

Painting Scenographics

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Reference:

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[-- page 74--] My starting point for this essay is a simple premise: that *paintings orient feelings of world*. This follows the idea that paintings afford access to *the feel* of other places. Paintings connect *different senses* of world together. Paintings orient physically as well as emotionally. Accordingly, I ask can these place-orienting traits of paintings be understood as in some way “scenographic”? Silke Otto-Knapp’s paintings regularly take the stage environment as their subject. Notably, her 2017 exhibition at Midway Contemporary Art (Minneapolis) was titled “Bühnenbilder”, which is often translated as “stage designer.” Yet I suggest that Otto-Knapp’s paintings also evoke a quality of scenography, by which I mean the multiple methods used to evoke atmospheres of place in theatrical performances, such as set, light, sound, or costume.

Silke Otto-Knapp’s paintings could be seen to represent stage environments. But at the same time, one could argue that, as with the stage environments they evoke, her paintings enact a feeling of place that others, complicates, and reveals normative orders of place. This is my starting point for proposing “painting scenographics.”

“Scenographics” is a collective term I employ to account for the place-orienting qualities of staged material cultures. Etymologically, “scene” is approached via the Ancient Greek *skene*

as a tent or a hut; a temporary structure. Likewise, “graphy” is defined from the same timeframe as an action, of scribing, rather than a codified system of writing. This reading re-imagines scenography as a *scribing of tents*, but tents as located atmospheres that can be crafted through the intersections of light, sound, objects, and clothing. In the twenty-first century, the practice of scenography exceeds the typical reading of scenes as *commodifying* landscape and instead approaches scenes as *intervening* with landscape. Crucially, in approaching scenes as tents, this stresses how scenographics are temporary interventions that change or complicate the normative geographies of place. This framework can be applied to the place orienting qualities of gardens and installation art, along with visual merchandising and theatre productions. These material cultures are all temporary environments that have been crafted as interventions within a landscape. Furthermore, this interventional quality of scenography, as an act of crafting tents, is not bound to a singularly physical aspect. As with our feelings of place, stage scenographies are an assemblage of different forces, affects, and politics that work together to generate a distinctive feeling of place. These assemblages are often referred to as the “atmosphere” of a performance. Scenographics could be described as the atmospheric traits of scenes as acts of tent-making.

Paintings of scenographics

In the context of painting, scenographics might be viewed from two distinct positions. The first is that, quite literally, Otto-Knapp paints scenographic scenarios. For example, *In the Waiting Room* includes studies of performers engaged in choreographed movements akin to exercise and everyday activities (Figure 1). The costumes, spatial arrangements, and even implied lighting for these “scenes” all amount to representations of scenographic techniques. Otto-Knapp describes how her paintings seek to “construct a space that can be both two- and three-dimensional – concerned with both the surface of the painting and the illusion of space

within the margins of a staged scene.”¹ Likewise, Darby English reflects on the artist’s choice of subject as evoking a “particular understanding of sets, which sees them as costumed nature.”² The paintings could be approached as performing in a similar manner to stage scenography, both as representations of [– page 75–] *other* places and as place-orienting devices in their own right.

Otto-Knapp’s approach to the interface of scenography and painting differs from those developed by artists such as Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943). Based at the Bauhaus in the 1920s, Schlemmer pioneered an approach to stage scenography that investigated compositional languages of painting as the starting point for performance. Schlemmer sought to investigate how stages could be approached as timed-based compositions. Interestingly, Otto-Knapp’s approach is a reversal of her Bauhaus counterpart. She takes performance as her starting point and seeks to investigate how painting can express the spatial-temporal qualities of stages. In this regard, I approach stages as “fast images” and paintings as “slow images.” Importantly, the materialities of painting (canvas, pigment) are themselves in a process of material transformation—from carbon to carbon. Yet, this is a process that often exceeds human perception and even lifetimes. Whereas fast images are fleeting, slow images persist but still have the power to influence how humans feel or experience the qualities of place. Whereas Schlemmer had sought to employ rules of painting composition to re-imagine scenographic space, Otto-Knapp investigates the fleeting qualities of fast images (performance) through the medium of slow images (painting).

