

Silvia Bächli – in space. Sketching her work

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by Konrad Bitterli

There has been one constant from the start: space. Good drawings are larger than the formats decreed by the edge of the paper. The drawings are like sculptures, looming to various extents into the space in which we move. The white walls, the space, form an inseparable part of the image field.

Silvia Bächli

“It is tempting to think of SB’s drawings as hieroglyphs, as pictographs of things in the world. They do not simply stand for themselves but for something outside their own formal reality.”¹ With this reference to Egyptian hieroglyphics Ulrich Looock places Silvia Bächli’s oeuvre in the field of the linguistic, interpreting her stylistic language as a “pictorial concentrate”,² before, as a second step, analyzing isolated examples of her rudimentary pictorial symbols: eyes, irregular bodies, duplications, clothes, architectures, structures... His list encapsulates the fundamental formulations but by no means attempts to lay claim to exhaustiveness. Looock’s concise text uses examples to illustrate the kind of approaches and questions that have, to date, characterized the discourse on Bächli’s open pictorial language. Discussed in numerous publications, the spectrum of interest ranges from a classical iconography to describing the approach taken by her drawings to reality or her specific use of the medium and its formal purpose or the individual steps she has taken in developing her oeuvre. Looking back, it is possible to observe just how consistently the artist pushes her work further, it appears to be characterized “by a great continuity with a few, mostly subliminal but enduring changes.”³ Bächli herself has the following to say on the subject: “Time and again doing something different to before, without giving up what had preceded, taking everything with you and slowly developing it. This has been one of my principles over the years. I want to forget what the drawing with the leg from yesterday looked like – so that I can try again. How does it really look? How does it feel from inside? How do I see it in other works?”⁴ Here, the artist is firstly making a very concrete reference to the studio situation and to the repeated process of taking up a blank sheet and attempting to continue her graphic work with impartiality and secondly her statement should be seen metaphorically, as the act of permanently monitoring one’s own activities and as a continuous progression from one phase of work to the next.

Stages in the work

The artist has continued to independently develop her early work, its expressive portrayal of the body rooted in Neue Figuration, a movement typical of the 1980s: sweeping strokes and a vigorous approach to female physicality have been replaced by a view of reality that could almost be called introspective. Accordingly, everyday perception, an often incidental way of looking at things, really form the starting point for the artistic process in the course of which familiar things take on their own graphic shapes on the paper. Her characteristic pictorial motifs – the (female) body in its entirety or unusual sections and fragments thereof, everyday items, furniture, architectures, landscapes, as well

as more abstract subjects such as paths traveled, words, texts or fragments of texts, indeed, even noises and pictures of things secretly imagined – and logically, her approach has become the subject of analysis by art historians, in the same way that her idiosyncratically placed grid structures or the expansive flower shapes and garlands in her large-format drawings are topics that have found their way into the specialist literature.

In 1982, the artist abruptly broke off the series of diary-like ink drawings she had started jotting down, often in expressive gestures. These were followed by drawings, usually small in format, executed in grease crayon, oil pastels or brush and gouache. As part of her lasting investigation of the medium of drawing, the artist has turned her attention to obvious items. Restricting her choice of materials has allowed her to focus her observations economically. Strokes, lines and splashes gel into concentrated visual experiences: moments of remembrance that sometimes take measure of the body, sometimes of the lines of the horizon and sometimes of open structures. Her work initially took the form of individual drawings or small series but as of 1983-4 Bächli started assembling these to form large wall-based compositions consisting of several parts, something she refers to as *ensembles*: “The finished drawings are hung at differing heights to produce a tight, densely packed score of sounds on the wall. These clusters remind me of the notation for Gregorian chants. This simultaneity of things, states, vibrations, etc., corresponds to the way that I see my surroundings and what is within me: various levels that mutually colour one another.”⁵ Once fixed, the ensembles are dimensioned, provided with a detailed hanging plan and are given titles, some of them matter-of-fact, others poetic, titles such as *alles weg*, *twelf*, *uma*, *left sleeve*, *L.*, *indisch*, *Ammassalik*, *Tibet*, *Ida*, *quittengelb*... Basically, these *ensembles* are open structures, not the kind of linear series that would follow a narrative logic. They are designed as a whole; nevertheless, the viewer’s gaze will get lost in their individual parts, will rove between the various elements, rest on certain items: “I am less and less interested in recountable stories with a beginning and end. The ephemeral between the stories, the tone are becoming more important to me, with all their gaps, all that is unsaid, the allusions, the pauses... The stories without a beginning and an end, which cannot be tamed by words. Beginning with the whole figure, my interest is in homing more and more on the skin. The distance is diminishing.”⁶

