

## Satellites are out tonight<sup>1</sup>. Drawings by Jorinde Voigt

How is it possible, in today's world, to tie together the threads of our everyday observations and experiences of reality using a form of pictorial representation that does not favour set clichés or create exaggerated simplifications from heterogeneous impressions? Existing artistic solutions proffer a wealth of choice, but the heritage of painterly realism and that of conceptual art trends – this relation, too, may be described as one in which attitudes steadfastly clash in their simultaneity. After the industrialisation of society and its mediated images, artistic attempts to convey a convincing impression of subjective experiences of reality became the main object of Modernism and subsequent phenomena; for a long time now, they have been unattainable without doubts and contradictions. Jorinde Voigt's graphic undertaking is aimed at representations and notions of reality created by confronting and comparing scientifically and otherwise recorded traces; employing a serious manner of operation, she assumes – perhaps paradoxically – the incommensurable nature of both what is depicted and the form of depiction. Hereby, she always attempts to set the mediation of interrelations above the mediation of the “things themselves”, of the individual processes.

The sheets of paper in her series are covered with fine, black strokes, applied with extreme concentration but an astonishing lightness; minute numbers and letters, straight and curved, solid, interrupted and dotted lines and arrows, radii and axes. Usually, the distributed fields stand out against a white surface. To the unfocused eye, they vaguely resemble graphic cloud formations, but ones which display conspicuous areas of concentration within their blackness. These striking, significant conglomerations mean that our superficial impression begins to falter; our eye is caught and attempts at interpretation are triggered. On each of the sheets, which are usually interrelated in series, the wealth of signs and drawings turns out to comprise complex formal relations, while on the other hand the vocabulary used emerges as rather reduced: in most cases, it is soon possible to register a formal regularity at least, a kind of rule of thumb for each of the fields, even without being aware of a referential level beyond the most basic conventions of drawing and writing. The first impressions oscillate between two different but not contradictory fields of association: those of scientific and artistic-abstract graphics. The structuring qualities of the drawings – their rhythm and its repetition, their reduction and complexity, their directed and undirected dynamism – interact in a similar manner: as different but culturally homogeneous manifestations of an additional

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graphic dispositive, the extent and effects of which are difficult to assess. This needs not be classified as either genuinely artistic or genuinely scientific; far more, any attempt to pin it down offers an opportunity to consider the relations preceding such a division – without falling prey to fantasies of innocence, of course. The purposes that have been allotted to graphic processes and forms in art, cultural and scientific history, generate – or so one might contend – a kind of undercurrent which represents a subject of current artistic and scientific research pursued with great interest in the context of today's so-called "iconographic studies".

As a result of their method of conception and production, which is open to both the scientific and the artistically performative, Jorinde Voigt's drawings have a close affinity with such up-to-date themes. One could maintain, therefore, that they never become illustrative; on the contrary, they are about the illustrative, and succeed in making it into the subject of comparative visual studies from a distanced perspective. Their appearance cannot be definitely and smoothly attributed to one of the fields of knowledge cited, by any means. Far more, they and their special quality become accessible precisely when one visualises – in an associative process – the traces set down in them, which are certainly heterogeneous.

Associations (in the order in which they emerge): depictions of changing wind directions and areas of high and low pressure in weather reports; the vectored patterns in which iron filings were pulled towards a magnet in physics lessons; the regular, astonishingly "geometric" patterns that form in an area of sand on a thin metal plate when its edge is stroked with a bow (Chladni plates); biological studies about the formation of flocks of birds which I once saw; post-war abstract works à la Fritz Winter; "driving forces of the earth"; graphics in illustrated popular scientific magazines or paratechnical "informel" works like those of K.R.H. Sonderborg; the graphics made up of arrows, dashes and dots in drawings by Saul Steinberg, whose characterisation as caricatures is inadequate; the optical illusion of wave relief effects that were created in those drawings typical of Hans-Georg Rauch when he attempted to draw parallel lines as precisely as possible across a full sheet of paper with an (always trembling, never precise) free hand; the graphic representation of "bruit" over the heads of the musicians in Sempé's "orchestra rehearsal"; the explosions in picture stories by Rodolphe Toepffer; the swarms of bees that pursue Homer Simpson; graphically designed film credits for Japanese new-wave films of the sixties, Hiroshi Teshigahara, Susumu Hani; studies of river eddies and currents by Leonardo da Vinci; diagrammatic systems of family

