

Night and day – a scattering of considerations on the drawings of Silvia Bächli

Published in the catalogue *Silvia Bächli – Nuit et Jour*, p. 16–25

Galerie d'art graphique, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 7 November 2007 – 6 January 2008,

by Jonas Storsve

The inordinate undertaking in which Silvia Bächli has been engaged for more than 30 years consists in an exhaustive exploration of the world in its most minute details, an attempt to understand how all things work and the establishment, through this investigation, of a certain order. Hence, she seems to disregard overviews and broad lines and to attach importance mainly to details, to interstices and fragmentation, to the reflection or the shadow of objects rather than to the objects themselves. Somewhat in the manner of a traveller, for whom points of departure and arrival have little significance, being on the road is the only thing that seems to matter to her.

Silvia Bächli uses herself as a starting point: her body, her life, her history, and her surroundings. To facilitate the task or might it be to make it more difficult? – She has deliberately pared down her research tools to white sheets of paper of varying size, quality and tone, worked with Indian ink, charcoal, oil pastel and gouache in a palette ranging from light grey to deep black. Colour very seldom intervenes. Recently, photography has been introduced into this oeuvre composed as much of questions as of doubts.

Aargau

Silvia Bächli is originally from the Aargau canton of northern Switzerland, whose capital, Aarau, is located on one of the two railway lines connecting Basel to Zurich. She was born in Wettingen and grew up in the neighbouring town of Baden in the Limmat valley. Rather than complete the baccalaureate, she opted to obtain a teaching certification. But in 1976, at the age of 20, she left Aargau to settle in Basel where she began studying at the famous Schule für Gestaltung (School of Applied Arts) with the intention of becoming a teacher of visual arts. At that time, the teaching, based on the Bauhaus tradition, followed very strict rules: students began by learning to draw cubes, moving on to objects, architecture, landscapes, followed by works from the museum of ethnography and casts of Greek sculptures. Only after completing these various stages were students allowed to draw live models.

Basel

At the end of the nineteen seventies and during the nineteen eighties, Basel was a particularly active city on the contemporary art scene. The creation of the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, the first museum in Europe exclusively devoted to contemporary art, inaugurated in 1980 in a former paper factory on the Rhine, played a very important role. Tribute is also due to the very active efforts of two emblematic figures from this period: Dieter Koeplin, Chief Curator of Basel's Kupferstichkabinett from 1966 to 1999, and Jean-Christophe Ammann, Director of the Kunsthalle from 1978 to 1988. Thanks to their distinctive personalities and their personal commitment, Basel became a prime destination for contemporary art. Dieter Koeplin organized, first at the Kunstmuseum, as early as 1969, and then at

the museum of contemporary art, exhibitions of drawings by Joseph Beuys and numerous other artists.¹ Upon his arrival in Basel, Jean-Christophe Ammann also presented an intelligent mix of international and local artists in the neighbouring Kunsthalle.²

Both Dieter Koeplin and Jean-Christophe Ammann became interested in Silvia Bächli's work very early on. During a collective exhibition at the Kunsthalle Pallazzo of Liestal in 1981 Dieter Koeplin acquired several of her drawings for the collections of the Kupferstichkabinett. During the nineteen eighties he continued to purchase single sheets, and on the occasion of Silvia Bächli's solo exhibition at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst in 1989, he acquired the wall installation *o.T. (München)* (1985), comprised of 19 drawings, for the Kupferstichkabinett's collections. For his part, Jean-Christophe Ammann invited the artist to produce a solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle as early as 1987, where she displayed wall installations and a few large-format drawings (approximately 200 x 130 cm).

Alongside the Basel museums, mention should also be made of the alternative, nomadic art space "Filiale Basel", founded in 1981 by a group of friends – Eric Hattan, Silvia Bächli and the art historian Beat Wismer – as well as the galleries, particularly the Stampa Gallery³ founded in 1969 by Gilli and Diego Stampa, who worked from the outset with international and Swiss contemporary artists and architects. Lastly, let us note that the first Basel Contemporary Art Fair, now a must-see event, was held in 1970.

