

**Text about my work in “Many dots still don’t make a line”
by Nora Gantert (art historian and sinologist, Berlin/ Nuremberg)**

“If you want poems to be innovative in their formulation, do not be satisfied with emptiness and immobility. For immobility exists because everything is on the move and emptiness because it takes in ten thousand places.”⁵

Boundaries are blurred in Alice’s life and art: is her private life an equal element in her artistic creation, or is it rather the core, origin and starting point of her artistic creation? Just like the national border between Germany and Austria that runs down the middle of the river Inn, the precise borderline in her own work cannot be detected by the naked eye alone. Alice grew up in this border town, with its blurred borderline always before her eyes.

Returning to this place as someone who has travelled far away and presenting her own, very personal work, is something rather special. At the heart of this presentation are four thematic leporellos (accordion fold books) that combine artistic work with her personal path through life. She embeds her own life history in Wernstein’s private “local archive”. The four leporellos with Alice’s story and artistic development stand next to paintings of the city, coats of arms, registration registers, photos, drawings. They are equal, related, invasive. Inconspicuously, to some extent, Alice has smuggled her own story and interpretation into local memory. The texts are free and direct; you get close to the artist and become a conspirator in her smuggling art.

Contemporary nomadism is a much-referenced societal phenomenon that, especially in the world of the arts, refers to the wandering between cities, continents and time zones, whereby the ‘nomads’ always feel as though they are part of a certain tribe: the tribe of travellers, the tribe of those who keep on the move, the tribe of culture producers. Simultaneity is the key to contemporary nomadism. It is possible to be simultaneously a Berliner and to have a studio in Beijing; it is possible to be simultaneously networked over here and over there. Belonging to different tribes is desired and promotes one’s own individual plurality. Alice Dittmar began early to incorporate this way of living into her own life. She lives in Wernstein, Berlin, Perth, and Beijing, with the latter being the place where her art is created. At the edges and fractures of a nomadic life. Day-to-day events are processed in works of art and as a result of this way of living, the subject of crossing borders or boundaries reappears time and again.

Transculturality is not applied as a mere concept, but is lived out. No matter where she works, themes such as ornamentation and landscape painting remain important for Alice and function as a compass in her world. Her stays in China have made her include local ideas and materials in her artistic practice.

Alice’s interest in China was triggered the moment she recognised the ornament as an ancient cultural practice and its significance in different cultural circles. In ancient Chinese art, ornamentation occurs in objects of daily use such as porcelain, bronze,

and of course clothing and textiles in general, but frequently it also appears as a decorative element in profane and sacred architecture. In many cases, ornamental forms arise from particular symbols, which are simplified and continually repeated in jewellery and decoration. This is particularly the case in Buddhist painting. The ritual gesture of repetition is an integral part of religious practice. Thus, the act of copying sacred sutras – as a meditative practice of repetition – is one of the most honourable practices of worship.

Forms of various themes are used in traditional Chinese ornamentation: auspicious idiographs and abstract, modified variants of the latter, as well as plants and animals, and waves and clouds, are applied as ornaments and in abstract forms. In scholarly painting the same motifs (for instance, the deer or the pomegranate) are used not as decorative accessories, but as solitary subjects. A piece of landscape painting, for example, would typically not include a decorative braid with a pearl pattern or a Ruyi sceptre braid. However, it would be completely normal to adorn the well of a porcelain plate with images of pomegranates. It is probably safe to say that the act of repetition plays a decisive role in Chinese painting, even if it is more of an inner attitude than something that is actually implemented in ornamentation. In Alice's work, by contrast, repetition sometimes makes a landscape painting or photograph ornamental on its own account, thus connecting two theories that are in actual fact separate.

To this day, it has been the foundation of artistic education in China to learn the practice of painting by copying that is, by repeating models. Within the six principles of Chinese painting established by Xie He (active in the period between 500 and 535) the sixth element is: "approaching the masters by repeating/ copying them"⁶. In this way, an internalisation is sought, an ability to put the subject on paper emptily, that is, without the artists supplying any will of their own. The act of painting becomes "non-action". Paintings arise from the inner attitude of the Daoist "wuwei", the free circulation of breath with emptiness breathing life into the painting. François Billeter understands "wuwei"⁷ as unconscious, or rather non-targeted, action, in the way athletes, craftspeople or musicians experience the performance of actions that they have mastered to perfection. The conscious thought of doing something interrupts the flow of action.

In my opinion, the two concepts overlap in the meditative function of Chinese landscape painting and in the sequence of the ornament. Repeating a movement until you lose yourself completely in it is a performative quality that characterises both Chinese landscape painting and ornamentation.

Chinese landscape painting and ornamentation.

In Chinese landscape painting, the principle of fullness and emptiness is considered the highest good. When the breath circulates and breezes through the landscape, the painting becomes accessible via its "empty" surfaces and the terrain opens up to the viewer as experienceable and alive. The dynamic of a painting arises from the rhythmisation of filled and "empty" surfaces. Guo Xi (before 1020 to around 1090) describes the qualities of landscape painting as follows: „It is [a] generally accepted

opinion that in landscapes there are those through which you may travel, those in which you may sightsee, those through which you may wander, and those in which you may live.”⁸ Therefore, the highest form of land-scape painting is that in which the viewer can “live”.

The goal is to reach a balance between unprocessed surfaces and those that are shaped, with the non-shaped surfaces providing the counterpart to the shaped ones. When Alice has a Chinese papermaker join together the natural papers not yet processed for her landscape paintings and then lets the glued areas remain visible, this is to be understood as homage to the principle of emptiness in Chinese painting: the empty space, the vacancy, is treated on an equal footing with the processed space. About her relationship to her own work she says: “I love beautiful, fragile things, because they are able to move me. I try to breathe my soul into them; [...]. In return, their breath makes me feel deeply alive. In the optimal case, the viewer is able to feel this, too.”⁹ A Chinese painter of the 11th Century could have expressed it just like that or similarly.

⁵ Inscription on a self-portrait by Zeng Mi (born 1935) [own translation], from: *Der Himmel in der Pinselspitze – Chinesische Malerei des 20. Jahrhunderts* [The Sky in the Tip of the Paintbrush – Chinese Painting in the 20th Century], Museum of East Asian Art, Cologne, 2005, p. 78.

⁶ Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese texts on Painting*, Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 39–40.

⁷ François Billeter, *Das Wirken in den Dingen*, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, 2015, p. 43.

⁸ Susan Bush and Hsio-yen Shih, *Early Chinese texts on Painting*, Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 151.

⁹ Alice Dittmar, *Alice-D in Wonderland*, self-published by Alice Dittmar, 2010, without page numbers.