2004, to her sculptural works, the "Cascadas" (columns) and "Cañas" (canes).

The canes are divided into sections of different colours, representing the refraction of light in water.

The starting point of these "Cascadas" is the floral patterned wrapping paper mentioned above. In other works, Lamberty likes to use special papers, made from onion skins or asparagus. One of the first stages in creating the "Cascadas" is the making of rhythmic waves in the paper, and for this the choice of material for the paper is crucial. This corrugation is a necessary prelude to the second phase of the work, the arrangement of the found bits of paper into a collage. Here colouring is the essential factor and the emphasising of colours within the waves of the paper. The rhythmic interplay of the colour tones is reminiscent of a waterfall accelerating as it cascades down.

How to portray time sequences and motion in a picture is an age-old problem in Art. Futurism had a characteristic way of representing dynamic motion sequences, for instance by the use of simultaneous contrasts where juxtaposition or even by the superimposing or fusion of moving objects in the fixed image. In 1912, for example, Marcel Duchamp painted the Cubist-Futurist-style work "Nude, going downstairs" as a visual sequence of time capsules, superimposed on each other like X-ray pictures – an idea that Lamberty explores in her series on the waterfall motif, though formally in quite a different way, that is as in a vertical series of "coloured tracks".

2.2

The series "Sujetar el momento" (Capturing a moment, 2004) is also about the passing of an instant and concentration on one particular moment, as in Japanese Zen bow shooting. In his "trap pictures" ("Setting a trap to chance"), Daniel Spoerri fixes a particular moment at a table after a meal in time, and sticks glasses, dirty plates, cutlery, ash trays with their contents and empty bottles in their respective places. Lamberty lets canes drop from a height and then aims to capture a particular point in their falling down (see Point 3., "Cañas").

The external course of events can be described in physical terms through the action of gravity, following Newton's law of gravity. A film of such an event will present a sequence of single images from which individual stages of the event

can be reconstructed. Classical picture histories and modern comic strips use a similar division of images to tell a story.

Special note:

For the aesthetics of the 18th Century, Lessing's "Laocoon" essay was of central importance. While literature reconstructs a plot with an obvious development (succession), painting can only give an apparently static account, whose various parts develop beside each other in space, that is, as a series of images. If, however a whole story is to be told in the one picture then the painter must focus on the portrayal of a single moment, and this "fruitful moment" will let imagination run free. To quote from Lessing: "The more we see, the more we should be able to add on mentally."

The whole composition is concentrated on the possibility of portraying this one moment in the complete story and incorporating in it what comes before and after. In a similar way, stills are selected today to represent a film.

In an equally valid way, Janina Lamberty's pictorial language focuses on particularly potent moments of concentration.

2.3.

"Señal del viento)" (Sign of the Wind) is the title of a series of works produced in 2004. Wire wrapped up in corrugated paper represents the natural process by which a strong wind can shape a landscape, like sand dunes along a beach or in the desert. A second series of the same name (2005) consists of sail-type shapes. How the individual colour fields are arranged in relation to one another is subject to the principles of chance (just as in nature, where even drifts of sand themselves bring about chance arrangements).

3. Cañas

The Spanish word "Cañas" means "canes". The "Cañas" that Lamberty has produced since 2005 are up to 120 cm long. Her canes are made of straw wrapped in dyed Japanese paper. The wrapping of the canes should be seen as an independent stage of the working process. They are finally fixed in artist's resin varnish.

The artist lets these canes fall by the Mikado principle and fixes them with glue in the positions in which they chance to land (see above). In this way, twirls, whirls and bunches are formed like sheaves of corn. One sees points of concentrated colour, such as an intensification of red tones, and this emphasis is a sign that it is not pure chaos that is at play here but an accentuation and visualisation of chance in operation.

Again, there is nothing portrayed here, but instead these objects can be seen as the **artistic transformation** of physical forces that operate in nature in just the same way. Artistic correction or intervention comprises no more than 20 percent of the production process in the Canes series.

Intervention in the operation of chance serves to aestheticize nature, as in various cultural disciplines such as garden design. Take, for example, topiary of trees and hedges in European Rococo landscapes or in Japanese Bonsai trees. Where a symmetrical underlying structure is recognised among the Canes, this targets our sense of orientation: The seat of our sense of balance is

the cerebellum. This is why we perceive symmetrical order is aesthetically pleasing, indeed perfect, while asymmetry causes an emotional disturbance of our sense of balance.

Special note:

Lamberty's handling of space and the setting up of rhythms in her canes series invites associations with the sculptural dynamic forms created by the Duesseldorf sculptor Norbert Kricke (1922 – 1984). In 1954 Kricke defined his sculptural principle with these words: "My problem is not with mass or figure, but with space and movement." At the same time, it is also a question of thematising temporal sequences. In the 1950s Norbert Kricke began to make abstract spatial sculptures from carved or tubular sticks. These formations of thin and sometimes bent wire rods remind one of the lines on a sheet of paper. However, they do not surround the space or a form like an outline; instead these sculptural lines are to be seen as directional signs pointing towards space. They represent sculptural congealed motion in space, as if a sequence of different positions of the rods had been fixed in space.

Meditative, contemplative and ritualised moments play a decisive role in the throwing down and arrangement of rods.

In Japanese aesthetics, the origin of ceremonial procedures such as this grew out of the Shamanistic principles of the ancient Shinto religion. The performance of a ritual, such as the Kagura masked dance, did not originally require a temple; instead a temporarily sacred space was staked out in an everyday setting with strings and paper flags and was used as the site of action only for the duration of the ritual, after which it was restored to its mundane state. Here we see a cultural and religious reason for the above mentioned fixing on the critical moment of an act and the "fruitful" point of portrayal.

An important moment in a ritual cannot be long-lasting, but during the ceremony draws towards it a concentration of (life)energy – a principle employed later, for instance in the ceremonial preparation of ink, in the concentrated contemplative process of writing with a calligraphy pen and indeed, in all other cultural and ritual techniques used by the Japanese.

Thus it can be claimed that the "Cañas" (canes) show a recollection to the origins of all art. With regard to the aesthetics of presentation, the canes are presented in exhibition settings as reliefs or wall objects. One variation of this consists of free-standing Plexi-glass columns, the canes inside them are sewed together and aligned, which in consequence signifies the congealment of chance. In the end, it is one of the characteristics of our human (all-too-human) condition that we wish things should stay as they are, and that the ever-fleeting moment should become tangible - or put philosophically in a slightly different way: that phenomenology merges into ontology.