

An e-mail dialogue between Sebastian Pöllmann and Florian Matzner
in November 2008

You can't actually draw!

Great, than I am on the right track. Art isn't only a product of skills but also of a good approach. I am glad my work and in particular my drawings create controversial opinions. What more could an artist ask for, than that his or her work is being discussed? Some love my drawings and their quick, simple and clear directness, for others they are just scrawl. I don't think there is an in-between. One either likes me drawings or dislikes them - it's just as simple as that!

Your drawings often deal with intimate as well as sexual fantasies, experiences, dreams, etc. At the same time drawings as a medium are the most personal form of expression of an artist: Until the 20th century history of arts considered the classic hand drawing to be a project outline, brainstorming, the sketch of a concept, which the artist was planning to realise in a painting or a sculpture at a later stage. In this sense the drawing is not a »public medium«, i.e. it usually doesn't leave the artist's studio to be shown in an exhibition to be presented to a broader public.

Well, the 20th century is over and the drawing is established as a public medium. It is obviously a question of how to adequately present drawings. Nobody would question whether the works of Dan Perjovschi or David Shrigley are worthy of being exhibited. It's just obvious that drawings are »their« medium: quick, direct and simple. I often wish to find the same sparkle in a finished painting that is inherent in these quick drawings.

Let's come back to your technique: At first glance you seem to be flirting with a certain dilettantism. Then again the viewer is reminded of the »Automatic Drawings« of Surrealism. Beyond this there is no background or context, thus the figures and scenes seem to be floating on paper. What is your technique?

I have an idea; I take a pencil and draw - done! Or something triggers a reaction, like in my drawings of nautical charts. Often it is only small things like the torn-off corner of a piece of paper or a splash of paint that brings up an association... Backgrounds - I call them »canvas fillers« - usually just serve the purpose to place the motif in some sort of context. My drawings, however, deal first and foremost with the person that they portray. It is the positioning of the drawings that creates a spatial depth on the paper. Francis Bacon's paintings draw their essence from these clear and simple backgrounds. Mostly they are only monochrome backgrounds that create a strong focus on the essential. I normally present my drawings in black frames on a black wall. Thereby the frame melts into the wall, which has the advantage that the frames provide the drawings with an appropriate space but don't dominate them.

You have just graduated from the academy of arts in Munich. Are your academic studies in Munich still relevant for your work now?

What my professors Horst Sauerbruch and Günther Förg have taught me is the importance of finding my own mindset, to grasp a position and to find and follow my own way. I think that I have grasped the essentials of what they taught us.

You were in Günther Förg's class, even his master student...

Well, you never know when a reference like that comes in handy.

In addition to this you have stayed in several countries, mostly in the United Kingdom...

The first time I stayed in the UK was during an Erasmus exchange in 2006. I studied »interactive art« - whatever that means - at the Metropolitan University in Manchester. I and many of my fellow students have never really understood what the term actually means; it wasn't quite clear what was expected from us. In 2008 I won a two-month artist-in-residence scholarship in Hospitalfield in Scotland. There were two of us living in a small chateau right next to the Scottish east coast and were provided with spacious studios. It was a great time. I realised how important it is to have this kind of quietude from time to time to develop new ideas.

Let's go back to your drawings as a stand-alone artistic medium. You mentioned the names of other artists: Shrigley, etc. Where does the current »boom« of the drawing come from? It seems as if the drawing has replaced the hype of the painting in the late nineties and early 2000s. Chris Dercon has recently claimed that the drawing is the artistic medium of the future.

»Booms« are a very special case. They usually have barely started when they are over again. Maybe the living rooms of collectors are jam-packed with huge paintings and all of them have space left for small drawings. But seriously, I believe in the magic of the drawings.

...Magic?

Well, maybe magic is the wrong term, but I think that the great potential of the drawing is that it is possible to bring out so much by using very little... It's the ultimate reduction. I draw a few lines and everybody understands what I mean. Matisse, Rodin as well as Warhol have made some great drawings and there is almost nothing to be seen on the paper. That's why I also like the late works of Picasso, because he is able to implement the quick and »easy« character of the drawing in paintings. And these paintings have often been controversially discussed.

