

The Discovery of Slowness. Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan at Kunsthalle Nürnberg

Text in catalogue to *Schnee bis im Mai* at Kunsthalle Nürnberg, 19 February – 1 May 2011

by Harriet Zilch

John looked out on the ice, studied its forms, and tried to understand what they meant. [...] Hour after hour he drew shapes of icebergs. He added colors: "Green on the left, red on the right, the reverse ten minutes later." He tried to invent names for what he saw, but that didn't work very well. Rather, the sights were like music that would have to be transcribed in a score. The fine-ribbed sea lapped playfully around the ice figures and bore them along in a rhythm, while they themselves seemed to make up a harmony as of musical sounds, although they were also in a sense splintered and split. Yet their effect was to create a feeling of calm and timelessness. Nothing like this could be ugly! Here it was peaceful. Far behind them, somewhere in the south, men worried about the misery of man. In London, time was a despot whom everybody had to obey.

(Sten Nadolny: *The Discovery of Slowness*)

I. Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan spent four months in the small port Seydisfjörður in eastern Iceland during the spring of 2008. In a wood-panelled room painted a faded green, Silvia Bächli worked on the first sheets for her presentation *It (to Inger Christensen)* in the Swiss pavilion of the 53rd International Art Biennial in Venice (2009). During those months, Eric Hattan made recordings for his video installation *All the While*, which he had been invited to produce for the *Festivale de création contemporain, Le Printemps de Septembre* in Toulouse. While out walking, they also took panorama photographs using a shared camera: these do not constitute a narrative illustration of a successful journey, but a distillation of landscape comprising snow and ice. There was an awful lot of that on Iceland during those months. The Icelanders say the winter in their valley was the severest since the 1960s, with *Snow Until May*.

II. As early as 2006, Silvia Bächli spoke in an interview with Hans Rudolf Reust of the way in which open, barren landscapes like that of Iceland with its fundamental emptiness fascinated her far more than tropical regions.¹ Indeed, there are obvious parallels between Silvia Bächli's drawings and a winter landscape with its monochrome expanse of snow and ice: snow falling over a landscape causes any form of loudness or turbulence to vanish. The world's strong colours are reduced; suddenly everything smells and sounds different, and our customary perceptions are thrown into question. Our steps sound strange when the snow crunches quietly under our boots, and street noise turns into a dull and apparently distant rumble. Freshly fallen snow seems to paint a new ground onto the canvas of life.

Silvia Bächli's drawings counteract our customary visual and perceptual habits in a similar way, for they create – sheet by sheet – a counter model to our world characterised by a noisy, omnipresent flood of images. There is not a single superfluous line and nothing bright or overstrident in her economical drawings. As if everything had disappeared underneath a blanket of snow. Drawing for

¹ Hans Rudolf Reust in an e-mail dialogue with Silvia Bächli, *Prix Meret Oppenheim 2003, Interviews*, ed. Bundesamt für Kultur, Bern 2007, pp. 19–26.

Silvia Bächli – and she emphasises this repeatedly in interviews and conversations – means omission more than anything else. Her drawings exhibit the great art of reduction; their riches are compacted into a concentrate. In an interview with Claudia Spinelli, Silvia Bächli replied to a comment on the emptiness in her studio by saying that it was necessary, since otherwise her ideas would creep behind the objects, never to reappear.² The Icelandic landscape expands on this cosmos: the emptiness of the studio continues into the outside world and provides the bareness that Silvia Bächli requires for her creative work. No one and nothing could ever conceal themselves here.

The works produced in Iceland are connected in many ways to what the artist saw there. In the 1980s, Silvia Bächli kept a diary of drawing, and the drawings she made in Iceland also resemble a journal including visual descriptions of situations, remembered moments and everyday perceptions. Firstly, these drawings are always a dialogue that the artist realises with herself. Photographs documenting the drawings as they hung on the green walls of the small studio room show how directly some works correspond to her surroundings: a bare bulb hangs down into a drawing just as it does into the actual room. Drawings with parallel lines adopt the structure of the room and its vertical wooden panelling. One drawing shows the corner of the room where the wall panels and the wooden planks of the floor meet. Other sheets display abstract webs and constellations of lines, which seem to have evolved from playful motions of the pen. Wide, graduated brush washes are drawn softly across into the centre of large vertical formats. Man appears in figures, faces, heads, legs and feet. One recumbent figure is enclosed by the parallel sweeps of the brush to such an extent that it seems gently washed over by waves.

