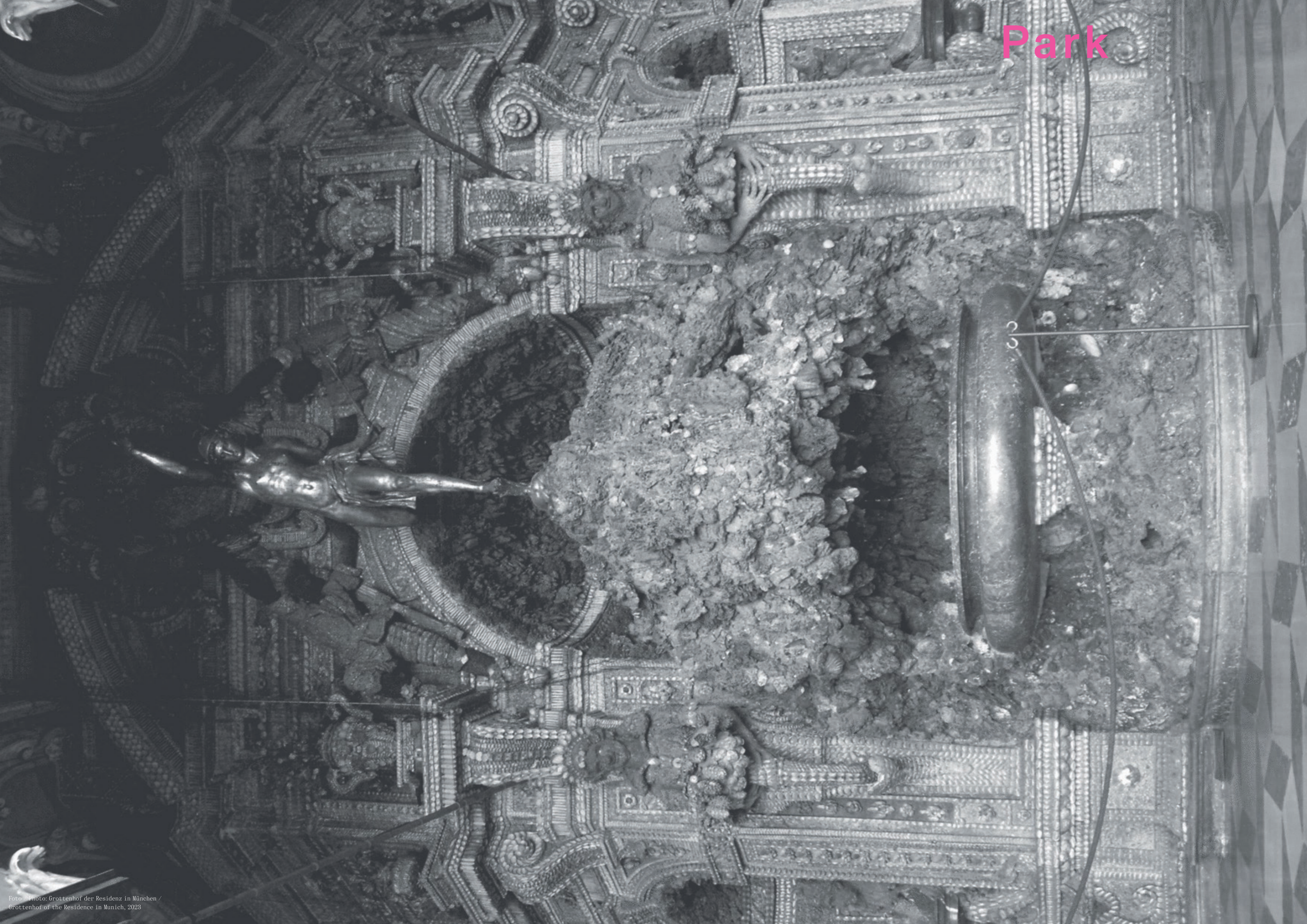


Park



Grotto, Grove, Garden and Pink Font AKA Loopholes in the Ornamental
An epilogue to the performance series 'Park' by Shola von Reinhold

The piece is composed as a fictional opera-essay libretto, consisting of stage directions and theoretical thought.

