

For An Opening of Space
Notes on cultural transfers

By Peter Herbstreuth

In a recent portfolio, Susanne Lorenz included a description of her work. With her comments, titles and illustrations, she swiftly outlines the cosmos of her work in the reader's mind. *Mountain. Here Today. Travel. Towards England. Towards China. Towards Japan. The History of Gardens. Narrow Landscape. Wild's Garden. Plasticine. Virtual Worlds. Memory. Red Hilly Landscape.* Under the reader's fragmenting cursory gaze, the splinters of meaning align themselves in seconds, as if drawn by a magnet, giving orientation and telling where this journey will lead. The text conjures up an idea of elsewhere. The force lies outside. Not here. This impression is reinforced by the illustrations. Imaginary movements.

TRAVEL EXPERIENCE TIME. In Susanne Lorenz's gardens, the experience of wandering about, with all its potential pleasures and hazards, is removed. The visitor remains on familiar ground, moving in safe territory, able neither to go astray nor to catch a cold. Perception is not subject to the whims of nature, and the visitor's body is in no danger of attack from behind in some dark corner. Her gardens provide safety. They are based on a visual construction and present the imagination with a weave of associations, drawing on the richness of European garden culture with all its transcultural adoptions and appropriations. She takes the many variations on artificial nature in old gardens and turns them into fragmented images, isolated and objectified. We see pictures over pictures, with oriental influences or functional echoes of garden motifs from the pattern books of Japan, China or England and the catalog from the local garden center. Europe's old gardens focus attention on physical movement and the choices of those strolling around them, who become part of the picture, moving about freely as in an installation. In Lorenz' gardens, the gaze of an essentially static viewer is focused on a picture in the near distance. The viewer can turn away at any time, as from a screen, a book, or a painting. Although these garden pictures are exhibited in public institutions, the gaze into the space of the picture is private. The viewer is not part of the picture and does not affect what others see. The image is free of interference. This is due to her choice of medium.

PICTURES IN SPACE. Clever art historians are right to criticize the arbitrary way a scattering of objects in a room is often ennobled by calling it an »installation«. But there is one major fault in their argument, since the special quality of the installation medium is that it abolishes linear perspective in favor of a dynamic space based on the viewer's movements. This removal of viewing hierarchies suits an approach which illuminates a constellation from various angles. It allows individual perspectives without wanting to entirely forego the overall impression of a pictorial whole. Correspondingly, Susanne Lorenz designs spaces which can be viewed through windows, but not walked through. In 1995, she made -preliminary studies in »Helmet (new perspectives)«, a piece based on Filippo Brunelleschi's work on perspective and Leon Battista Alberti's theoretical treatise from the early 15th century, which Lorenz adapted into variable, seemingly oscillating linear perspectives. In 1998, at »Kunst und Technik« in Berlin, three of her gardens could be viewed through three different windows. According to the titles, the viewer's gaze traveled »Towards England, Towards China, Towards Japan«. Then in 1999, in the courtyard of the Berlin gallery »Asian Fine Arts«, she laid out an extended version of her installation »Towards Japan« which remained in place for over a year. The »Japanese« garden was viewed through a window of the gallery, a view across grassy hemispherical hillocks in light and shadow. The ambivalence of the dimensions had the distancing effect of an optical illusion. At times one seemed to be looking from above at a model of artificial foothills, at others it seemed more like a field of uniform bulges. And when one's eye got caught between the light and dark of the hills, it was impossible to say whether the garden consisted of dry Astrotruff or real live grass. All attempts to determine what it was and what it represented also evoked the opposite, preserving the piece's sense of »the Japanese«.

ALL TIMES, ALL PLACES. »Nature changes according to climate. Using illusion, let us try to change the climate, or at least distract attention from our actual location. Let us integrate changing opera sets in our gardens. Let us show as reality what the most skilled painters offer as decoration. All times, all places.« This proposal for a garden near Paris, made in 1779 by Louis Carrogis Carmontelle¹, is a near perfect match for what Michel Foucault was to refer to in 1967 as »heterotopia«². A garden was to be a place in nature beyond nature, a place based on the example of painting. Organized according to rules which negate the world that surrounds it, while at the same time representing the essence of all the inspirational parts of that world. An ideal world, on clearly delineated terrain, with its own logic. Autonomous, contrived, and a pleasant way of being elsewhere on home territory.

ANALOGY 1. In her commentaries, Susanne Lorenz keeps coming back to the analogy between surfing the Internet and 18th century Western European gardens, whose owners ordered architectural elements, ornaments and plants from China, Japan, India, Italy and Greece out of pattern books and catalogs³. »In both cases,« she writes, »that which is seen is taken out of context and reassembled to generate a new cosmos in the viewer's mind, either in a garden, in a computer program, or by zapping.« The common denominator is the availability of images from faraway regions which are combined at a single location on a new theme. But the fact of this combination alone says nothing of its subsequent use, the potential consequences of such a composition. It does no more than make such consequences possible. On the Internet, the traveler's attention is constantly being distracted from images and texts to the navigating medium itself. The abrupt stops, waiting and reboots make the experience more like riding a stuttering vehicle on a level surface than surfing with a steady wind. In spite of their incidental character, the sum of these breaks constitutes the characteristic experience of this medium, influencing the user's perceptions. In this light, the analogy of the Internet and computer travel is effectively a rhetorical sleight of hand. It appeals to myths of liberation through travel, faraway places, discovery. With the added bonus that under ideal conditions (depending on what's expected), it actually works.