The colours of these drawings are familiar: black, white and the shades of grey produced when ink is thinned with water. However, other works reveal a new use of colour that seems to respond to the glacial river green of the studio. Shades of blue and red are also linked to the washed-out colouring of the Icelandic landscape. These same colours also strike us occasionally amidst all the white in the panorama photos. The colour white reduces reality to the abstract, which is probably why it represents a modernist ideal. According to Wassily Kandinsky, it has a similar effect on our soul to complete silence. It certainly grew in relevance for Silvia Bächli in the white barrenness of Iceland, where colour is the exception rather than the rule.

In some of the drawings this Icelandic landscape with its mountains, high plateaux, fjord valleys, isolated trees, lava fields, moss and grasses is mirrored in the motifs as well. The frequently selected horizontal picture format also emphasises the topos of landscape. On a superordinate level, the individual sheets which Silvia Bächli arranges into groups and precisely defines via their hanging in an installation become landscapes themselves. The drawings expand into space, for as Silvia Bächli sees it, a good drawing is always bigger than the format delineated by the paper's edge. She once compared this effect to a dancer whose presence and movements extend beyond her finger tips into the surrounding space. Just as a dancer defines the space beyond her own body, these drawings determine their surroundings by means of their varying formats, different heights of hanging and the resulting intervals and interim spaces between them. The intervals and interim spaces form an essential part of the ephemeral constellations; like each individual sheet, they are part of a composition that extends across the wall. Like the pauses in a piece of music, their function is one of

² Silvia Bächli – Zeichnen ist eine Arbeit ohne bekanntes Ziel, Silvia Bächli in conversation with Claudia Spinelli, *Kunst Bulletin* 6/2009, pp. 30–35.

deceleration, conveying quiet, transparency and a luminance that recalls the light of the sun reflected by snow. Light that the Japanese call *yuki-akari* – snow light. This light is not one that illuminates things; rather, it serves as a spatial and temporal de-limitation.

A landscape covered in snow can be a place of refuge for man; a place in which he can escape the civilised world's accelerated modern reality and reject the maxim of speed. Snow and ice decelerate the world, and even natural processes slow down in polar fauna, biological cycles adapting to the polar days and nights and apparently stretching time. In Sten Nadolny's novel *The Discovery of Slowness* the English polar researcher John Franklin "profits" from this. The eternal ice makes it possible for him to live according to his own measure of time. Silvia Bächli's drawings also incorporate this deviant, subjectivised sense of time. They convey a sense of *taking one's time* and so contradict habitual action oriented on results. Silvia Bächli says that this *taking one's time* is a key to her work, because only this allows a specific kind of attentiveness, which is essential in order to see quite common things as if one were seeing them for the first time: "Everything is already there; I only need to pick it up."³ This attentiveness causes fleeting and apparently meaningless aspects of the everyday to become visible: a bare bulb, simple wooden panels or legs stretched out parallel to each other.

The Danish lyric poet Inger Christensen also describes *taking one's time* in her cycle of poems *det* (it) published in 1969: "It. That's it. That started it. It is. Goes on. Moves. Beyond. Becomes. Becomes it and it and it. Goes further than that. Becomes something else. Becomes more. Combines something else with more to keep becoming something else and more. Goes further than that. Becomes something besides something else and more. Something. Something new. Something newer still ..."

Silvia Bächli also called her 33-part installation in Venice *it (to Inger Christensen)*, and she quoted from Inger Christensen's poetic account in the accompanying publication. The poem is composed almost mathematically, without a word too many to disturb its delicate linguistic balance, and it is surely possible to transpose this consistency to Silvia Bächli's working method, to the way she *takes her time, tells herself stories and talks out loud to herself*.⁴ Here too, something else, something new without a single superfluous line to disturb the balance of the composition emerges via a process of seeing, thinking, experimenting and combining.