Wall Installations

Silvia Bächli's first works were ink drawings done in red A4 format notebooks to form illustrated diaries of sorts. During a stay of a few months in Rome in 1981, she sewed together very thin, large grey sheets of paper salvaged from the vegetable market and used them as supports for large drawings that participated in the neo-expressionist wave of the period. Themes and motifs, such as faces, female figures, hands, and feet, which are still present today in Silvia Bächli's work, were appearing already in these drawings. Even though her output seems to have followed a smooth course, there have been a few notable breaks. In 1982, she suddenly gave up her notebooks to work on loose sheets of paper. Then, after a stay at the Cité des Arts in Paris in 1983–1984, made possible by a grant from the Aargau canton, she discovered a truly original and personal means of expression in wall installations. On the occasion of a group exhibition, "Das Subjektive Museum,"⁴ organized in the spring of 1984 by Eric Hattan in a former Basel factory, she showed a series of 56 drawings, *Sans titre (Paris 10.83-3.84)* [cat. no 2, p. 67],⁵ a wall installation in which space plays an important role, so important that it becomes an integral part of the work. At her first exhibition at the Stampa Gallery in

¹ Georg Baselitz, Markus Raetz, A. R. Penck, Cy Twombly, Claes Oldenburg, Jörg Immendorf, Frank Stella, Mimmo Paladino, Dieter Roth, Anselm Stalder, Martin Disler, Francesco Clemente, Walter Dahn... See the complete list in *Expositions de dessins d'artistes contemporains à l'Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel de 1967-1995*, in: De Beuys à Trockel. Dessins contemporains du Kunstmuseum de Bâle, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1996), p. 90-92.

² Alighiero e Boetti, Giovanni Anselmo, Helmut Federle, Dennis Oppenheim, Martin Disler, Geer van Elk, Mario Merz, Neil Jenney, Markus Raetz, Miriam Cahn, Enzo Cucchi, Jeff Wall, Fischli/Weiss, Hannah Villiger, Bruce Nauman, Katharina Fritsch and Rosemarie Trockel. For a complete list of activities at the Basel Kunsthalle, see for reference *Die Geschichte des Basler Kunstvereins und der Kunsthalle Basel 1839-1988* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1989).

³ Silvia Bächli's first exhibition was held in the commercial gallery, The Stampa, in 1983. They were association for a dozen years.

⁴ "The Subjective Museum."

⁵ This historical piece comprised only 48 drawings when it was presented in Paris in 2007.

1983, the artist had already mounted her pictures in this way, while still agreeing to sell the works separately. But with very few exceptions, from 1984 on, this device was to permanently fix her artwork and determine its overall format. The single works also have a close relationship with the surrounding space: "The drawings are like sculptures, looming to various extents into the space in which we move. The white walls, the space, are an inseparable part of the image field."⁶

Creative Process

Let us look more closely at Silvia Bächli's creative method, even though it has already been described in most publications about her artistic output. Her work develops in several stages: after the spontaneous, almost automatic creation of images with simple forms, at times abstract, at times with representational overtones, often related to the human body, comes a careful and studied construction. Eventually the artist very rigorously selects some of these drawings to be presented either singly, or in groups that can number up to 50 or so sheets of paper.

Abroad

She does only one or two such wall installations per year to avoid repeating herself.⁷ These wall installations have been largely responsible for her recognition beyond Swiss borders. Until the mid-nineteen nineties Silvia Bächli mainly exhibited in Switzerland and Germany. The first indication of her changing status on the international art scene came with her participation in the 1995 winter exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York, where she showed the installation *Ida* (1993). But it was above all her solo exhibition at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1996 that surprisingly, brought her "international" recognition and a whole new visibility. Silvia Bächli was then associated with a highly respected art scene, partly created by Ulrich Loock, the director of the Kunsthalle from 1985 to 1997, thanks to his visionary, radical programming.⁸

Her exhibition in Bern certainly influenced Philip Nelson's decision to invite the artist to join his Parisian gallery. Although Silvia Bächli had been dividing her time between Basel and Paris since the mid-nineteen eighties, her first solo exhibition in France did not take place until 1997. It was held at the Nelson Gallery, with notably two installations drawings, one of which, *Belonging*, [cat. no 6, p. 54-55], was acquired by the Frac des Pays de la Loire⁹ in 1998. The other, *Karola*, became part of the collections of the Pompidou Center in 2000.