The passages read by Sylvestra are from the essay 'The Pursuit of Art and Pleasure in the Secret Grotto of Wilhelm V of Bavaria' by Susan Maxwell.



PERSONAGGI

SYLVESTRA
A slipper-in to the Hofgarten...
She does not recall when or how she arrived and doesn't really care either.

CLEOPARTINIFONTANA
A fountain-dweller of the Hofgarten.

RUEVOLUTE-VILLE
Inhabits the crumbling Residenz Library.

MOTTINE FIRRE-MOTTINE II
A figure encountered in the Grottenhof.
Another fountain nymph but unique to the pink font of the Grottenhof.

... our protagonist Sylvestra finds herself in the dilapidated grounds of an old palace and its parks. She does not know that this is the Hofgarten – such a name is meaningless to her – nor does she know how long she has been living there. Sometimes she makes her rooms up in the Antiquarium, or the Hermitage or the library, other times in the Residenzgrotto which is a little different from day to day... Some days water literally trickles over the rocaille faces of the figures and lilies float in the waters... others it seems to be in total disrepair: shells cracked and statuary crumbling. Sometimes the Grottenhof has a large pink font in the courtyard alongside the central fountain... it is as if time is slipshod... or perhaps time is passing normally but its strangeness is more apparent.



Much assaying has been devoted to the violence of 'ornament' – its relation to labour, to hegemonies, for example. And much (not all) that has been said in this vein bears repeating. I open as such because, having written on some of the ways in which adornment, ornament and the decorative are (un)critically maligned as aesthetic categories under dominant aesthetic schemas and the received wisdoms which attend upon them ('less is more', 'all style and no substance' and further such platitudes), it feels ever increasingly necessary to ward off a certain boilerplating impulse that I encounter, am sometimes encouraged to emulate, and can be summed up by statements like "Ornament is a Radical Act" or "Decoration is Revolutionary" and so on. Reductive slogans which ultimately, in their reduction, undermine the kind of defenses, recuperations, contemplations of the ornamental I'm interested in. (Not to sound too moderate... or measured.)

But enough circumspection: it should also be said that the decorative is far from widely heralded as edifying, or even worth rumination, let alone a potential site of transgression. 'Good honest simplicity' rarely needs intervening for (though people always are) because it isn't coded as criminal, foreign, effeminate and evil in the way ornament has by various precepts, artists and thinkers, despite 'simplicity' having also been a vehicle of atrocity and subjugation throughout history, much like 'moderation', or 'stylistic invisibility', or 'naturalness'. While the benefits of all such categories have long been paraded, the extra-aesthetic always exceeds the bounds, or is deemed hollow and empty – it is either too much or not enough, in ways that are frequently racialised and gendered. This regulation and relegation of the decorative, is to be found everywhere in the past several hundred years of western aesthetic tract: Winckelmann's endorsement of 'noble simplicity and sedate grandeur in gesture and expression' above all other art, or Kant's decorative as "mere" and good ornament as being something well-bounded and confined, or Loos' "criminal" ornamentality. Over half a century later, this administered harmony, prescribed invisibility/stylelessness/minimalism/naturalism set up in relation to an unwanted superfluity still passes for good advice, as do a thousand regurgitated versions of courtly 'sprezzatura' aka the art of hiding artifice:

"But having before now often considered whence this grace springs, lying aside those men who have it by nature, I find one universal rule concerning it, which seems to me worth more in this matter than any other in all things human that are done or said: and that is to avoid affectation to the uttermost and as it were a very sharp and dangerous rock; and, to use possibly a new word, to practice in everything a certain 'nonchalance' that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought (...) Accordingly we may affirm that to be true art which does not appear to be art; nor to anything must we give greater care than to conceal art, for if it is discovered, it quite destroys our credit and brings us into small esteem. And I remember having once read that there were several very excellent orators of antiquity, who among their other devices strove to make everyone believe that they had no knowledge of letters; and hiding their knowledge they pretended that their orations were composed very simply and as if springing rather from nature and truth than from study and art; the which, if it had been detected, would have made men wary of being duped by it."