In 1994 Bächli’s work changed again. Not only did she carefully extend the scope of the medium of drawing but she also began reflecting on her work to date. She started revisiting drawings that she had previously rejected as no good – but not by embarking on a process of painting over them. Instead, she eradicated, wiped over or washed over the existing drawings: “The old traces were drowned by the water and covered by new traces. This response to something that had been there already resulted in far more abstract linear formations, which otherwise I would never have dared to produce. Playfully I discovered a few forms connected to the objects, which I nevertheless can trust.”⁷ In the act of reactivating existing pictures her work begins to free itself from deep-rooted traditions and to become condensed into increasingly free graphic structures.

In 1996, she produced her first space-consuming table installations. Up to 15 sheets from her extensive oeuvre were assembled in flat display cases like an archive to form little collections, sorted according to “family”, as the artist calls them. In the following years, the tables themselves underwent modifications in the way they looked and their formats, however, what was to be much more crucial

was the way that the drawings were arranged, progressing from a uniform setup to complex multiple perspectives and extending their physical possibilities to allow for movement around the table. In 2001, after a phase of intensive preoccupation with the collection of drawings she had produced for an art book, *Lidschlag*, she embarked on the above-mentioned large-format works on paper with delicate, overlapping lineaments: "Large paper (200 x 150 cm) demands a totally different kind of physical effort. One can manage to draw an unbroken line for two meters without interruption. But a longer movement can only be executed by taking a step and thus by a visible interruption in the line. Every line must be filled with presence, like a good dancer who extends right beyond her fingertips into space."⁸ Her rather severe grid structures had been preceded, as early as 1998, by floral pictorial compositions, initially wild garlands, and then were later reduced to the stems of flowers and heads of blossoms.

In parallel to extending her graphic possibilities, photography found its way into Bächli's work, initially taking the form of sections of newspaper pictures that she photocopied and integrated into *ensembles* and then later she started producing silkscreens of drawings of media pictures. She used photos of trips as invitation cards and studio shots for documenting and checking provisional hangings for planned exhibitions. However, these increasingly emerged as an autonomous medium with the artist investigating her environment on trips. Individual photos like her work on paper in Plexiglas were integrated into installations of drawings. Or they were exhibited on long tables as coherent series as in *Hafnargata* (2011), a cooperation with her life partner Eric Hattan, with whom she also realized a series of collages. She has also produced a work in video with him: *Snowhau* (2003).

Aspects of spatiality

Every aspect of Bächli's equally concentrated and multifaceted work has, in the past, been discussed, either individually or in meaningful combination with other elements of her work. However, her oeuvre's various forms of presentation have never been taken as the starting point for an exhibition project. *Far apart – close together*. This comprehensive exhibition at Kunstmuseum St.Gallen will, for the first time, be dealing with the whole breadth of the forms of presentation she has tried out over the years – less, in the form of a retrospective, as a chronological sequence of steps in a certain direction, than as a concise inventory of installation-based moments in her drawing career. And indeed, as it turns out, her work is not purely graphic but rather a careful process of extension and a way of training her viewers' way of looking at things.