Might this have something to do with the fact that we live in the age of the »Iconic Turn«? - The transition from the old industrial society of the late 20th century to the information society of the 21st century, the acceleration of everyday life, powerful images produced by advertising, TV, the Internet... all this has created an enormous longing for personality, intimacy and uniqueness. The drawing as the most individual artistic medium seems to fit into this longing; do you consider it as a way of breaking with the anonymity of everyday life or at least of undermining it?

A few years ago there was a lecture series »Iconic Turn« held here in Munich. In the catalogue which came with it Bill Viola published an essay titled »Das Bild in mir - Videokunst offenbart die Welt des Verborgenen« (The image in me - video art reveals the world of what is concealed), where he briefly describes the experience of the American scientist John Lilly during his experiment in an isolation tank. Viola considers these experiences proof »...that humans when deprived of all sensory stimuli and are thus confronted with vacuousness start to produce images themselves to fill the void. These images from within are our impetus to continue to leave for new horizons and discover foreign territory. Images are the engine of our life, they are as fundamental to our being as is sexuality or our ability to breath.« (Iconic Turn, 2004, p. 260) I think that the drawing, despite the great significance of paintings, offers both, the artist as well as the viewer the opportunity to elude the ple-

thora of images a little. Drawings bear the great potential of abstraction and reduction.

...Abstraction and reduction focus on the essential, on the personal, the unique. Should your drawings onto nautical charts and maps, which re-interpret a familiar, maybe even banal background, be understood within this context? It seems that you use these charts and maps like theatre uses the stage to create something entirely new.

The nautical charts and maps open an additional conceptual level of drawings. It creates a location for my figures; old Scottish legends and stories drawn onto Scottish nautical charts. While being completely deprived of their original purpose they serve, as you mentioned before, as a stage.

About a year ago you started to »translate« your drawings into wooden sculptures or more accurately spoken into wooden reliefs. Is this »only« a three-dimensional extension of your drawings or are these reliefs an autonomous formal and conceptual medium?

For me these reliefs are way of staying true to my way of drawing and yet apply it on a different medium. I draw on wood and then use a jig saw to cut it out; these reliefs undoubtedly bear my signature. I have created numerous different motifs of various dimensions. What I like about this approach is to play with the almost sweet connotation of fretsaw crafts; and to break with it through my motifs.

Thus the fusion of Low Art and High Art? Introducing Dad's handicrafts to the holy halls of the White Cube?

I wouldn't call it High and Low Art: what's high and what low these days? There is no material I can think of that has not been used in arts. On the other hand everybody who has ever bought poplar plywood knows how high its price is. What I find far more important is the tension that can result from the combination of a material and a motif. The work with the wooden reliefs has also helped me to approach a genre that has always fascinated me: the shadow theatre. On a antiques market in Peking I bought an old leather puppet used in shadow theatre and started to experiment to put my figures into motion. That is how animated drawings like e.g. the video loop »Der Heilige Sebastian« (The Holy Sebastian). Likewise I started to delve into shadow theatre; the result of this is my latest work. It consists of numerous figures that are moved by engines and tackles. In a way it's going back to my roots considering that I grew up with the puppet theatre of my parents.

...Your parents are professional puppeteers?

If you define professional whether they can make a living from their puppet theatre, then they aren't. My father was an arts teacher at school and my mother is a teacher, too. Yet, the Schwandorfer puppet theatre goes far beyond a hobby. The preparation phases for new productions often take months. The foundation of the theatre dates back over thirty years. Thus it was an incremental part of my childhood and youth. I believe that is the reason why I ended up in a creative field. Likewise I think that the fact that some of my works bear some resemblance to the aesthetics of theatre originates from my strong interest in theatre. My latest work wouldn't have been possible without the knowhow which I have gained in my parent's theatre.