... and on and on Sylvestra pushes through the overgrown dark green arcade before coming upon a tapestry, half-choked in the striated mulch of a pond, festooned with circles of brown and green and yellow rot: stained and bleached by the arcade's own decay. Still, she can see depicted an allegorical scene, typical in style but showing no allegories she has ever seen: instead of theological virtues or cardinal virtues or charities or hours or graces are four other figures: Grotto, Grove, Garden and Font. Grotto stands to the edge of a cave mouth – the figure's robe is folded like a strange shell and he wears a necklace of shells and sandals studded with shells and quartz and is holding a spiked crystal object and wearing a crystalline crown. Grove stands shaded beneath a quincunx of trees, a crown of dark leaves but other than this the tapestry's deterioration make things altogether too obscure. Garden wears a fruited gown, pecked by finches, and is holding a posy of aromatic physic's herbs in one hand, rose and violet petals trailing from the other. But for a bluish hand, reaching to snatch one of Grotto's shells from his dress, and a spindle of pink water, jettisoned from a pink stone mouth, Font is not visible, ironically submerged in the Arcade pond... surely the site of a font itself once... an old holy well-spring... Sylversya wonders who has dumped this tapestry here...



We could bring several categories and modes – the decorative, the ornamental, the pastoral, camp, decadence, under an umbrella of 'the hyperaesthetic' – a mode which brings stylistic queries to the fore, but also goes beyond that into realms of stylistic ex-crescence. It doesn't have to be visual – an ornamental tumble of ideas, aphorism, elaborate and askew thoughts, turning, twisting, flourishes, flicking, odd angles and unexpected passages. They are frequently inoperable when it comes to a certain kind of criticism fuelled by a relentless will to reduce (not just hermeneutics - interpretive criticism can, after all, multiply if good), to lure and then ensnare everything in a ring fence of its own normative terms.

One of the definitive points at which ornament as we know it was conceptualised was the 18th Century. Idealist thinkers and Palladian logicians such as Kant, Winkelman and Joshua Reynolds all in their own ways called for noble grandeur, harmony, sedateness, whiteness, evenness and 'masculine line', fashioned against a (not always spoken of) moral panic about visual excrescences and gaucheness – about rampant ornament that was considered 'foreign' (in England this played into a longstanding fear in which ornament had, among other things, once been literally considered an Ottoman plot to turn the country's men into sodomites).

Generally unmentioned in the theory of the time, and curiously missing from contemporary accounts of 18th Century aesthetic tract, despite being writ large in popular consciousness, is the figure of the Macaroni, whose association with sodomy was one link in a chain that led to contemporary conceptualisations of homosexuality and to an extent was at play in conceptions of transness by way of the figure of the Molly. Even less plumbed is the fact that one of the most famous Macaronis in Britain at the time, 'top among fops' Julius Soubise, was Black. This proximity of Blackness to ornament, homosexuality and gender in the public mind has largely escaped treatment, especially regarding the subsequent Wilde trials a century later which, as Alan Sinfield crucially identified, publicly triangulated homosexuality, effeminacy and aestheticism to configure modern homosexuality (and homophobia) as a consolidated identity in ways that hadn't previously existed and was ultimately to be so brutally exported and imposed around the globe.



... through several passages she comes to hewn stairs. Walls are studded and whorled with shells... pools illuminated by [illegible] portholes... fresh soil lies in a dried pool and up springs a tree – evergreen and invariable. It twists and swoops in all directions... not writing... twisting amiably. Carved in its trunk is a message of its mirror tree. "A specimen in a pedestrian plaza, paved grey mortar... civic, plain and unmythical as anything." After this more passages and shell-studded walls... finally she arrives from underground via a secret passageway into what was once the Grottenenhof. Composed of shells are various figures including what looks like mermaids or at least some kind of oceanic deity whose faces and bodies are made of black shellwork.