Titles

Most of the single drawings do not have titles. The large format single drawings are given a series title followed by a number, such as *Linien 32* [cat. no 25, p. 64-65] or *Blumen 9* [cat. no 11, p. 72-73]. The names of the installations are all in different languages: *Alles weg*, *Abrikostraeerne findes*, *Tibet*, *Karola*, *Quittengelb*, *Ammassalik* ... "Quittengelb" is a colour, "Ammassalik" is the name of a town in

⁶ Silvia Bächli, interview with Hans Rudolf Reust, "What do the majority of minutes consist of? Questions to and from Silvia Bächli's", in: Silvia Bächli, *Studio* (Porto: Museu Serralves, 2007), p. 142.

⁷ Silvia Bächli, interview with Hans Rudolf Reust, *idem*, p. 147.

⁸ Notable exhibitions included Franz West (1988), Harald Klingelhöller (1988), Marlene Dumas (1989), Jean-Marc Bustamante (1989), Robert Gober (1990), Thomas Schütte (1990), Helmut Dorner (1990), Bethan Huws (1990), Al Taylor (1992), Brice Marden (1993), Gregor Schneider (1996), among others.

⁹ First acquisition of a Silvia Bächli work by a French public institution.

Greenland, “Karola” is a woman’s name and “abrikostraerne findes” a quotation from a work of the great Danish poet Inger Christensen. The titles bear no more narrative meaning than the works themselves. They seem rather to have been chosen for the way they sound, for the taste or aroma that emanates from them, but also, for the colour they evoke.

Space

In these installations the white of the walls does not separate the images but rather joins them together in a vast organic ambience, an atmosphere that the artist, like a dreamer telling a dream while still in it, does not perceive as a whole. Her narrative is conditioned by the movement of her memory slowing down and speeding up, which creates a rhapsodic effect that governs the whole breathing of the installation, as Paolo Colombo notes.¹⁰ The distance between the sheets of paper modulates the intensity of their connections and works the same way as an interval of silence in poetry or rest in music. These works are never narrative and yet they resemble fragments of an amnesiac’s speech, or of a lost language of which only a few symbols remain, or a story from which the necessary elements for its comprehension have been cut out.

Questions

In Silvia Bächli’s drawings the smallest detail is what matters most: the pressure of an arm, the trembling of a hand, the thickness of the line, the way it is drawn, the intensity of its colour (black), or the manner in which the paper absorbs it. What happens when one line meets another? What mark does a paintbrush barely dipped in gouache leave on the paper? What happens when the colour reaches the edge of the paper? Can a line drawn from the top of the sheet to the bottom be identical to a line drawn from the bottom to the top? Is it possible to repeat a form already drawn? These are only a few of the questions raised by these drawings.

Families

During her exhibition at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1996 the artist proposed for the first time a new way of presenting her works on display tables. She organized her drawings into thematic families on simple wooden panels. A drawing could nonetheless change families as the display was not sealed until the piece was purchased. This is the case for the tables, now at the St Gallen Kunstmuseum. On one of these display tables are 11 drawings of silhouettes produced over a period of 15 years using different techniques (watercolour, ink, and gouache); on another, 9 drawings of arms or hands; on a third, titled *Les Ingrédients*, 8 drawings produced over a period of 16 years are assembled according to a different principle: one of the elements present in the first drawing can be found in all the subsequent drawings. Thus, some families are determined by formal aspects, others selected on the basis of content, and still others organized according to a different system. The order simply depends on a grid of criteria chosen by the artist.