trees, hierarchies and links in works ranging from Charles Darwin to Ad Reinhardt and even Mark Lombardi; the dachshund immersed in motion lines by Giacomo Balla; the swarms of black arrows directed at Maggie Cheung in Zhang Yimou's "Hero", all – absolutely all – of which she is able to fend off with her sword; transparent heads with agitated, illuminated outlines in the work of Pavel Tchelitchev; the complexity of avant-garde choreographies and scores in "New Music"; the aesthetics of the mechanical drawing; the moving envelope; the curve representing the equation of art and science in visualisations of Techno and electronic music...

Such a large number of more or less apt visual comparisons will usually be generated by a formal language that is kept universal and simple, like the one employed by Jorinde Voigt. This language is located with precision among the mass of extreme similarities and avoids any pretentious allusion or direct reference. But the eye, concentrating on a search for points of reference, is struck by the clear but complex hand-written notation of lines, the construction of which causes an interruption in our chains of association. Obviously, their style is similar to that of the other lines which thus seem to originate from the same hand – whereby these, with their remarkable assurance, are both counteracted and highlighted. And it is only when one looks more carefully that one realises that – only here and there – straight if not curved rulers have been employed to produce the skilful trajectories. Voigt draws in numbers and letters using hand-writing that is neither particularly stylised nor exaggeratedly clear. Her drawings – synthetic forms somewhere between image and text, neither illustration nor "autonomous" drawings – represent a textual-pictorial form of expression that does not seem compellingly suited to reading in the sense of a recognisant, systematic, complete understanding. Over the course of years and with extreme physical consistency, she has assembled – in graphic series – scientific and non-scientific modes of description for heterogeneous regions of her subjective experience of reality, creating a mapping project in which space and time are given utopian character, and the levels of meaning – despite their common placement on the level of the sheet – generate reciprocal friction, because Voigt consciously employs them in an attempt to convey what cannot be conveyed.

The meeting of unrelated and irreconcilable elements, one of the focal points of early modern avant-garde programmes like Surrealism or Dadaism, is staged in a completely new way here. It is transferred to a performative setting in which the socially coexistent, meanwhile almost inseparable pictorial languages reciprocally comment on, criticise and question each

other, combining in the short-term to create something that is always innovatively open. In titles like “Temperature change 0°C to minus 273°C, temperature change 0°C to plus 100°C, pop songs, transformation, eagles, flight path, satellites, infinite and finite action studies (2 kiss each other), current”, Voigt brings together opposing objects or states which the scientific world view is still endeavouring to reconcile today: nature, culture and technology, individuality and the mass, contingency and conscious steering. Jorinde Voigt calls them “elements” and their combination in her drawn series “apparatuses”. The terminology that she ties to the outside of her work remains difficult to interpret, but she keeps close to a scientific way of writing without becoming completely absorbed in it or making the thought processes associated with it into her own.

Whether inside the drawings themselves, at their edges or in the titles of the works, any concrete levels of reference enter the overall picture primarily via writing. These referential levels enable Voigt’s graphic undertaking to evolve as a broad-based reconstruction operating by means of diverse scientific and non-scientific models of visualisation and thought: while certainly following in the footsteps of artistic and literary Modernism, she is concerned with the question of the translatability of a complexly understood, contemporary experience of reality – which manifests itself in such diverse historical-terminological constructions, as well as that of everyday life or experience. Specifically modern aspects can be discerned in Voigt’s work not only as a result of the chains of aesthetic impulse reactions mentioned above, but already in the combination of scientific and artistic forms of expression that defined our first impression. She may share her capacity for abstraction, which creates a conceptual distance to her moments of experience, with the “confused sensory impressions” of August Strindberg or the “epiphanies” of Joyce and Faulkner, but her reduction of written language and her culmination and heightening of pictorial expression enable her to practice a distance that appears quite undefined initially.