Whereas Bächli's small-format drawings invite focused perception in an intimate dialogue with the pictures, her early sketchbooks galvanize the viewer into action, at least requiring him to page through them, a process in the course of which the sequential nature of the images engenders a meaning and the viewer is most likely to engage in some kind of act of narrative reading. The artist undermines this act of linear perception in multi-part *ensembles* by creating delicately balanced wall-based compositions which the viewer paces up and down in front of, his own physical and visual movement generating and rejecting ever new approaches to interpretation... With her table installations the artist then ostentatiously occupies the room, requiring from the viewer a fundamentally different way of looking at the work, offering something almost like an overview of a subject addressed by her drawings. By contrast, her large-format work on paper takes on the presence of the kind of panel

painting with which the viewer is directly physically confronted. In all the forms of presentation she uses, it becomes clear that Bächli is never concerned with the traditional categories of drawing, nor has she ever been at all interested in displaying superficial virtuosity. Her artistic approach is distinctly more comprehensive, integrating sculptural and installation-based dimensions, firstly, in the way that individual elements of her work reach out into the room and secondly, because her viewers move around in front of her work and make their way through it.

This manifests itself not least in the kind of exhibitions that set themselves distinctly apart from the usual kind of work compilations which, to a greater or lesser extent, bestow a meaning on these works. She prepares her presentations with great care, seeking out the exhibition location in order to, in the first instance, get a feeling for the place. Then she builds a model in order to determine the structure of the exhibition, to define her choice of works and to check the latter repeatedly. "The search for the right neighbors is not, however, simply a concern for me with the ensembles, but with any exhibition. I don't simply arrive with a couple of works. I always examine the possibilities for sequences and links beforehand in my studio. The whole is already set up in a 1:50 model, and then I check once again at the location whether my proposal actually holds its own with the reality there. My interest in intervals, rhythms, syncopation, sound intensity, compactions, weight, emptiness – whether inside of an ensemble or in a completely different space with lots of individual drawings – remains unchanged."⁹ Basically, what the artist is interested in is, just like in music, a composition within the room – one that uses her own graphic endeavors as the music for a three-dimensional score she wishes to implement – or, to revert to Ulrich Loock's terminology, to place pictorial concentrates in a spatial context.

Text and context / reception and the present day

The catalogue that accompanies the exhibition also goes into the largely neglected question of the spatial aspect of the work. To all intents and purposes designed as a reader, it comprises essays by long-standing observers of her oeuvre, explaining the different forms of presentation. These are complemented by reprints of selected texts penned at the genesis of individual works. These range from a text written in 1991 on the *ensembles* which Roman Kurzmeyer has specially revised for this publication to two articles that see Bächli's drawing installations and entire rooms as topographies or landscapes: Hans Rudolf Reust on the installation at the Venice Biennale and Catherine Pavlovic with a seminal article on the spatial staging of the drawing. Kristin Schmidt touches on the same subject, with her observations oscillating between the individual drawings and entire installations, using individual examples and, at the same time, in dialogue and dialectically. The reprint of Markus Stegmann's essay on the *line* drawings devotes itself to the large-format work on paper and a revised article by the author discusses the table installations since 1996. Nadia Veronese in her essay is the first person to address Silvia Bächli's art books, above all the collection of drawings brought out by Lars Müller and entitled *Lidschlag. How It Looks*. In his essay *Space Grid Change* Roland Wäspe discusses the artist's current work by relating her grid-like structures to the oeuvre of an Agnes Martin or Donald Judd. These essays are rounded out by selected texts on specific groups of works by Jürg Halter and Maja Naef that propose specific, albeit different readings of individual drawings.

