

The feet that carry us

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by Jürg Halter



Men play chess close by, I am sitting on a bench at Bundesplatz in Berne, Switzerland, leafing through an exhibition catalogue. I take a closer look at one illustration, its contours only gradually becoming clear, because the paper reflects so much in the sunlight. It is a drawing by Silvia Bächli. I can see feet and the contrast in which they are shown makes it clear to me that this moment is unique.

Everything that we see we only see exactly this way once. In the same way as a poem only comes into being through its reader, a drawing only comes into being in the eye of its beholder. Thus, it is always something different. There are no pictures that do not move. Only unmoved viewers. When I write about a drawing I can only write about what is not shown because what is shown is indescribable. – So, are those feet?

They could be the feet of a woman sitting on a chair at a large table in her studio, bending over a piece of paper, imagining her feet, which she cannot see under the table and then drawing them with a brush, almost as if she were keeping her eyes closed in the process. – in this drawing there is no will to be observed, only a meaningless gesture, one about which the artist herself may be surprised.

This morning, these feet do not yet know under what table they will be standing this evening. They neither know over which riverbank they are dangling nor how cold the water into which they dive will be.

Looking at a drawing by Silvia Bächli means trying to see all her other drawings at the same time, even those that she took to a lonely island, where they hang in a house without windows and doors, a house which only animals pass through from time to time. Seeing even the drawings that she had destroyed before anyone saw them. Even the ones that she had yet to draw.

Or are they the feet of a hanged person? I imagine them fleeing, waking up in prison, only I cannot imagine the matching face.

And so I think about Silvia Bächli again, about how she hangs this drawing in her studio alongside others on a wall. How she creates a relationship between it and the drawing of a torso, how she hangs another one of a mesh structure underneath it, how lines lead beyond the edges of pieces of paper, as if they were looking for connections with other lines, how individual drawings make up an ensemble, how a new, large drawing comes into being, how, when I get closer to it, the latter once again separates out into individual drawings. – Perhaps her drawings are signs from which, some day, it will be possible to infer back an alphabet that is still unknown, if not complete, without her ever having thought about this.

I imagine, don't ask me why, how deceased Danish lyric poet Inger Christensen once strolled through one of Bächli's exhibitions and how she stopped at the drawing of the feet, how she took off her glasses and how the feet then became tree trunks without roots. I think about how, after going around the exhibition, Inger Christensen sat down in the next café around the corner and composed the first lines of a new poem beginning as follows: " You walk past me/whilst we are sitting quite still // I talk past myself/whilst you are not listening // We do nothing/and an angel gathers us up".

The drawing of Silvia Bächli can quite easily be overlooked. But anybody who is alert cannot find a drawing, cannot find a word starting from which it would not be possible to deduce everything. There is nothing uninteresting, nothing unspectacular in the world. – Bächli draws from a fleeting memory. One Saturday morning, with the light of the rising sun in her face, she observed two arguing fruit and vegetable sellers without hearing what the fight was about. She unconsciously followed their silhouettes with her finger: anything can become a drawing.

How do the fruit and vegetable sellers' feet feel when they lie on the sofa and relax. Bächli physically imagines what it would be like to be inside them and what she feels, she commits to paper with a brush. And the results do not absolutely have to be a drawing of feet recognizable as such. I continue to leaf through the catalogue from Kunsthalle Berne about an exhibition by Silvia Bächli, observe, beyond the edge of the page, how feet in sandals and proper shoes walk on the ground and wait until I recognize the ones that I have on my knees in the drawing discussed above. – In this way, Bächli's drawings call to mind the familiar, as if they wanted to alert me to the unfamiliar in them. Oh everything that cannot be seen in a drawing. Everything that I have seen before it, everything that I will see after it; – I lose myself in countless images. – And so I open my eyes, observe the chess figures being moved around by men who, during the game, pass dry commentaries in broken German. And whilst I am sitting here like this, increasingly, I get the feeling that it is not only my feet that are being drawn.

Translation by Kevin Cook/Jeremy Gains