

HANS RUDOLF REUST > On Anticipating Events

I.

For the most part, Silvia Bächli's drawings are suspended in visual clouds under-way carefully calculated and yet playful formations. That makes the attempt to understand them individually feel as if one were moving back behind the actual moment of their appearance in the exhibition. Yet, it is this very movement that reveals how the gaps between the pictures can serve to articulate the single work. So, to begin with, several descriptions of single works follow.

p. 82 They are all there, the vertical lines drawn freehand in restrained hues of amaranth-brown, greenish grey and blue. They can be seen all at once and yet, as we look at the drawing, they seem to be entering the picture plane from the left, one at a time, as if the picture were a stage. One line after the other walks in, joins the rest and slows down to a halt, though not entirely. Somehow, being vertical, the lines seem to be moving sideways and have yet to come to a standstill, which their composition as a whole will never find. That is because they begin to set each other in motion like chime bars, in clusters that could grow larger. But not now. Now everything that makes this wide, white expanse reverberate is already there. What remains are soft sounds with more subtle nuances.

p. 78 Entirely different is the conduct of this bundle of related lines in horizontal layers. While their arrangement suggests clear, structured stasis, the lines are still trembling from the gesture of the hand that painted them. It looks as if gravity has been tricked with, for the lines, a bundle of elongated dashes, are afloat in the middle of the drawing like a field of energy or a zone of thought. Here, too, the subtle application of pigments appears ephemeral as if the wash of colours were related to various forms of projection or the omnipresent visuals on screens.

p. 60 A slender, tightly spaced array of lines running in the same direction flows into the picture plane from above as if putting out feelers, but prepared to retract them at any moment. The tentative act of painting explores the surface as if it were precarious terrain. At the same time, its presence makes an impact that resonates well beyond the picture plane into the room itself. The gesture of reaching into space also characterizes horizontal lines in

countermovement (p. 76). Here, the traces of the paint brush, entering left and right, show larger and slightly irregular gaps, not only activating a zone of encounter but above all marking the ground of the white paper as an equivalent element. This horizontal encounter is even more conspicuous in the gentle touch of two elongated fingers stretched across the expanse of the picture plane (p. 86).

p. 66 The first impression that the word “star” invariably evokes is deceptive. It is deceptive inasmuch as its connotations can be similarly evoked by the intersection of straight lines, traversing and dividing a piece of portrait-format paper from edge to edge. What’s more, one cannot even speak of lines crossing in the middle; that would be misleading since at least one of the five lines misses or avoids the centre of the intersection. The plane is divided more or less in half both vertically and horizontally but not diagonally. The spokes of Duchamp’s bicycle wheel keep moving.

In a number of works, the lines drawn freehand traverse the rectangle to form a more or less orthogonal grid. The chequered structures override any claim to hierarchy among single pictorial parts; they divide the surface evenly or remind us that the grid could keep going forever beyond the frame defined by the sheet of paper (p. 50). And yet the grids that Bächli draws are never strictly geometrical; rather, they are extremely fragile, fluttering in the wind, interwoven with lascivious loops (p. 88) or so ephemeral that they are little more than remote memories of grids (p. 84).

p. 70 Lines in related colours come together like single syllables forming wordless sentences in the space of the picture. The exit is undefined, even where it began. Lines in English red are spread out in the drawing like antlers, branches or insect legs. Although triangles specifically elaborate several angles between the clearly defined linear sections, as if the joints needed reinforcement, the fragile structure is not of a technical turn but more like bricolage. The clear-cut presence of the linear configuration belies the enigma it poses on attempting to read it as a self-contained something.

p. 63 Cinematic or photogenic? Whatever the case, undeniably exquisite is the elegance of this arm sliding off an imaginary armrest and the slender hand, relaxed and dropping off into nowhere—were it not for the startling gap, in which part of the lower arm is linked to the absent body. Here the movement abruptly sinks into the all-embracing white of the paper, out of which it extracted itself as an encounter between two autonomous shapes. Like abstract, clearly self-contained shapes, this arm and this hand are figures that perceive the

picture plane as a field rather than probing it from the edges. Identifiable gestures allude to potential stories but stubbornly preclude explicit articulation. Each drawing remains a singular event that asserts its own time beyond any before or after.

Almost imperceptibly, a formal typology of linear compositions has emerged in these descriptions of single works by Silvia Bächli, classified by types of bundles, grids, additions and configurations. Such purely formal distinctions undoubtedly reveal aspects common to the way in which the works emerge, but they subject an appreciation of this artist's oeuvre to all too rigorous reduction. All the more important is a second level of appreciation: the play of individual works within a larger whole. Seen in concert, the specific features of these visual typologies carry over into an architectural rhythm that ultimately guides perception.

