

On Silvia Bächli

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by Maja Naef

For Silvia Bächli, the act of drawing is dedicated to the observation and graphic appropriation of her immediate everyday world. Since the late 1970s when her first drawings appeared, she has worked with the most basic materials, using ink, crayon or gouache on sheets of white paper in various formats.

The simplicity of Bächli's drawing process provides the framework for the two conceptual paths that underpin her artistic inquiry. On the one hand, the simple drawing method allows for the compression of compelling and sometimes unsettling impressions from the surrounding environment into a visual language – stroke, line, mark – that allows them to be acted out and seen anew, to be seen differently, on the page. On the other hand, the economy of Bächli's drawing tools underscores the drawing process itself, thereby illuminating what drawing – today – can mean.

Let us take a closer look: *Untitled* (2007) presents a pair of legs. Whereas the right leg stretches out horizontally, the left foot rests on the lower edge of the paper as if attempting to stabilize an unsteady situation. The right foot is truncated, the leg unable to find a place on the page. Extended outwards but still slightly bent, it appears arrested by the confines of the drawing paper. Yet this positioning of the legs creates a tension which ultimately serves the impact of the drawing: it pushes the body beyond the borders of the paper while, at the same time, expanding the picture space as defined by the two legs that traverse and measure it. The translucent application of the gouache which allows the white of the paper to shimmer through the legs emphasizes the close relationship between body and drawing, between surface and depth, between movement and the artistic process: drawing lays bare the space of the body.

Around 2000, the motifs of fragmented body parts such as hands, legs, nipples or arms recede as Bächli turns her attention to the line in itself and begins to work in a large format, 2 x 1.5 meters. Hand-drawn vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines form grids and string fragile nets across the paper. Beginning in 2006, her investigation broadens; she begins drawing brush-thick bands, starting in the center of the paper and moving out towards the edges (*Untitled 27*, 2007 and *Untitled 28*, 2007). This kind of line work requires a discipline of hand, which at first seems at odds with the body-oriented language of her earlier drawings. However, through the process by which the pattern of lines emerges, the body is reaffirmed. The large format presents other demands, requiring new materials and changing the fundamental conditions of drawing.

The sheet of paper affixed to the studio floor and the long-handled brush correspond to the full extension of the right arm as it strokes the paper, creating more distance from the body without losing the application of pressure needed to render the pull visible on paper. In the large-scale works where the somatic motifs are absent, the body enters directly into the drawing. Instead of representing the body in a literal sense, the lines are contingent traces of corporeal expenditure. Bächli's drawing practice becomes kinesthetic, her physical engagement a medium for translating space and time into a visible structure.

Bächli's preoccupation with movement and the repeated insertion of her own mobility into the medium of drawing also invites a kinesthetic experience for the viewer who can reconstruct this movement: the artist's body bent over the paper, the outstretched arm, the brush being pulled across the paper, the shifting of the body weight from left to right, the mental concentration, the physical exertion. One can see where Bächli begins her stroke to create a line, how the edge of a brush stroke frays into an adjoining one, becoming a point of multiple interactions. One can observe the open, light play of the bundles of lines and the way in which they tumble down from the top edge of the paper, falling into rhythm and generating a deep sense of space. Bächli's body of drawings thus suggests that the most revealing transitions are not to be found where differences are most clearly articulated, but rather in the slightest differentiations.

In *Untitled* (2007), the application of the lines begins at the edge of the paper closest to the artist. The second as well as all subsequent lines, increasingly remote from the body, register the curvature of the previous ones without ever repeating them exactly. The "sound waves" that appear are the result of drawing lines at an ever-greater distance, holding each line in relation to the others and activating the field between them. In a similar work (*Untitled*, 2007), Bächli maps additional transverse lines as if to compound this experience. What began as a type of sequencing and gradation here gains dimension, developing into a type of convoluted or "folded space" which could appear to lead into a hollow in the paper.

By contrast, Bächli floats a chestnut hulled from its shell in the uncertainty of blankness (*Untitled*, 2007). According to Norman Bryson, the initial emptiness of the white sheet of paper (or more generally, its openness) in which the hand sets its first mark could be characterized as the primal scene of drawing.¹ Walter Benjamin even attributes the line with the capability of designating and determining the surface beneath it, of giving it its identity.²

Silvia Bächli is herself an observer of her own drawings (note the reference of the chair in the studio photograph in this publication). The second stage of her work, which can go on for weeks, is an integral component of the artistic process. First, she repeatedly sorts through her sheets of paper and throws many of them away, grouping others into ensembles centered on one piece. Bächli hangs the drawings in her studio, directing her attention not just to the effects of a particular drawing, but above all to the distance between the individual sheets. In this sense, Bächli confronts the possible shifting perspectives of her own work.

In a group exhibition in 1984,³ the artist presented 54 drawings together in a wall installation in which two walls were filled with drawings hung at precisely defined distances, filling the entire room with the experience of drawing. The distances, empty spaces, gaps, and interruptions reorient the relationship between picture, wall, and – in the exhibition context – room sequence. "The drawings are like sculptures, looming to varying

1 Norman Bryson, "A Walk for a Walk's Sake," in: *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act. Selected from the Tate Collection*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (New York: The Drawing Center and Tate, 2003), pp. 149–158.

2 Walter Benjamin, "Paintings, or Signs and Marks," (1917), in *Medienästhetische Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, 2002, pp. 271–275.

3 "The Subjective Museum," organized by Eric Hattan in Spring 1984 in Basel in which Bächli exhibited a group of 54 drawings, *Sans Titre* (Paris 10.83–3.84).

extent into the space in which we move. The white walls, the space, are an inseparable part of the image field,” remarked Bächli in a recent interview.⁴

In this sense, the perspective of the artist comes together with that of the viewer. As if wanting to expand upon this experience, Bächli has begun to integrate small-format photographs into her drawing installations. The color photographs from the series *Yukon* (2004) show a loose scattering of uninhabited huts. Posts, wood struts, slanting beams, colored boards, tables, corrugated roofs, a rain barrel, as well as a snow-covered white landscape enter into a dialog with the simplicity of Bächli’s drawing syntax. The silence of the photographic scene and the plainness of the provisionally-constructed huts intensify the experience instigated by Bächli’s drawings. We find ourselves standing not in front of a drawing or an individual sheet of paper, but within a space that has been created out of the drawing, a space in which the immediate surroundings of production – chair, desk, lamp – find their place, and where individual experience finds resonance.

Translated by Elisabeth Tucker with Mary Rozell

⁴ Silvia Bächli in conversation with Hans Rudolf Reust, “What does the majority of minutes consist of? Questions to and from Silvia Bächli,” in: *Silvia Bächli Studio* (Porto: Museu Serralves, 2007), p. 142.