I've sketched in the above passages a few ideas around ornament, adornment and the hyperaesthetic that have preoccupied me for some time. Generally I go on to look at sites of ornamentality further afield from the domains in which they are traditionally assessed. I'll talk of barqueness, of how such elaborate modes are not and never have been the sole remit of the elite: Working class ornamental codes, domestic adornment, vast histories of dress and let's not forget a long line of queer and feminist Black aesthetic theory, and modes of living (like when Saidiya Hartman invokes the "aesthetical negro") where the baroque has flourished, attending to something that Zora Neale Hurston identified when she claimed the ornamental space as a Black space, describing the "the will to adorn" as a historical core of Black expression. All these generally employ the very same 'decorative turn' to such a degree of luxuriousness that to simply cede 'ornament' to elitism, whiteness and so on, would not only be an error (and one eventually playing upon/to carefully constructed elitist narratives) but a betrayal. I'll also typically look into ways ornament's 'frivolity', it's very 'uselessness' can make it at times transgressive or how it has been long been (un)employed as a means of escape, of bypassing harm through dazzle, of refusing to offer up one's interiority for flattening, for consumption.

I'll generally look at all this, but here, in the context of Park, and the Hofgarten I'm interested in something perhaps trickier and more troublesome – how ornament functions exactly within literal spaces of power-making and what might be available, exploited, 'scammed' from/through them.

Sylvestra spends so much 'time' in the grotto that part of her soul is suffused with it – as is meant to be in ornamental places though this was somewhat forgotten even in the creation of the Grottenhof... Time leaks in the grotto hither and thither as the fountain leaks. Eventually it becomes clear to Sylvestra that the black shellwork figure up there is a god/ess and that when the Grottenhof was being built this was unknown even to its designer, but that one of the apprentice decorators was suffused with an Afrofuturist vestige that Sylvestra also felt. It was clear to Sylvestra what Black mermaids in Munchen meant... Surely everyone knew the connotations of Black mermaids... of the myth of Drexciya?

In this scene we find Sylvestra in the library directly above the grottenhof, mind hovering, floating among and between the carved finials and painted ceilings... everywhere she witnesses heraldic devices and emblems... even here – right now – these dead monarchic signs stir a little – she sees their vestigial beams at play... beneath now obsolete emblems, seemingly shorn away from power, they wheeze and strain to drive their old functions... And yet... for a moment, as if she catches it all from a different angle, and the light hits it differently, it all seems to trickle and flow like the fountain with its braids of water... patterns leap up and about in a different manner.

From a description of the Grottenhof:

"The most striking feature of the courtyard is the three-sided fountain that projects into the eastern loggia, providing an aural and visual component to the Grottenhof that is crucial to its meaning. Water pours, drips, and trickles from surrounding rocks into a four-foot-wide, rounded basin to create a sparkling effect of shifting lights and colors. Two female caryatids holding cornucopias of flowers and fruits flank a large-scale bronze Mercury, who appears to land on the basin. Set in niches on either side of the fountain, two additional caryatids hold red marble basins that catch water flowing from their breasts. The life-giving effect of running water seems to catch the caryatids in the process of transforming from stone into living matter. A later addition consists of two Africans dressed in red and purple who ascend behind Mercury to hold aloft the Bavarian arms."