II.

Despite the plainly reduced and understated nature of Silvia Bächli's works, they do not simply stand alone. They do not have the "hereness", the unbroken presence that ordinarily applies to a picture. As demonstrated in the intentionally singular descriptions above, they follow a complex temporal trail, one that transcends the linearity of narration by conflating the ever present process of drawing with the permanence of the drawn traces.

Roland Barthes associates photography with death because it captures a moment that is irrevocably past; similarly, painting largely embodies the presence of a finished process. In contrast, the immediacy of a fragile drawing often stands in a present that is still very close to the gesture of drawing. Deviations from this hasty classification immediately come to mind in all the three mediums. Deviation from the drawing as presence is particularly conspicuous in the work of Bächli: her completed pictures actually only become pictures by initiating a process of perception. To put it differently, her drawings anticipate what they are about to unfold as an event. The still nascent event materializes just when it has already become more than the imminent future. There it is, unabashedly abrupt, and yet its presence cannot allay the inquietude that will be imparted by its actualized form.

Jean-Luc Nancy attempts to elucidate this insoluble inconsistency between the act of drawing and the drawing itself¹: "Drawing is therefore the Idea—it is the true form of the thing. Or more exactly, it is the gesture that proceeds from the desire to show this form and to trace it so as to show the form—but not to trace in order to reveal it as a form already

received. Here, to trace is to find, and in order to find, to seek a form to come (or to let it seek and find itself)—a form to come that should or that can come through drawing.”

“*Forma formans* more than *forma formata*.” Hence, drawing is related to an unquenchable desire, which cannot, however, be recognized without the static drawing: “But in this intimate combination of the two gestures of birth and ostension, the one can never separate from the other—birth cannot simply remain an interminable process (a mark must be traced), nor can ostension simply present a formed or closed form. The *status nascendi* or *status formandi*—this *status* that has no stable state and remains incessantly metastable - never stops preceding and extending itself beyond itself. It began ‘before’ and it will continue ‘after’ what allows itself to be identified as the present of its presentation. Formed form summons a new formation; the Idea makes demands on itself [*se demande elle-même*] beyond its identifications; thought proves to be that of a desire always opened up again, because the truth of the thing cannot be presented once and for all, given that to present it—to form it—is already to remove a part of its own capacity for opening, forming, transforming, or deforming. The possibilities of truth are infinite, and it is this infinity that thought designs. Drawing carries out the gesture of its desire.”

It is the white ground of Bächli’s drawings that links their ephemerality and their visible presence. Although the ground is brought into play differently in every work, it invariably activates an intermediate zone inseparable both from the individual work and from the architectural space. Moreover, it not only recalls the latent potential prior to the act of drawing but also opens avenues to the possibility of continuation.

The drawings have congregated in two galleries at the exhibition in Munich. Silvia Bächli has deliberately staged their perception, extending the appreciation of works in isolation to their composition in space, thereby heightening understanding. We perceive the works mounted on the walls as a production in space, where we move about and become contributing agents in directing the gaze. Not only does she address our vision, she addresses our bodies as a whole, for they can constantly modify the focus by zooming between close-up and longshot. That parameter changes slightly on studying the works laid out on tables. Our first impression, as we look down, is an overview, while subsequent movement along the edges of the tables is more stringently defined. Thus, shifts in the mode of viewing correspond to the instability of the individual drawings. Rooms containing Bächli’s works provoke ceaseless change as a constant. Unbridled, rampant, beautifully sweet and sour, with eating repellents and barbs to assist in climbing and with their shiny dark fruit, these “blackberries” have now become nourishment for Munich.

And finally in Bächli's spaces, one discovers another an entirely different, very intimate and profound association. Despite all the ruptures, it is still possible to experience how each and every drawing rises out of the touch of the paint brush on paper. In one of her poems, Yoko Tawada says that "touching is seeing without distance".² In Silvia Bächli's case, we may then speak of a seeing that touches, simultaneously creating intimacy and detachment.

- 1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, translated by Philip Armstrong, Fordham University Press, New York, 2013, pp. 10, 21 and 25–26 respectively. First published in conjunction with the eponymous exhibition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon 2007–2008: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Plaisir du dessin*, Editions Galilée, Paris 2009.
- 2 Yoko Tawada, "Ges-ICH-ter", in: *Aber die Mandarinen müssen heute abend noch geraubt werden* (1997/2003), konkursbuch verlag, Tübingen, 1997/2003, p. 46.