

Ulrich Look

Silvia Bächli – Studio

Introduction to the exhibition *Silvia Bächli – Studio Museu Serralves, Porto, 13 April – 1 July 2007*

My drawings are beams of light cast onto careless, insignificant motions, fusions of objects, overpaintings of once commenced and since abandoned figurations, noises, notions; continents between what is closest by. I allow the furthest extremes to falter and flow next to each other. Drawing is experimenting, groping one's way and playing. My work is like speaking out loud. One tries something, changes the emphasis, tries it with a different sequence of words, at a different volume. Sometimes a sentence will hit the mark, it captures what you had dimly suspected. In the best case you discover something that is a better fit, is more surprising than what you had expected. Which makes it possible for even words to literally intervene in what happens in a picture, as in a drawing from 2001: "what/ how is/ once again/ how again / once again/ ever again/ and once more", or in a gouache from 2005: "distant shores / – / old dykes / horizons/ mountains of clouds", or in another gouache of the same year: "everything is gone/ no more/ sea/ – / where to / – / come back / sit down/ stay here".

Silvia Bächli is one of those outstanding artists who have built a large and complex oeuvre on the basis of severely limiting their use of artistic means. For nearly thirty years she has almost exclusively made drawings with black gouache on white paper and with the same sense of determination she has focused on manifestations of the human body. The body makes its appearance in different ways: as intense pictures informed by the artist's close connection to the subject of her drawing and as the direct inscription of the drafter's own body through the use of her brush.

The first gallery of Silvia Bächli's exhibition is a vast space that is only sparsely occupied: on the walls are drawings and a few photographs, almost exclusively lines of black gouache on white paper; the photos are in colour but they are small and the colours are far from bright. There is little competing with the architecture – on entering the space it is immediately clear that the concept of the installation is in direct contrast with any demand to focus on the artworks exclusively. There are also four chairs that can be used by the visitors (designed by Álvaro Siza) and, at the far end of the gallery, a table with drawings laid out in such a way that they are to be viewed by walking around this simple piece of improvised furniture. The space is inviting. The visitor is invited to be in this space, to move around it in a non-prescribed way, to take his or her time. In a non-prescribed way, certainly, but at the same time the visitor may be drawn close to small works while large works offer themselves to be seen from afar. The visitor is addressed not only as a pair of eyes but as a complete bodily being, here in this

specific space. The drawings and photographs are installed in an unusual way: spaces between the individual pieces vary between far apart and close together. There are rather large drawings and small photos relating to each other, not so much in formal terms or in terms of subject matter, but

rather in such a way as to create a rhythm that encircles the inviting space – around the person in the space. The image of the complete installation may be reminiscent of a musical partition – this way of perceiving is a far cry from identifying what is depicted in the individual pieces. There are three types of works exhibited: immediately visible in the main space are large drawings with lines entering the pictorial field from the upper edge of the sheet to end roughly in its middle. They may be seen as dangling and thus may inspire personal connotations: a veil, a curtain moving in the air, a gentle wind, a springtime breeze... But, once again, this is quite personal: someone else may think of something different or just stay with the pure presence of dark lines inscribed on a sheet of white paper. Inscribed: left behind on the paper by a hand holding a paint-loaded brush, a hand that is connected to an arm, to the body of the painter, and marking a specific difference on the extension of the white surface. The line is the trace of the movement of a body that, at a certain time, was connected to this support through the brush. A body, the body of the painter, without a doubt. But, at the same time, not much more is decipherable than the pure presence of a body which belongs to the past: the drawing, the trace, is an inscription of the body that doesn't reveal any personality.

Apart from drawings orientated vertically there are works from the same family with horizontal lines entering the field from the left and the right (an orientation, certainly, but not a clear indication of a direction), and there is one piece with horizontal and vertical lines crossing and forming a fragile grid.

A second set of drawings, interspersed between the large works, consists of considerably smaller pieces, a number of which again featuring non-representational lines. This time, however, the line is winding and moving in a way that is difficult to understand: a line snaking here and there, searching for its path. These drawings are notations of the artist's movements, the walks and travels she remembers from a past, near or distant. In this case the inscription of the body is not immediate but filtered through memory – to be followed by the spectator with his or her eyes. The word 'woher' [from where] refers to spacial dislocation while the meaning of 'was' [what] is more difficult to grasp – what is it that changes place?, what is a change of place?

The photographs of a temporarily occupied village in Canada, north of the Polar Circle, being representational by their nature, seem to contradict the linear inscriptions in the drawings. Seen with the eyes of a draftsman, however, they reveal lines delineating objects that cut across the surfaces of the photograph as if they were far from transmitting the knowledge of an object. Works displayed on the table in the large gallery and a group of drawings that are dispersed across the walls of the small adjacent gallery – the distribution of these drawings being defined to the centimetre – reveal yet another dimension of Bächli's work: many of these

drawings refer to things she had seen; namely images of the body. The body usually appears as seen from close-up; it's never the full body. In a number of cases it seems to be what one could see turning the gaze on one's own body: a hand, the feet, the lower part. In other cases it is a face, two eyes, the hair covering a head, the upper part of the body, a flexed arm – each time an image that is not only condensed to the bare essentials but, what is even more important, an

image that differs from the linguistic denomination: where does an arm end?, how do you call something hair without considering the head?, how come these four bars can be considered fingers?, etc. The body in Bächli's drawings precipitates in two different ways: in the form of a trace left by repeated movements of arm and hand holding a brush which can be invested with figurative connotations; and in the form of a depiction which, on the other hand, is informed by the closest convergence of the body depicting and the body depicted. Going back and forth between these different modes and creating all kinds of intermediate approaches, Silvia Bächli develops her work.