ANALOGY 2. In discourse on the arts, this analogy of the Internet and travel is accompanied by the analogy of computer screen and »finestra aperta«. This comparison presented itself during the 1970s when the software industry opened »windows«, which eventually spawned Microsoft's concept for a user interface enabling a variety of different programs to be displayed on screen simultaneously, each in their own box, with the resulting product becoming a global standard. But on close examination, this analogy becomes untenable. When Leon Battista Alberti described the painted canvas as an »open window« in the 15th century, he coined a name for a way of seeing where a picture was considered to capture an exemplary detail of the physical world. This detail could be objectified. Using -linear perspective, it was possible to create a space continuum which satisfied -scientific (i.-e. verifiable and rational) criteria. And it exerted a defining influence on pictorial composition for 500 years, until Paul Cézanne and his Cubist interpreters devised a new paradigm for painting. But unlike a painted canvas, a computer window doesn't show a single deliberately chosen detail. Instead, it shows whatever the user chooses to call up from behind the screen and manipulate in an endless variety of ways. It lacks the authority of authorship. It actually is a window, affording a view into a world in which anything that is technically possible can happen, with no need for a counterpart in the real world – a »heterotopia« in the sense of an alternative reality.

CULTURAL TRANSFER. The power of Lorenz' gardens is an evocative power, based on the recognition of images from elsewhere. This elsewhere is more likely to come from a stock of electronic images than from actual memories of travel. Susanne Lorenz puts today's viewer in the position of the wealthy burghers and aristocrats of the 18th century. Travel was arduous and many never went beyond the fashion of gentlemanly tourism. They listened to the accounts of travelers and browsed the catalogs for images that inspired them, pictures they could use to adorn their estates. Instead of the magnificent stage sets and luxurious backdrops of that period, Lorenz offers sobriety. She reckons with viewers who see according to their own standards. In this way, she passes on what those she refers to and between whom her work takes shape all do too, be they heirs of linear perspective, commissioners of fictive gardens, or Internet surfers: They appropriate parts of the world in images, paying no attention to their original context and creating new ones. If one wanted to name the core of Susanne Lorenz' work, it would be the issues of image availability and cultural transfer⁴ since the 18th century. Instead of a cubist approach – looking from all sides – hers is a variation on linear perspective.

WINDOWS. For artists down the ages, borrowing elements from other cultures has always been just one of a range of creative strategies. The orientalism of the 19th century in France, the interest of the Cubists and Surrealists in African sculpture, the enthusiasm of the »Brücke« painters for the South Seas, the influential brief journeys of Ernst Macke and Paul Klee to Tunisia, and Sigmar Polke's trip to Afghanistan are just some of the exceptions. In spite of the excessive traveling done by contemporary artists, Susanne Lorenz' interest in non-European gardens and their interpretation is also an exception. The art world remains basically fixated on the history of art in Europe and America. Pictorial references to non-European traditions are introduced by artists coming to Europe on journeys from Asia or Africa. With her work on gardens and their long history of transcultural references, Lorenz has opened a window into the world which few had even identified as a window. The constellation of garden history-/Internet-/linear perspective constitutes a topic that reaches far into the future and deep into the past. It allows us to conceive of a pictorial history which devotes attention to communication and its fruitful misunderstandings as well as to representation.

Notes:

¹ Louis Carrogis Carmontelle, *Jardin de Monceau près de Paris*, Paris 1779, p.-4.

² Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, translated by J. Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 1986 (original publication in »Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité« under the title »Des Espaces Autres«).

³ For example: Johann Gottfried Grohmann, »Ideenmagazin für Liebhaber von Gärten, Englischen Anlagen, und für Besitzer von Landgütern« (Catalog of ideas for the decoration of parks and gardens) Leipzig 1796–1806; For a detailed survey: Stefan Koppelkamm, *Der imaginäre Orient. Exotische Bauten des achtzehnten und neunzehnten Jahrhunderts in Europa*, (The imaginary Orient: Exotic buildings in 18th and 19th century Europe) Berlin 1987; For the basics: Annegret Nippa, *Orientalisierende Architektur in Deutschland* (Oriental influences in German architecture), in: *Stadt in Afrika, Asien, Lateinamerika*, Rainer Ernst (Ed.), Berlin 1984.

⁴ For a Western European perspective on the foundations of a new cultural order: Peter Burke, *Kultureller Austausch* (Cultural exchange), Frankfurt/Main 2000.