¹⁰ Silvia Bächli, exhibition catalogue (Geneva: Centre d’art contemporain de Genève, 1994), p. 54.

Words

The drawings featuring words or letters are a category of works that stand apart. Most of the time they are alone on the page. They can also sometimes be associated with shapes, as in the drawing that pays homage to Marisa Merz in which a simple rounded black square in the middle of the sheet is topped by the inscription "For Marisa." They can sometimes, in their form though not in their content, resemble a shopping or to-do list.¹¹ Silvia Bächli willingly plays with language, and especially with homonyms.¹² This iconoclastic way of destabilizing language, but also rendering it poetic, can have surprising results, sometimes reminiscent of visual poetry, of the kind that Ian Hamilton Finlay, for example, used to practice. Other drawings include words with existential overtones, which seem to make explicit the deep-seated meaning of her work, like the 1995 drawing [cat. no 5, p. 76] announcing "Urgent Questions."¹³

Feminism

In addition to the tribute to Marisa Merz, there is also a text-drawing that refers to another artist, Sophie Taeuber-Arp.¹⁴ She is evoked in reference to three drawings that she produced in 1939 for Jean Arp's poetry collection, *Poèmes sans prénoms*,¹⁵ published in France in 1941. These drawings marked an important change in her work insofar as the line became for her a theme in itself. But can we, for all that, speak of a feminist stance in Silvia Bächli's work? The Stampa Gallery in Basel, the artist's principal gallery for more than 10 years, represents or represented many important women artists, such as the Swiss artists Miriam Cahn and Pipilotti Rist, as well as Rosemarie Trockel and Marlene Dumas, whose work have points in common with that of Silvia Bächli. Barbara Gross' Munich gallery, with which Silvia Bächli has worked since 1988, is also known for its feminist attitude and, in this regard, it is tempting to mention another great graphic artist, Eva Hesse,¹⁶ cited by Silvia Bächli in an interview;¹⁷ In fact, Bächli's recent works in India ink [cat. no 29, p. 48-49] are reminiscent of 1964-1965 "machine" drawings of this German-American artist. There is an analogous attention to the delicacy of the stroke and to the precision of line and form in these drawings that Eva Hesse wanted to be, "sharp, clear – but as crazy as machines, with larger, bolder forms, drawn with precision."¹⁸ Ultimately, if we can speak of feminism at all, it is simply because Silvia Bächli's work, marked by a very personal artistic language, is produced by a woman perfectly conscious of her condition.¹⁹

¹¹ See the drawing with the words, *Das Ding an sich* [The Thing in Itself], *Diagram/Erklärung* [Diagram/explanation], *Ding im Raum (abgebildet)* [Object in space (reproduced)] features on the back cover of the exhibition catalogue, Silvia Bächli, *Studio*, op. cit.

¹² A good example is the drawing that belongs to the installation *Alles weg*, 2005-2006 [cat. no 21, p. 58–59] with the text „alles weg / nichts / meer da.“

¹³ Drängende Fragen.

¹⁴ Silvia Bächli also incorporated a photographic portrait of Sophie Taeuber-Arp in a silk-screen print from 2002, reprinted in the catalogue of her one-woman expositions at the Frac Haute-Normandie, the Domaine de KerguŽhennec and at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg in 2002.

¹⁵ Silvia Bächli also used this title for her exhibition at the Mamco in Geneva in the summer of 2006.

¹⁶ Barbara Gross exhibited the work of Eva Hesse, notably her drawings, in 1993.

¹⁷ Silvia Bächli, interview with Hans Rudolf Reust, op. cit., p. 146. The drawing should be „Losgelöst, aber aufs Intimste persönlich sein“ [“free but personal to the point of intimacy”], She also mentions Agnes Martin in this interview.

¹⁸ Letter written to Sol Lewitt on 18 March 1965. Cited by Béatrice Salmon in the exhibition catalogue *Du trait à la ligne* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, Galerie d'art graphique, 1995), p. 45.