However, she can expect a wealth of associations to arise, because her notation, as Voigt herself says, “draws together elements that have symbolic importance in society or that are decisive for describing civilisation and its surroundings”<sup>2</sup> – that is, the elements and symbols are legible far beyond the culture of natural science and technology. As ever, the handwriting here provides a concrete reference point to the dimensions of the drawings of which it is a

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<sup>2</sup> Jorinde Voigt, “Untitled (1–14)”, in: “Temperature change 0°C to minus 273°C, temperature change 0°C to plus 100°C, pop songs, transformation, eagles, flight path, satellites, infinite and finite action studies (2 kiss each other), current”, publication for the exhibition Jorinde Voigt: PERM Millennial, Fahnemann Projects, Berlin, 2007, no pag.

component. One is reminded of early Hollywood monster films, in which sea monsters rise from oversized waves, thus turning the sea into a swimming pool and the monsters themselves into Plasticine figures. But a sense of the proportional dimensions of hand-writing is obviously imprinted in our culture; this helps us to estimate the surrounding dimensions within a combination of drawing and writing like the one we have here, for example. Some characteristic traits of Jorinde Voigt's working method become clear in this context: precisely this element of hand-writing in her drawings emphasises the importance of their proportional dimensions, pointing to a specific production method. In the drawings, the imprecision, the "clumsiness" of the fact of hand-writing is a disturbing element. In many respects, they are dependent on the original; inevitably, reproductions in publications like this one are a compromise, for as a result of their reduced dimensions the hand-written elements in them remain illegible. In many respects – and not only because of the unique work's value-creating potential –, this is a strength of these works. It is a pointer to the essential performative dimension that is linked to them. Despite the associations triggered by some of the drawings – suggesting scores, choreographies, instructions for musical actions, advance instructions for actions – their character is far more that of traces: traces of the artist's activity as a draftsman, defined by the operating angle and range of her hand, her arm, her body. "First and foremost, this method of notation creates a framework on which to hang new things. If one were to read the drawings as mere storyboards or musical or choreography scores, the realisation in "real time" would be thwarted. The events depicted are not possible in reality. It is much more a matter of the intensity of what is associatively linked to the particular element." (Jorinde Voigt)

As the sheets of paper – particularly the larger formats – are difficult to handle, Voigt often works on a floor surface. But the physical movement is also part of the strenuous discipline imposed by the generative, methodical drawing procedures of her art; the body produces contingent effects, but simultaneously it is an instrument of the greatest humanly possible precision when realising small, balanced movements. Without wishing to advocate an increase in value through cultural-historical ranking: their relation to ritual practices can be seen quite clearly in the outcome of such graphic forms – as practised within European culture in the sweeping gestures of consecration performed by augurs, for example. Voigt is obviously aware of other 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic practices with a positive reference to such original myths, e.g. in geometric abstraction, Minimal Art, Arte povera or in Land Art. Nonetheless, her work is characterised by repeated attempts to position the freshness of

contemporary experience against historical models and their claims to validity, and additionally, to demonstrate the historically mediated nature of her own activities as a draftsman. Thus, although her comparisons of measurements are based on an enthusiasm for mathematical conceptual models quite similar, for example, to that in the work of Mario Merz or Sol LeWitt, she still insists on the direct relation of each item of experienceable information to its physically realised production. Here, it is noticeable that we are confronted almost exclusively in these drawings by representations of models and functions – the Fibonacci series is only one of many. It is because of the functional regularity of individual elements that the drawings extend over many sheets within a previously established framework; under certain circumstances, they also call for a format that increases in relative size. The emphasis on growth that continues *ad infinitum* – at least theoretically – remains unbroken on the level of her own production, but it should not be confused with pure productivism. Voigt thus handles the functions of her elements and apparatuses not only in the sense of a subjectivising aesthetics of increase, but also in the sense of an appropriation of the diagrammatic drawing under the conditions of additive artistic productivity. The relations between the concrete functional elements define the complex, difficult to grasp overall function of the apparatus; not only does an increase in drawing come about in this process, but also a growth in complex interrelations.