¹ Otto-Knapp cited in Searle, A. (2014) “Dancing between light and shade, Silke Otto-Knapp’s ‘washing up’ paintings,” *The Guardian* [online]. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jan/20/silke-otto-knapp-paintings-monday-tuesday-camden-arts-centre>

² English, D. (2019) “Awash in desire,” in Peeters, J. ed., *Bühnenbilder / Silke Otto-Knapp*, Amsterdam: Roma Publications with Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis: pp. 30

Crucial to this framework of fast and slow images is the argument that painting scenographics are distinct from ideas of the “the scenic.” Concepts of the scenic are used to frame an experience of world *as if it were* a painting. This is also the central premise of the “picturesque.” Allen Carlson argues this point conclusively, stating that the picturesque “requires us to view the environment as if it were a static representation which is essentially ‘two dimensional.’ It requires the reduction of the environment to a scene or view.”³ Scenographics, on the other hand, suggest that the place-orienting affects of world are experienced as an ever-changing assemblage of things, humans (inclusive of the viewer themselves), and political frames of reference. The old strict ontological binary of subject and object, viewer and world, is revisited in this framework. Humans are never outside their environments. Instead, humans are themselves an assemblage (organs, nervous system, non-human bacteria, etc.) who are part of broader assemblages of place (architecture, street, town), non-humans (trees, mountains, etc.), and hyperobjects (such as weather). If viewed from the position of assemblage, there is no “outside.” Rather everything is part of an assemblage of assemblages. Notions of objectivity, as an ideological distancing of human from world, become undone when considering worldly experience as an assemblage of parts.

Otto-Knapp’s paintings explicitly underline this quality of togetherness, of how feelings of world are produced through ongoing assemblages. For previous exhibitions, she has employed a painting technique of building up layers by adding and removing pigment that leaves traces only just visible to the naked eye. In these instances, as you approached the painting, the textures undertake subtle shifts in detail. Jan Verwoert observes how “Otto-Knapp’s paintings are *in* motion because they render the potential for motion tangible.”⁴ This quality of motion

³ Carlson, A. (1979) 'Appreciation and the natural environment', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37.3: 267–75: pp. 271

⁴ Verwoert, J. (2009) “Motion Pictures: On the recent paintings of Silke Otto-Knapp,” in *Silke Otto-Knapp: Present time exercise*, London: Koenig Books: p. 19

is also a quality of scenographics. The surfaces of Otto-Knapp's paintings that adopt this technique change dependent on the sensory organ of the eye's spatial proximity to the layered surfaces of the painting assemblage. For this exhibition, she has employed a different technique. Now motion is foregrounded through the sequential structure of the paintings, which inclusive of the switching between light and dark. Overall, I propose that, rather than evoking the picturesque aesthetic ideology of the scenic, Otto-Knapp's techniques [-- page 76 ---] reinforce how paintings orient a feeling of place beyond representation alone; arguably, the paintings orient a felt relationship to place that exceeds its subject.

While her paintings are a *depiction* of movement on stage —stretching, dancing, etc.— Otto-Knapp's paintings also act upon the viewer to orient an *experience* of stages as places. The idea of “place-orientation” accounts for both of these articulations. This builds upon Sara Ahmed's notion of “queer phenomenology” that proposes a dual reading of “orientation”; as both encounters of the near and far, as well as what is familiar or strange. Taking heteronormativity as a dominant form of orientation, Ahmed argues that human experiences of world are oriented by a range of material relations as well as social systems. These dual systems of orientation are best articulated by considering what it feels like to stand at a national land border. The material qualities of the border act *alongside and with* the political systems that place bodies and identities as native or foreign, welcome or unwelcome. Ahmed understands the queer object as affording insight into the slippage between these dual modes of orientation. In the context of scenographics, all objects are queer objects. The othering traits of scenographics are connected to their ability to queer the power relations of place by highlighting, complicating, or othering normative experiences of place. In this regard, Otto-Knapp's paintings depict queer objects, but they also act as queer objects in the gallery.

