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Ornamentality as artificial evolution

A comment to the current discussion about a new ornament

In: Zona #4, Supplement to Abitare, #494, edited by Jörg Gleiter, Bozen 2009, p.58-59.

The current discussion about a new ornament represents a milestone for architectural discourse: it must finally admitted that the usual interpretation of ornament as decoration and adornment does not do justice to many ornamental phenomena. Particularly with computer-generated designs that work with genetic and evolutionary programs, numerous forms can be observed that are ornamental in effect and whose strange qualities call forth the question of their newness. A reformulation of the term ornament as regards architectural theory is now finally due.

We currently and justifiably assume a much more fundamental relationship between ornament and design. This potential is however frittered away if the ornamental is prematurely made dependent on the architectural and the ornament is thought of as the result of an architectural program. We must think in a much more fundamental way and first ask ourselves about the ornamental itself, and about the foundation, formulation, form and function of the ornamental. A meaning of ornamentality would come then to fruition which the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, regarding the definition of ornament, in 1995 condensed as the basic form of the developing of forms from forms.¹ The ornamental thereby becomes visible as what it has always been: the basic principle of all artistic generation of form. Architectural ornamentality could then in principle be observed as the result of an interference of artistic and architectural programs.²

One of the many other purposes of this fine-tuning and abstraction of the concept of ornament is to be able to explain why, particularly in computer-generated designs using evolutionary programs, strange ornamental art is produced: the reason is that ornamental and evolutionary programs are functionally similar. The art theoretician Paul Valéry³ had also surmised this in 1895, but only today can the evolutionary process of biology be simulated through the processing power of computers and applied to architectural design processes. The results prove Valéry right and require the science of architecture to consider ornamentality as artificial evolution. The result is the appearance of not a new, but rather an old, original ornamental art in the strange evolutionary ornamental art.

1 Niklas Luhmann: *Art as a Social System*, Stanford 2000. Original published in German in 1995 under the title *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main.

2 Michael Dürfeld: *Das Ornamentale und die architektonische Form. Systemtheoretische Irritationen*. Bielefeld 2008.

3 Paul Valéry: "Introduction to the Method of Leonardo" trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler, in: *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*. Edited by James R. Lawler, Princeton Univ. Press 1977. Original published in French in 1895 under the title *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci*, in *La Nouvelle Revue* 17 (1895).