After having discussed your drawings and wooden reliefs, we have touched the second part of your work: shadow theatre, puppet films and animated drawings. Thus, projects that aim to translate the twodimensional drawings in the three-dimensionality of space. In return the snap-shot of the drawing is placed in a story and a time period.

As mentioned before, I consider animation as an opportunity to put my figures in motion, which then enables me to tell more complex stories. Let me use the animation of the »Holy Sebastian« as an example. In practically every church you can find paintings or sculptures of this naked Roman officer tied to a tree being hit by arrows. My parents used to have a little figurine of the »Holy Sebastian« for years. In my 30 seconds long loop you see a person tied to tree, whose leaves are moving, while the body remains completely motionless, only his tiny penis dangles from side to side. Then a pink heart, resembling a tattoo, appears on his upper arm. At the same time a little pink arrow moves towards the heart, which transforms into a bird that seemingly flies out of the picture at the end of the loop.

...So you are dealing with crossing the line between experience and thought, between virtuality and reality? I have the impression that your films are far more conceptual than your drawings. It seems to me that your film projects make a much stronger claim for universality. They have some characteristics of a moral and ethical system of rules.

No, it wouldn't be me to create a moral and ethical system of rules. Otherwise I wouldn't have called the catalogue »PleasureLand«, but »The 13 Commandments«. A film or animation always comes across as more thought-through, since the method requires a different approach than drawings do. However, I have remained true to my quick way of drawing. My puppet films are more portraits of the puppets than films as such. Take for example my video loop »Eitelkeit« (Vanity), where »Kasperl« (Punchinello), after his hair was burned in a performance, runs his plywood hand through his hair in frustration. Here I examined the phenomenon that puppets often have strong human traits, not least because of the imagination of the audience.

Talking about the audience: how do you define yourself towards your recipients? Do you think about them? Or do you even include them in your work?

The viewer has always played an important role in my works. In this sense art is similar to theatre; theatre is made for the audience and not made just so that you can give yourself a pat on the back and say: »Man, I'm such a great actor!« One needs recipients, otherwise it's getting difficult in the long run. I am well aware that my drawings irritate the aesthetic habits of many. I regularly get the reaction: »This guy can't actually draw!« Therefore I try to give my drawings an appropriate platform through the way I present them. I also think that the viewer can find him/herself in the stories that my works tell. In other works I consciously include the viewer as an additional level. So for example my shadow work »Temptation« - a homage to Hieronymus Bosch's »Der Garten der Lüste« (The Garden of Earthly Delights) Here the viewer is in a darkened room, shadow figures are projected onto the walls and the ceiling. Both, the technical equipment as well as the light source are located in the centre of the room. Therefore the spectators themselves cast shadows on the walls and thus become part of the installation.

After all the recipient of images has changed, in the arts as well as in everyday life, due to the fact that the role of images themselves has considerably changed. While the image used to serve the purpose to illustrate and explain text, images today have an independent information content and ideological substance.

The concept of »the image«, which has been considerably broadened, triggers very personal associations in the viewer. At this stage the producer of the image can only look at this intersection from outside.

Both, in your drawings and in your animations you consciously choose the formal means of abstraction, the reduction to black and white; Wim Wenders once said that the film is in colours while real life is black and white...

Yesterday I went to watch his new film »Palermo Shooting« with Campino playing the leading part. It's about a very successful photographer who fails to see the meaning of his life. After having been photographed by him the personified death tries to contact him... What I found interesting, was the unusual typification of death as an aimable character rather than a dark and evil figure. Coming back to my drawings and shadow works, I think that while they are mostly black and white they are dominated by the colourful sparkling life.

So what's next? Your studies at the academy of arts is finished, you successfully graduated. What are your next projects?

Art, art and more art. I hope that there will always be a goal that I can work towards. Otherwise I guess I have to set my own objectives. To remain open and to continue to experiment - first and foremost I want to preserve the diverse facets in my work, which creates new impulses for all areas. So I always get new input for creative output!