In terms of going beyond models of representation, Otto-Knapp addresses the relationship between stage backdrops and landscape painting. I write this at a time when stage backdrops have become somewhat unfashionable in contemporary theatre. While a mainstay of Restoration theatre and employed by noted modernists such as the *Ballet Russes* (1909-1929), since the mid-twentieth century there has been a considerable resistance to the relevance of the backdrop as a contemporary scenographic technique. This is driven by the ideas of scenographers such as Adolphe Appia (1862-1928), who argued that in an age of electric light the painted shadows of the backdrop were inadequate. Appia proposed that the place of drama should exist in the same time and space as the action. The conventional backdrop was unable to change its painted shadows and, accordingly, Appia called for painted surfaces to be replaced by physical objects. This way, the physical objects could be lit from different directions, thereby allowing for shifts in the atmospheres of the scene without the need for moving the physical objects themselves. This “dynamic” quality was not possible with the conventional backdrop, which, for Appia, remained “fixed.” Painting scenographics could offer another way of approaching the labor of these slow images in performance. One that embraces the place-orienting qualities of backdrops as intervening or revealing the normative aesthetics of place.

Otto-Knapp’s paintings scenographics are exemplary in showings how the fast images of scenographics can be represented within the slow images of painting. Yet, it is equally important to recognize that the work evokes scenographics through the very act of placing a painting on a wall or in a gallery. These placements and orientations are scenographic in conception. As with the crafting of a stage scene, the configuration of the exhibition space is crafted through the queer place-orienting qualities of the paintings themselves. The exhibition space acts *as if it were* a scene; a place of directed experience. In German, this relationship is explicitly recognized as *Szenographie* and is often used to describe the craft of exhibition and

stage design. The shift between the representation of stages and the scenographic qualities [---
page 77 ---] of the paintings themselves (as objects) affords a unique insight into the place-orientating labors of both art forms. As with the backdrop technique in theatre, the interdisciplinarity of Otto-Knapp's work exists in this slippage between depictions of place-representation and experiences of place-orientation.

Painting scenographics:

Otto-Knapp's work might also be considered *as if it were* scenography, "waiting for a performance," as journalist Adrian Searle wrote.⁵ The most explicit example of this is a free-standing painting titled *Screen (Trees and Moon)* located at the center of the exhibition *In the Waiting Room* (Figure 2). Depicting stylized trees in bloom, the painting is divided into five panels connected with hinges. The structure stands concertinaed with its wooden frame exposed at the back (Figure 3). In conventional theatre, this object would be called a "flat." In ancient Greek and Roman theatre, a three-sided device called *periaktoi* (which translates as 'revolving') was employed to move between locations. Each side would be painted with a different image and when revolved, possibly using wheels or stagehands, the location for the scene would change. When used in combination with multiples of the same structure, the *periaktoi* were arguably one of the first scenographic innovations for changing a feeling of landscape during a stage performance. Stage flats today are used in a similar way to enact a particular location. Otto-Knapp's tree scenes echo the stylized techniques of the German Expressionist stage designers of the 1910s and early 1920s, who would paint bold geometric lighting streaks directly onto the flats and extend them out onto the stage floor. The installation for *In the Waiting Room* goes beyond this, however, to investigate the scenographics of stage

⁶ McCormack, D. (2018) *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*, Durham: Duke University Press: pp. 5

flats. The exposed frames and freestanding set-up mirrors how stage flats work in theatre. They are both gallery paintings and stage flats at the same time. Otto-Knapp's paintings are not not stage flats.