By contrast to other, apparently superficially related approaches in the art and literature of Modernism, Jorinde Voigt presents the relations between her graphic elements by turning them into the subjects of a montage-like composition, in which element 1 becomes an aesthetic signature that may encounter the signature of element 2 quite unpredictably. “The elements of temperature profile, eagle, pop song, current etc. are conveyed in a ‘social’ relation to one another. By this means, a concrete spatial constellation is described. This is finally realised in the individual imagination.” (Jorinde Voigt) In many cases, the artist has extended this principle into arrangements that – due to the large number of elements involved – seem to point to a synaesthetic model, but her curiosity is directed primarily at the degree of relative translatability into and out of so-called everyday experience.

The story of this experience is already revealed, for example, in a famous citation from the unfinished novel “Man without Qualities” by Robert Musil, written between the two world wars; here, the synaesthesia of urban life is conveyed by very similar, also apparently graphic metaphors, although it is characterised by a sense of threat: “Automobiles shot out of deep, narrow streets in the shadows of bright squares. Dark clusters of pedestrians formed

cloudlike strings. Where more powerful lines of speed cut across their casual haste they clotted up, then trickled on faster and, after a few oscillations, resumed their steady rhythm. Hundreds of noises wove themselves into a wiry texture of sound with barbs protruding here and there, smart edges running along it and subsiding again, with clear notes splintering off and dissipating.”<sup>3</sup> In another place in the same novel, Musil describes a basic, prototypical experience of his protagonist Ulrich, when the descriptive systems “tip” into a relativity that is constantly endeavouring to re-order everything:

“All these lines, circles and crosses, straight lines, curvature and mesh composing the furnishings of an apartment, which had piled up around him, were neither nature nor inner necessity; down to the last detail, they exhaled the over-splendour of the Baroque. The current, the pulse that flows regularly through everything in our environment had stopped for a moment. I am but chance, necessity sneered; when viewed without prejudice, I do not seem so different from the face of a werewolf, beauty confessed. Basically, not much was necessary; varnish had flaked off, a suggestion had been triggered, a trait of custom, expectation and tension severed; a fluid, secret balance between feeling and world had been disturbed for a second. Everything one feels and does occurs somehow ‘in the direction of life’, and the slightest shift away from this direction is difficult or shocking.”<sup>4</sup>

This is a description of the modern horrors of a reality experienced as habitual and thereby contingent in mass industrial society and a presence of life that is constantly drifting into the arbitrary and incomprehensible. Conveyed by language in the quotations from Musil, this theme has been more predominantly handled in modern literature, perhaps – and less in the fine art of Modernism, which, insofar as it found material form, was less capable of distancing itself from the affirmative nature of its objects. In the combination of media and methods available to artists today, drawing – in the sense that Voigt has developed the medium in her work – is especially attractive, because in the past it has been accredited with the greatest “immediacy”. But much as her drawings produce aesthetic pleasure, her reflection outside of drawing on the relations of graphically presented constellations of knowledge – the “elements” and “apparatuses” – is the true attraction. And so in Voigt’s working method, the distance between the act of drawing and its description plays an important role. The natural scientific terminology she uses herself when registering and describing her works in catalogues and other commentaries is very precise, but it does not necessarily help those who are searching for information about the links between the various descriptive systems

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Musil, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Adolf Frisé, vol. 1: *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1976. p.9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

used. For usually, these descriptions are records that list what is contained in the relevant sheet or series in the way of referential elements. Their paucity – or so it seems – intends to permit access to a restricted level of commentary alone. On this level, the question that inevitably arises after some contemplation and ordering of the complexity of a work – what is the connection between the elements X, Y and Z, between eagles, the flow of current, changes in temperature? – remains unanswered. The performative method of production, which can be seen in the drawings themselves, directs our full attention to the “constructedness” of the ideas associated with these visualisations. The fact that the ideas pass through the body and become a trace in space and time; this is what links each one to the others. However, it is only the beginning of a relativity that must be referred to individual experience; in Jorinde Voigt’s work, not only does it not become a rigid cipher or logo – it maintains a dynamic relation to her quietly changing living conditions.

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