III. Per Kirkeby also quoted from the cycle of poems *It* in a small catalogue publication dating from the year 1996.⁵ The trained geologist Kirkeby first participated in a scientific expedition to Narsaak, Greenland in 1958 and travelled to the eternal ice repeatedly during the subsequent years. He produced watercolours there, naturalistic landscapes that form an exception among his otherwise predominantly non-representational works. In this context, Per Kirkeby refers to *landscape remains*.

Landscape remains are also shown in the videos recorded in Iceland of the installation *All the While* by Eric Hattan, which comprises seven projections in Kunsthalle Nürnberg. The recordings confront the viewer with a relative lack of events, diametrically opposed to our everyday flood of images. While film and television always offer to take us to "the centre of events", Eric Hattan shows the minor settings of everyday life and directs our attention to the *remains* of landscape, information or action. The changes in *All the While* are so minimal that initially the viewer believes he is being shown the

³ Silvia Bächli, quoted from Stefanie Hauer, *Das Unsägliche geht, leise gesagt, übers Land*, cat. Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, Ostfildern 1995, p. 6.

⁴ Descriptions that Silvia Bächli has used in various interviews and conversations.

⁵ Per Kirkeby, *Neue Bilder*, Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne 1996.

frozen moment of a film still. But then a drop of water falls, ice floes drift by or a bank of fog alters its amorphous appearance.

The recordings for *All the While* were produced when Eric Hattan set up his camera on a tripod in the windows of the house with its small rooms that became the focus of the artists' life and work during their period in Iceland. In the first weeks, this house was also a space protecting them from the inhospitable outside world with its permanent backdrop of snow and ice. Longer periods outside in the fresh air were impossible, and the cold-sensitive digital video technology could not be used outside this protective space, either. Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan, like Peter Hoeg's Miss Smilla before them, established that "You can try to live with the ice. But you can't fight it or change it or replace it ..."⁶ Thus their Spartan dwelling-place also became a kind of memory. Eric Hattan describes the house as a "film canister"⁷, since it seemed to store impressions and images of the outside. Equally, the green room was not only a studio space for Silvia Bächli; frequently, its particular structures and conditions were the focus of her interest as a drawing artist.

Geologist Friedrich Simony, who began to research the glaciers of the Dachstein mountain in the mid 19th century, built a small hut for this purpose, into which he took a camera in the year 1875. Year after year, Friedrich Simony employed a fixed viewing point to photograph the changes to the Hallstatt glacier and the "Karl" ice-field through a window of his hut. The geologist used the windows as eyes through which to study the changes in the glacier from a protected interior space. The changes in the landscape only become visible from the distance of decades and via direct comparison of the documentary photographs. Time thus adopted a key significance in Friedrich Simony's research. In the title of his work *All the While*, Eric Hattan already points to the time factor as an elementary aspect of his installation. The videos' own sense of time means that a falling drop of water becomes an eagerly awaited event: drop by drop, the three icicles in front of the window melt. Slowly, small islands of snow thaw and slide down the panes of glass. In 1877, Friedrich Simony wrote in his *Dachstein-Portfolio* that a camera provided the advantage that "it fixes some phenomena clearly and understandably, which, when observed in passing [...] either remain entirely unnoticed or can be perceived only superficially and are thus difficult to express in words."⁸ In *All the While* Eric Hattan also captures short moments, fixing them with his camera and so rescuing them from transience. In this way, details become visible to the observer which would have remained concealed from him otherwise. The images trigger concentrated attentiveness, enabling the sensitised viewer to discover slowness. The reward for this discovery is as by Silvia Bächli his realisation: "Everything is already there; I only need to pick it up."⁹

The invitation to take part in the *Festivale de création contemporain, Le Printemps de Septembre* in Toulouse came shortly before Hattan's planned departure for Seydisfjörður. Once there, the artist immediately began to film the Icelandic winter landscape, although at this early stage he had not yet made the decision to present a new video installation. His concept was not concretised until the beginning of April. During a visit to Toulouse, Eric Hattan chose the exhibition hall of the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* for the presentation of his work: supposedly a white cube, although on closer examination it turned out to be a black box. Historically, the classic hall with light from one side opened via nine

⁶ Peter Hoeg, *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, Delta 1995.

⁷ Eric Hattan in an e-mail dated 30 November 2010.