¹⁹ In this respect, the title of this article, "Night and day," initially chosen for the colour of its sound, has subsequently proven to contain a discreet tribute to three other great twentieth-century artists whose work evinces

Formats

Was it to differentiate herself from the use of small formats traditionally associated with women that, towards the end of 1990, Silvia Bächli began to use a new, larger paper with which she seems particularly comfortable? In the mid-nineteen eighties she was already using large formats, but they were, by their very technique (they were done in acrylic) almost more like paintings on paper than drawings. Around 1998, the sudden appearance in her work of a thicker paper and a larger format (200 x 150 cm) on which she draws with gouache, introduced a new monumentality. This is true of the *Floreal* [cat. no 7-8, p. 52-53] series that evokes a strange aquatic and mineral flora, which could never be found in a botany vade mecum. Some of these flowers and the strange ties connecting them – a cross between a tube and a silk ribbon – evoke drawings on porcelain of the kind produced by the Meissen and Copenhagen factories in the eighteenth century, only greatly enlarged. These elements already foreshadow the work with lines that followed and which continues to occupy Silvia Bächli today. In the large formats and particularly in the *Linien* series, the artist sets up a very physical connection between herself and the work. She makes them horizontally, with the paper placed on the floor. These very long strokes are drawn in a single movement sometimes covering the paper's entire 2-meter length, without pause or repetition. It is not physically possible to create a longer stroke without moving and without "breaking" the line. The human body, the artist's in this case, is therefore highly present in these purely abstract drawings. The lines can intersect [cat. no 17, p. 56], become supports for organic forms (*Linien 3*, 2001²⁰), become parallel, evoke a head of hair (*Lily*, 2004, cat. no 13, p. 63), a landscape (*Linien 18*, 2004²¹) or a door (*Linien 19*, 2004²²).

Lines

Silvia Bächli usually works on a subject, a system, until it has been exhausted or transformed into something else. The latest development of this line principle is a series of large formats with parallel lines rubbing against each other. Their density varies in a range of particularly rich greys and blacks. The artist begins the line at a precise point, in the middle of the sheet, and ends at the upper edge, repeating this gesture in a series of regularly placed or more freely drawn lines. In the latter, the lines – which are quite wide – even overlap or intersect like the fringes of a wool scarf. In these drawings, based on slight variations and movements of the line and on the intensity of the gouache, Silvia Bächli succeeds in maintaining a clearly organic appearance that naturally connects them with prior works. The modesty, the absence of grandiloquence and spectacularity, but also the precision and great coherence of Silvia Bächli's output contribute to making it a rare and precious gem in the art world. Her areas of interest are rich and varied, and more knowledgeable than one might imagine: they range from the Black Virgins of the Auvergne – which are the inspiration for many of her drawings of heads – to Cycladic sculpture – which is particularly evident in the drawings of

a keen awareness of their condition as women: Virginia Woolf, whose novel *Night and Day* was published in 1919; Karen Blixen through the story of the old lady Miss Malin Nat-og-Dag, the heroine of her gothic tale "The Deluge at Norderney" (first published in 1934); and, lastly, Billie Holiday who may very well have given the most beautiful performance of Cole Porter's 1932 standard "Night and Day."

²⁰ Private collection, Basel. Reprinted in the exhibition catalogue Silvia Bächli,

Linien (Schaffhausen: Museum Allerheiligen, 2005), p. 35.

²¹ *Idem.*, p. 73.

²² *Idem.*, p. 75.

busts in the series *Die Schwarze Köchin* [cat. no 3, p. 82-83]. Moreover, the ethical positions upon which her work is based never waver: “The way something is made, the approach that informs it, is more decisive than the chosen motif. I am drawn more to a Romanesque chapel than the Sistine. Sweeping barren landscapes – Iceland for example – with their primal emptiness fascinate me far more than tropical regions. Drawings mean leaving things out: a winter landscape with snow.”²³

Translated from the French by Gila Walker

²³ Silvia Bächli, interview with Hans Rudolf Reust, *op. cit.*, p. 149–150.