In the library Sylvestra returns to a book she has opened at random reads aloud passages:

"The Grottenhof is a small garden surrounded by painted loggias in the Munich Residence, a palace that served as the seat of the Wittelsbach Dukes of Bavaria beginning in the sixteenth century. Completed between 1582 and 1589, the garden contains an elaborate grottoed fountain, sculpture, and paintings based on Ovid's Metamorphoses. The pictorial program of the painted loggias combines images of mythological ardor with illusionistic interlopers from everyday court life who make punning references to the pursuit of love. The sources for the garden can be found in Italian and French prototypes, yet the program of decorations creates a variety of associations that were unique to the patron, Duke Wilhelm V of Bavaria. The material and subject matter also reflect contemporary theories about art, nature, and the ordering of knowledge that informed the earliest cabinets of curiosis, where collections of art and natural objects were brought together in the so-called Kunstkammer. The garden was meant to engage all of the senses in a sanctuary that stimulated sensual thoughts while provoking broader contemplation about creativity and art."



You see, an idea is accumulating around 'ornament' – one I'm still formulating (and want to trace some of that here whilst being aware I won't be able to fully articulate it yet) but amounts to the sense that even when given over to forms dominance and other unscrupulous, violent applications, ornament leaks stray glimmers that have been the recurrent unintended source of escape and survival by those it was meant to dominate or exclude. Thus I am by no means interested in the perpetuation of these forms of ornament for the sake of stray glints, but want to linger over the fact that there is, in other words, I think, a waywardness in much ornament that can be taken up: loopholes, an impreciseness, a psychic availability that issues from the unmeant, unintended, the misused. Both a semiotic and sensory messiness in the ornament found in, made for, palaces, stately houses, civic parks, libraries – a whole assemblage of decorative arts put to the purpose of reifying state, monarchy and other bodies of power.

Even when supposedly obsolete, such as monarchic ornament which remains when monarchy technically doesn't, or when devices and heraldry and ornamental grammars are severed, meaningless, illegible to contemporary viewers or interlopers far removed from its language (because its codes were not taught them, were meant to be hermetic, a language of power) it can continue to transmit, signify, operate as part of a brutalising machinery (intimidation, exclusion, reification etc). On the other hand it is also at its most obsolete or illegible that other layers become available. Its second skin of legibility comes to the fore. Representations that were absorbed and embedded into this or that schema from other places and periods begin to glimmer anew. Traces, residues, symbolic and stylistic quotes, as it were: acanthus, unicorn, grapes, 'arabesque', grotesquerie... ornamental quotes of ornamental quotes trailing off into semiotic oblivion... And then there is the loss of sensual reading that occurs when the ornamental is instrumentalised as solely a symbolic strata of decoration.



Sylvestra lies on the library window casement overlooking the gardens and reads aloud more fragments from the book:

"The Grottenhoff... as expressive of early modern debates about the correlation between the artificial and the natural."

"The Grottenhof provided an experience of all of nature in miniature, and its relationship to the exterior world was reinforced in several ways. Rocks, gems, and shells, along with sculpted birds, fish, small animals, and insects."

"Without becoming the catalogue of objects that a Kunstkammer represented, the Grottenhof alluded to the comprehensive nature of the duke's possessions and knowledge. By subtly referencing all of the unusual objects collected by the duke, the Grottenhof contributed to Wilhelm's ability to impart a sense of his knowledge of classical art and philosophical discourse."

"Perhaps more than any other ducal project, the intimate garden represents the complex nature of Wilhelm's patronage. He was a ruler at once devoutly religious yet also unabashedly worldly in his pursuit of unusual objects for his collections. In the garden grotto, the religious and politically motivated austerity of Wilhelm V gave way to a multifaceted late Mannerist fantasy layered with meanings and associations."

"The court humanist Anselm Stöckl, asked to come up with a name for the new garden, suggested Paradisus, Alcionidium, and Hesperidium, all classical references to a utopian retreat."

Following these readings Sylvestra laughs – this is known as 'the laughing aria' and is actually very dramatic. Pause. Sylvestra reads: 'Antic fragment' from the 'Blue Arcade in the Grotto of the Black Carnelian' (A translation):

"And the flower said to the crevice, I don't much know what's going on here, do you - - - But the crevice had died several centuries ago and no longer spoke let alone intimidated those vap'rous specks – memories – of the Grotte and the Grotlines swimming in the blue pool networks of the Grotte of the Black Carnelian. Fortunately, for now, this flowerwas not much in the way of listening and began a plaintive, florid aria for several years. But this was only to defer the summit of its worldrage [sic] for some timespan later the flower stopped singing and recalled the crevice had not issued its reply at which point it became furious:

I said, dear crevice, I don't - - -

And realising the Crevice was deadened [sic] the flower perished of misery of time of misery of perished beauty of half-fruited anguish and unfruited blooddreams [sic]."