My argument for scenographics is bound to the tactics that sustain the representational double negative of theatricality. "Surrogacy" is one such tactic. Whether a stage prop or a representation of landscape, a surrogate object performs *as if it were* the thing it represents, while still remaining identifiably not that thing. Otto-Knapp's freestanding painting is not not a stage flat. The painting is not a stage flat, inasmuch as it is not intended for use in a particular performance. But it is also not not a stage flat. The techniques, contextual frames, and arrangements of the paintings evoke a "flat-like" relationship, albeit twice removed. Otto-Knapp's painting complicate the normative assemblage of "stage flat" as a surrogate twice over. This double double negative—a painting acting as a surrogate for a stage flat, which, in turn, is a surrogate for a tree—further isolates the scenographic labor of stage flats more generally. The twice-removed context of the gallery highlights the multiple layers of stage flat scenographics in theatrical scenarios; where the trees are not not trees and the wooden frame is not not visible. It is this slippage between modes of representations, and the corresponding knowledge of this slippage, that provides scenographics their political power. This same double negative is central to the atmospherics of theme restaurants, visual merchandising, and interior design. Scenographics are always othering; they complicate and irritate the normative assemblages of place by inviting a representational slippage. While this might be achieved through the tactics of surrogacy, scenographics differ from more normative atmospherics in their potential to reveal, score, or irritate the assemblages of worldly experience.

[-- page 78 ---] While the physical placement and materiality of Otto-Knapp's paintings are scenographic, there is a scenographic quality in the use of multi-paneled structures to depict changes in light and location. As with the *periaktoi* technique, the artist has approached each panel of *Forest* (see Figure 4) as evoking a distinctive atmospheric quality or "scene". While this reading that could be extended to the exhibition at large, it is most directly evident in the six side-by-side panels of this painting. The decision to invert the color palette in the center of each panel has allowed Otto-Knapp to explore the transitions between scenes, almost as if it were snapshots from a stage production. What is most revealing here is that the inverted black and white color palette seemingly evokes emotive states or moods, in the same manner than lighting would work in a stage performance. The change in palette works to shift a feeling of atmosphere in a manner that is highly reminiscent of theatrical lighting. In this regard, the organization of the painting evokes a set of atmospherics similar to the storyboarding of a stage scenography.

One way of mapping painting scenographics is to compare them to atmospherics produced by paintings. Indeed, scenographics might be viewed as a type of atmospherics. Cultural geographer Derek McCormack approaches atmospheres through concepts of envelopment, where envelopment is "a process through which atmospheres are disclosed and become palpable as elemental conditions of experiences via different configurations of bodies, materials and devices."⁶ Likewise, art philosopher Gernot Böhme proposes that scenography is "the art of the stage set which rids atmospheres of the odour of the irrational: here, it is a question of producing atmospheres."⁷ Mixing the claims of McCormack and Böhme,

⁶ McCormack, D. (2018) *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*, Durham: Duke University Press: pp. 5

⁷ Böhme, G. (2013) 'The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres', *Ambiances: International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space*, 10 February. Accessed from <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/315> : pp. 3

scenographics would amount to the tactics of atmospherics; the methods through which crafted atmospheres are produced. The atmospheric qualities of painting, as removed from the things it represents, directly informs Otto-Knapp's technical approach. As already described, the layered techniques used in some of her previous works allow the image to shift in detail depending on the approach vector. In this regard, the paintings affect the motions and flows of the gallery room explicitly. While arguably a condition of all paintings, certain techniques in Otto-Knapp's work explicitly invites a spatial re-orientation that, in turn, affords insight into the assemblage of assemblages that makes up the painting. Otto-Knapp's paintings are acts of place-orientation.

Scenographies remind us of how physical forces and materialities combine with expectations and imaginations to frame assemblages of place. Whether a corridor or an open field, the properties of stage environments afford a twice-removed lens to investigate how humans feel place. Stages operate as microcosms from which to witness spatial border politics in action; imagined divisions between the politically real and contrived, presence and absence, inside and outside. Scenographics, accordingly, are the queer tactics that draw attention to the properties, processes, and methods of being placed. Painting scenographics amount to these same tactics of queering. Paintings potentially *act out* through scenographics.