⁸ Quoted according to Monika Faber, *Die Weite des Eises. Zur fotografischen Wahrnehmung von Alpen und Arktis seit 1863*, in: *Die Weite des Eises – Arktis und Alpen 1860 bis heute*, cat. Albertina Vienna, Ostfildern 2008, p. 14.

⁹ Cf. note 3.

windows onto the street and the River Garonne. However, these windows were closed by a blind wall, and the skylight which probably existed at first had also been sacrificed when another floor was constructed above. By shutting out the daylight, the 19th century hall was turned into a black box lit only by neon tube lights.

Eric Hattan saw this black box as the ideal precondition to a several-part video installation: "I use the hall as a dark box: the outside wall with its windows behind the constructed wall becomes a projection surface and the projection windows open onto distant horizons."¹⁰ This concept means that a protected space for the viewer evolves as well; he can look at the images of winter through its windows. The rectangular shape of the hall also gave Eric Hattan the possibility of projecting his images from one long wall to the other without the overhead beamers blocking the view. These aspects contrast to his earlier video works and their form of presentation. In an exhibition context, the 50 videos of the work group *Beton Liquide*, which he produced as from 1995, were always shown on monitors distributed freely around the room. Despite the differences in presentation, there are numerous parallels in the aesthetics and content of *Beton Liquide* and *All the While*. In *Beton Liquide*, Eric Hattan also used the video camera to capture phenomenological details and everyday observations: on forays through urban space, he found a rich potential of basic plastic forms in everyday situations. Eric Hattan shifted his artistic focus from the conception of new image-creations to a search for sculptural forms which evolve casually and by pure chance: a fishing line floating on a pond, moving unintentionally, becomes a sculptural form (*Fishing for Shape*, 1999). This is also true of a strip of paper, gently blown by the wind, which leads to abstract figurations (*Blowing in the Wind*, 1999). The meanwhile almost legendary scene in the Hollywood film *American Beauty* (1999), in which a plastic bag appears to dance in the air currents on a street, existed already in Eric Hattan's collection of films (*Air*, 1998). Like Silvia Bächli's drawings, Eric Hattan's video works also document an artistic strategy in which key significance is attributed to *letting go*. Eric Hattan also develops a focus on the aesthetics of the insignificant from his ability to view the long familiar from a fresh perspective. His readiness to accept chance is central to this approach, since it is impossible to plan either the flight of a plastic bag or that of a snowflake.

Eric Hattan used his video camera as a kind of diary or notebook for the group of works *Beton Liquide*. In an exhibition catalogue dating from 2000, he writes: "The natural way in which cats change direction and the simultaneity with which life happens, producing the richest of images, never cease to amaze me, day after day. On walks through the city, a small video camera is an ideal notebook."¹¹ This gained renewed relevance in the developmental context of *All the While*. Eric Hattan reports that in Seydisfjörður he took daily notes on everyday life while at the same time employing the video camera to document situational impressions. The length of the tapes prescribed a maximum duration of one hour.¹² In the exhibition context, the projection of these momentary impressions is now parallel, suggesting a simultaneity of all the images which is actually impossible: drops of water fall, and a gently moving bank of fog develops in front of the viewer. Water flows past slowly, altering its colour with the colours of the sky. An ice floe floats into the picture frame from the right. Gusts of wind drive along drifts of snow, dramatically illuminated by floodlights. Man does not appear directly, but the port

¹⁰ Eric Hattan, quoted from the manuscript of a speech by Michel Metayer, director of the l'ESBA (Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts) in Toulouse (unpublished).

¹¹ Eric Hattan, *Beton Liquide. Eric Hattan Video*, cat. Aargauer Kunsthau/MAMCO Musee d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva, Baden/Switzerland 2000.

¹² Cf. note 7.

architecture reflected in the water points to his existence. Rain sets in, causing those reflections to tremble. In the distance, a car ferry belonging to the Faroese shipping company Smyril Line, the *Norröna*, slowly leaves the fjord with steam rising from its funnel. *All the While* also shows the flight from Reykjavik to Egilsstaðir: the engines start, the undercarriage begins to move, faster and faster, leaves the ground and is then withdrawn for the duration of the flight. The snow-covered landscape of Iceland is visible until the plane passes through the cloud cover. The white plain, interrupted by water courses, roads and the delimitations of fields becomes visible again as the plane approaches Egilsstaðir. These structures are vaguely reminiscent of Silvia Bächli's constellations of black lines on a white background. The shock upon landing is scarcely perceptible; here too, the camera remains still. The viewer sees all these images parallel to one another and in a steady, harmonious time flow. In the exhibition context, although the projections are started simultaneously in an endless loop, the varying lengths of the tapes prevent any synchronism of the images. As in real life, a situation never recurs in exactly the same way and the image combinations shift constantly.

