

## A Non-Figurative Imagination

Daniel Kurjaković

Men travel in manifold paths: whoso traces and compares these, will find strange Figures come to light; Figures which seem as if they belonged to that great Cipher-writing which one meets with everywhere, on wings of birds, shells of eggs, in clouds, in the snow, in crystals, in forms of rocks, in freezing waters, in the interior and exterior of mountains, of plants, animals, men, in the lights of the sky in plates of glass and pitch when touched and struck on, in the filings round the magnet, and the singular conjunctures of Chance.

Novalis, 1. The Pupil, *Disciples at Sais*, 1798–1799<sup>1</sup>

For many decades now, the Western view of non-European art—African, Oceanian, Asian, etc.—has been accompanied by the thorny question of whether, and how, transcultural understanding is possible. Some people adhere to the notion that an innate, non-verbal meaning inheres in visual artifacts that, at least to a certain degree, can be considered “universal.” Others hope to achieve the necessary insights by way of historical contextualization, a continual process of discursive description and analysis. Still others take more indirect, interdisciplinary paths in which, for instance, contemporary literature, in so far as its relationship to regional tradition is still vital, is capable of building bridges to the art and culture of “others.” The project conducted by Silvia Bächli at the Musée Barbier-Mueller can be seen in this larger context. In the form of an exhibition and publication, it sketches specific vantage points on the issue, and addresses both its aesthetic and ethical aspects.

In this publication on the project, photographs showing the current situation in the museum storerooms play a critical role. In these snapshots, objects from various regions, periods, societies, rites, and functions are kept in groupings that appear disparate, even though experts can see that they are arranged in terms of ethnic groups. The artist’s eye oscillates between *contradictory* views, between a focus on a certain object whose striking pattern, sculptural configuration, or other detail draws her attention, and an interrogative distance from groupings that are stored apparently without explanatory labels, meaningful

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<sup>1</sup> Novalis, quoted by Thomas Carlyle, “Novalis,” in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, Volume 14 (New York: Fenelon Collier, 1897), p. 517.

contexts, or recorded histories. The photos, taken with a cell phone, do without clarifying axes and explicit lighting. They are obviously not intended for educational or explanatory purposes. They reflect the specific movements of a subjective eye, including a certain difficulty of seeing (in the sense of understanding), considering the aura that surrounds the objects like a symbolic halo. In some cases, the photos even exhibit something akin to the *blindness* inscribed in perception—which we usually tend not to notice, in respect to non-European art in particular and the visible world in general.

In the exhibition, graphic works by Bächli come into contact with selected objects from the collection. A few analogies and formal correspondences become apparent. Yet these are merely superficial aspects of a further question the artist raises in the context of her anthropology of the visual: our life world is surrounded, shot through, and shaped by visual vectors that elucidate space and time and exist on the extreme margins of language, such as the blurred contour of the sun, ever-changing cloud formations, the kaleidoscopic variety of vegetation, geological formations, or other realms of constant metamorphosis. Some of this is definitely inscribed in the artist's work—perhaps as a kind of fluid cartography, a system of surveying that remains in flux. It is as though Bächli were interested in what might be termed, with all caution, the “unconscious” passageways between nature and culture; these approach the continually shape-shifting threshold of the visible, where phenomena are in the process of becoming signs (understandable to us), only to stop just before consummation!

In Bächli's artistic practice, the concept of “nature” should not be understood as an objective factor but as a material and visual echo chamber in which human imagination is, so to speak, “inlaid.” (It is no coincidence that many of the earliest art forms known to us are literally “inlaid” in nature, on rocks, cave walls, high plateaus, etc.) A frequently tentative characteristic of the artist's drawings seems to conform perfectly with this echo chamber, as they rely on *synaesthetic* processes that require a totally or fundamentally free form of attention in which the graphic investigation is steeped. Bächli's drawings attain the status of works on account of the “gesture,” this infra-sensitive medium, which is discovered and made permeable to a dual experience: the gesture is capable of triggering a non-individual memory as well as generating a non-visual evocation. This factor discourages equating Bächli's oeuvre with a “lexicon,” because this would imply reading her work from the end backwards rather than from the beginning. Rather than simply recording a schema, her drawings are like Morse signals that evoke the code of living things. Ultimately, they represent the artist's *embodied* knowledge about how her activity is linked with the fundamental impulse of the making visible of the world.

Much the same can be said of the diverse objects in the museum's collection, which likewise should be considered not from the end but from the beginning. They do not simply represent certain forms of cultural life or mere typologies or categories of meaning. As art, their apparently static character abounds with kinetic, even virtual potential. A figure's tightly shut mouth will open a second later; a spiral form will tighten even more or, vice versa, uncoil into the surrounding space. The examples could go on forever. Worked into these objects are veritable technologies of the imagination, which become immediately evident thanks to the sculptural mastery of their makers.

Perhaps this may hint at the very passageway in which the artist's drawings meet the works in the collection—the passageway of a non-figurative imagination.

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#### Biography

Daniel Kurjaković is an art historian. Since 2017, he has been curator of programs at the Kunstmuseum Basel. He has curated projects in the fields of sculpture, installation, sound, film, and performance, with artists including Louise Bourgeois, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, Nalini Malani, Vittorio Santoro, Simon Starling, Annie Lai-kuen Wan, and Lawrence Weiner. In 2017, his text on the British author John Berger was published in the Centre Pompidou's *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*. In 2016, he was editor of *The Air Will Not Deny You: Zürich im Zeichen einer anderen Globalität* (Zurich: Diapanes), the publication of the inter-institutional cooperation platform *DeNeutralize*.