The fact it is generally so hard to talk about ornament (at least in English), traces a paucity, a critical, conceptual, aesthetical, sensible deficit in Western relations to surface that ultimately has its consequences throughout the visual and non-visual. Critically, there is little in the way of helping us to read ornament, to move with/against it, heed the feeling-knowledge in its many sensory registral planes, even (unobtusely) parse its symbolic orders, its codework.



In the grotto one day the fountain water rippled and caught the light in such a way that its motions trellised and chained and meshed over the faces of the nymphs and the other statuary. It rippled and moved and as it did Sylverstrra realised she could read the walls, the shells, the light chains, the liquid quivers, the rocaille. She could read the grotto. The patterns of shell moved and swayed and were legible... not as a language really but as a feeling... more like seeing music... it clanged and cracked here and there because these were after all copy and pasted quotes from other ornaments... foliate patterns over there jangled and played rustly because the maker had no idea what he was transposing... but still Sylvestra saw it, heard it and the motifs made a kind of musical story about how later she would descend the grotto's caves through the passage and swim its illuminated caverns with the grotto nymphs.

The same day she walks all around the place reading the patterns everywhere... Untranslatable, but went, musically, something like this: "Palaces, cathedrals, parks, state, authority, power... trefoil... acanthus... floral patterns with references to the names of kings and queens... rosecrantz (crown of roses, but what about a literal crown of roses on the head of cupid, of aphrodite, astarte, Inanna etc etc)... gyldenloves (gold lions - alchemical green lions touching on something predating lions couchant rampart and so on though she did like to be couchant – that surely was very ancient and beyond petty heraldry) birds perching... starlings... hummingbirds... wrens... and those... emissaries: angels... who are really here to be androgynous, here and everywhere supplanted onto multitudinous aspects... and referencing also their counterparts, another lost archetype the winged hermaphrodites ofc... so far removed... but winged... as cherubs... cherubim much related absurdity that puttì - cupids... the children of venus... babified but alluding to the... retinue of... roses, roses, roses, birds birds birds, waves, waves.

But more importantly then her eyes trace a serpentine line... a curlicue up there on a ceiling... and she felt her whole spirit move along the swoops... a rush of further music... each swoop of an arch motion a motion a feeling-knowledge... moving textures: Walking between walls thick with friezework or tapestries she no longer knew if she was. Walking through hedges, a garden avenue lined with whirling masses. One became the other... so she could recall a floral maze from a passageway no longer.

Walking around garden grove tapestry hall the chutes, arches, volution, fountain-hedges, branches led her inevitably to the immemorial grotto space so now she could now spy grottos through a small ornamental jumble in an interior cornice corner or a niche in a maze. They all join together... passageways open up... quadrangles... walled garden... archway... arcade, arcadian and you are in another garden... grove or grotto. Perhaps, Sylvestra thinks, this is a holding space... reached by thousands, millions over the years... to escape... it is no utopia but it is dreamy... fountains... trickle... forgotten registers of knowledge lie in wait and so on and so forth and gardens and groves and grottos and pink fonts.

Mottine moves a hand black beshelled and fountain-wet glimmers... and all this light on water becomes legible once more to Sylvestra... she gets into the fountain, a fretwork of shimmering... of trellises... she lies in it... dissolves... becomes waved... crystal... She passes through a crystal channel, a passageway... the liquid, shells swirling make her in turn swirl. She passes as it were into crystal... merges in the crystalline grotto... a part of it... faceted she becomes faceted... waved she becomes waved.