Eric Hattan did not view and edit his film material until he had returned to Switzerland. Technical effects like slow cross-fading are employed sparingly and with great sensitivity and do not compete with the barren and succinct defining aesthetics. The artist was able to view the films as large-format projections in his spacious studio in Basel. Here, he made the decision to project *All the While* with differing image sizes and heights, which leads to a kind of "Petersburg hanging". Thus the details of each film are as meaningful as the simultaneity of all the images and the resulting overall impression. The separate videos seem to melt together into a 360° panorama of snow and ice. When the viewer moves, a world evolves according to its own rules and with a different sense of time. This is reminiscent of Silvia Bächli's drawings, which also expand into the surrounding space due to their varying formats and different heights of hanging. In both cases, the walls of the room represent an inseparable part of the image field. By showing more to the viewer than he is capable of perceiving, Eric Hattan succeeds in expanding the room and extending the viewer's field of vision to a panorama. The viewer sees himself in a cosmos of snow and ice, in a similar way to the situation which Thomas Bernhard describes in his novel *Frost* (1963): "It was as if I were in an aquarium where the water had frozen. Everything in the aquarium was frozen. The trees. The bushes. Everything. Coated in whitish ice ..."¹³ The viewer is unable to move without hindrance in this *aquarium* lit by the intensely bright projections. Eric Hattan not only uses the light of the projections to transport the film images, but also to consolidate the separate reality of the black box. The projections are all that permit visibility in an otherwise dark hall, so enabling the viewer to experience the space in a dual manner. His physical presence becomes an essential component of the work. He is acting on a stage in front of the images, promoting and also structuring the sculptural intention of the work.¹⁴

IV. Despite their obvious separateness, parallels between the works of Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan certainly emerge when passing through the exhibition. Some of these shared features are formal in nature, while other analogies are related to a basic affinity of ideas, as well as similar perceptions of the outside world. Their joint stay in Iceland may have underlined the parallels. The Spartan house in Seydisfjörður became a shared space of ideas for Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan.

¹³ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, Vintage International 2006, p. 217.

¹⁴ Cf. note 7.

The Icelandic landscape is a subtext which has shaped all the works exhibited here. This is not surprising when we take a look at the artists' earlier works: there is a profound correlation between a monochrome winter landscape of snow and ice and groups of drawings by Silvia Bächli. In earlier works, Eric Hattan also focused on basic three-dimensional forms that emerge by chance. The natural world of Iceland, where every ice crystal is a filigree sculpture, provides a wealth of such plastic forms. A decelerated sense of time is closely connected to snow and ice: *quick, quick!* is impossible when nature compels us otherwise. Examining the photographs taken on their joint excursions, we see that the world they depict appears oddly lifted out of time. It is true that many of the photos show industrial architecture such as warehouses or silos, but there is no indication that something is actually being manufactured, transported or produced here. A world in which nothing seems to happen sharpens our concentration on details and allows things to become visible which would evade our attention otherwise. Such a world lets *the quick live quickly and the slow slowly, each by his distinct temporal measure*.¹⁵

Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan both work through a process of seeing, thinking and experimenting. Their works always incorporate chance and evolve without predefined aims. They are the outcome of a slow process of feeling one's way rather than purposeful grasping. In an interview in 2003, Silvia Bächli maintained that every work ought to retain an unfinished aspect; an opportunity for the viewer to join in, to slip inside, to continue its weave.¹⁶ This opportunity is proffered by both Silvia Bächli's drawings and Eric Hattan's installations.

Translation english version by Lucinda Rennison

¹⁵ Sten Nadolny, *The Discovery of Slowness*, Paul Dry Books; Tra edition, 2005.

¹⁶ Cf. note 1.