Although the publication under consideration focuses on the modes of presentation in Bächli's work, I would like to conclude by looking into the future. After all, contemporary art has devoted some attention to the medium of drawing: "Drawing has occupied an increasing amount of space at international art exhibitions and biennials in recent years. Although the importance of drawing has basically never, in the history of art, been neglected, it has seldom assumed the significance that it now enjoys amongst artists of the younger generation. As the works presented illustrate, today, drawing is not limited either to sketchbooks and drafts, or to paper and pencil."¹⁰ The introduction to *Vitamin Z*, an encyclopedic survey of present-day creative-drawing in book form, points out how the medium has been expanded and how, in the 1970s, it began consistently to move away from traditional drawing by hand. Indeed, drawing began to push beyond the boundaries of the traditional sheet of paper; wall drawings and purpose-made drawing environments were produced, along with substantial drawing blocks whereby individual pages were combined to form large-scale compositions. The lead here was taken by artists such as Hanne Darboven (1941-2009). Then, in the 1980s, came the art of the so-called Neo-Expressionists and, at the same time, drawing was elevated to the realms of something more expressive. The place it now occupied is exemplified by the work of Martin Disler (1949-1996), whose drawings and painted work on paper sometimes took a physical hold of the viewer or ran through the room in monumental lengths: *The Wall Flows* (1983). But the man who started the ball rolling for the present generation was Californian artist Raymond Pettibon (born in 1957). It is less his radical deconstruction of stereotypes of the American dream and more his collage-like combinations in small and medium-format drawings that, with their orchestrated power as entities, open up a splintered perspective on the world. A large number of artists have taken their lead from him, with series of drawings distributed over the walls in strips, blocks or rhizomes. These include Marlene Dumas (born in 1953) with her faces, Nedko Solakov (born in 1957) with his absurd, drawn political narratives or Marcel van Eeden (born in 1965) with his film noir series, which he realizes in precise total installations such as *The Darkest Museum in the World* (2011). These systematically structured blocks of work such as the written drawings of the above-mentioned Hanne Darboven or the work of Fernando Bryce (born in 1959), whose *Atlas Peru* (2000-01) with its 495 ink brush drawings spread out to form a historical panorama of his homeland. This kind of strategy combines an approach to drawing with the concept of the encyclopedia or collection, bringing to mind the notion of ordering and structuring that we have already encountered in Bächli's tables with their independent shapes.

Despite drawing's impressive presence in contemporary art, in the critical reception little significance has been attached to its forms of presentation, just as Emma Dexter's introduction to *Vitamin Z* does not take this approach any further. On the contrary, the author sees two trends in contemporary drawing, one post-conceptual one and one neo-romantic one. "In drawing, the artists discovered that place of refuge that protected them from the rigidity of conceptualism, of post-structuralism and of critical theory. Since then, drawing, whose aesthetics are based on an obvious return to emotion, to experience and to feeling, has undergone a great revival. This is visible in the work of artists such as Sylvia Bächli [...]"¹¹ Accordingly, almost conservative, Bächli's drawings should be placed in a neo-Romantic lineage and associated with terms such as authenticity or narration whilst, at the same time, their obvious conceptual or even sculptural aspects remain entirely suppressed. However, both the

theoretical aspect and the orchestration of her work in space are particularly noticeable, alongside her particular affinity for everyday things, and they all attest to her fundamental contribution to the subject of drawing. In contemporary art, this hints at a different kind of view of things – with, as its consequence, a fundamentally altered perception, and not only of art.

¹ Ulrich Loock, "Der Körper ein Werden," in: Silvia Bächli, (Kunsthalle Bern, 1996) , p. 9.

² Ibid., p. 10.

³ Hans Rudolf Reust, "What do the majority of minutes consist of?", published in: Silvia Bächli. Studio, (Museu Serralves, Porto, 2007), p. 141.

⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

⁶ Ibid., p. 142.

⁷ Ibid., p. 142-143.

⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁰ Emma Dexter, "Vorwort" , in: Vitamin Z, (Phaidon, Berlin, 2006) , p. 5.

¹¹ Emma Dexter, "Einleitung," in: ibid., p. 9.