

From the Line to the Word and Back: Jorinde Voigt on the Move on a Thousand Levels

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There are artists whose fundamental, primary impetus comes from art; others are significantly shaped by their environment, and still others derive stimulation from their reading. Jorinde Voigt draws equally from all three sources of inspiration. This is done with a subjectivist's profound skepticism with regard to normative concepts of "reality," "truth" and "knowledge." What Voigt really tries to comprehend is this: insight. With a free hand and delicate marks, she took straight lines and curves, numbers, words and collage elements and developed them into a visual grammar that allows her to transfer everything that is – or could be – the case around us and in us to a diagram-like matrix, to spread it out, to weave it together in order to make it available for fresh examination. Through the formative power of these graphisms – some stringently composed, others emotionally charged – individual facts of perception evolved that never deny their origins in the ultimately unfathomable abundance of sensuous impulses, and which are constantly striving for order. The artist's catalogue raisonné comprises over two and a half thousand works in various media and materials, predominantly ink and paper.

Jorinde Voigt's drawing work began circumspectly, almost inconspicuously, with a comparably small-scale series: the 2003 *Notations Florida* (ill. pp. 11, 26, 27). These sixty ink drawings nonetheless already contain all the registers of perception that would also distinguish her later works. "Like the notation of a musical composition, visual and acoustical elements are arranged rhythmically, located geographically through indications of longitude and latitude and placed in a relationship to duration and tempo."¹ This is how the artist herself describes it. On closer examination, the few selective indications on the paper reveal themselves as an inventory of circumstances that Voigt encountered on a trip to Orlando and Miami. With a few lines and words, she transformed the scan-like registering of her surroundings – which, by way of trial, she carried out without empathy or assessment – into situation studies, portrayals of intersocial relationships and sequences of commerce-related movements. One group of people at a traffic light is cut into vertical lengths according to hair and clothing color (ill. p. 11, right). Turned horizontally, the line defines the abstract flat space of markings that fix a spectacular beach scene (ill. p. 11, left). The same line on another sheet of paper assumes the role of a "timeline" or describes the movement direction of a vacuum tractor [Schmutzansaugmaschine] (ill. p. 26, top). It is these concentrated observations in the "Now" that make the subject seem light and permeable.

The graphic orchestration of the impressions that Voigt overlays with an expanded concept of a "score" is also always aimed at the transformation of the artwork-like into the performative. *Notations Florida* contains a dozen pieces of music in which *trite* impressions of her travels are recoded, such as: piece for 1 airplane | darkness |, Piece for: Neocolonial City and Law Office, Stück für 1ne Frau ohne Handy, 1ne Tasche und 1 startendes Motorrad,² Stück für: 1ne Corvette und 10 Ersatzteile³ and Piece for Red with White Lines. Like the situational drawings, these pieces are also copied from reality – with the categorical difference that they (re)play themselves. Echoing the experimental music of the 1960s, which was concerned with integrating everyday life into the repertoire of performative events with a view to derive from this its action art, Voigt wrote autogenerative pieces that occur, as it were, any place and at any time.

If the dissolution of art into life was the "maximum program" of the avant-gardists, the "minimum program" meant placing artistic mastery in the service of mundane daily tasks. This kind of strategic artlessness was demonstrated in an exemplary manner by Alison Knowles with her 1962 Fluxus classic *Make a Salad*. When Voigt in diametrical opposition to this makes boiling an egg the subject of her work, it is to demonstrate the conditions of possibility under which this kind of action can even succeed. To this end she applied a quasi-scientific methodology to process the individual determination criteria (color, weight class, temperature before cooking, elevation, air pressure and cooking time) in corresponding lists. This reduced schematization of all important parameters in the form of a table was accompanied by an apparatus-like object. As a consolidated form of observation it makes lifeworld relationships graspable without conceding the analytical distance. The 2009 *Cooking an Egg* (ill. p. 12) as a test design is as elementary as it is symptomatic of Voigt's experimental approach. The entire perception spectrum enters into her work without being completely absorbed by

it. There is always a remnant – or rather a speculative surplus – that stimulates new thoughts.

Because of the fascination they hold for Voigt, the modernist avant-gardists represent an implicit reference system for the artist; however, this does not extend beyond heuristic referentialities. If Voigt – who draws her works under great physical exertion while lying flat – refers to any role models, it is to the extremist attitude of the American performance artist Vito Acconci. Her use of copper leaf is inspired by Joseph Beuys. The attraction of Conceptual art derives from its method of uncompromisingly reducing everything down to a subject that only through this act of focusing can be seen from new perspectives. Whatever form Voigt's references take, she retains a cautious, critical distance to them in creating her own works. There are no specific references, quotes or allusions. However, it is from the development of Conceptual art approaches that Voigt's specific examination process evolved, one that could be referred to by the catchword "conceptual drawing."

The "event scores" of the 1960s avant-gardists in the form of brief directions or "instructions" as comparatively detailed descriptions of a piece find their counterpart in what Voigt calls "algorithms" – a term that shows her strategy for distinguishing herself from classical Conceptual art and reflects the zeitgeist. It refers to clear instructions for actions that can consist of an infinite number of individual steps. Her 2006 *Final Version Plan of Action Vilnius* (ill. p. 13) illustrates one such algorithm. The action *2 People Kissing* (ill. p. 23), initially a drawing, was performed according to the Fibonacci sequence, following precise instructions with regard to the positioning of the protagonists, their spatial distance to each other, the duration of the individual kisses, the pauses between them and the precise beginning and end of the performance, which theoretically could be continued ad infinitum. This kind of dramaturgy is based on a carefully thought-out plan and is related only formally to the chance-based "happenings." With Voigt, chance is, at most, that which remains when everything else has been defined.

The principle of the perception study developed in *Notations Florida* proved to be capable of adaptation and modulation. It could be applied to both the act of reading and the study of art. The smaller series and the larger cycles that resulted from the artist's intensive study of works by authors such as Roland Barthes, Elias Canetti, Paul Celan, Epicurus, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Douglas R. Hofstadter, C. G. Jung, Niklas Luhmann, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Arthur Schopenhauer and Peter Sloterdijk were not illustrations of these writings; rather, they expose an imaginative power that had been triggered by individual phrases, sentences and passages (ill. p. 14; p. 15, left). On paper these internalized reading experiences attain a graphic appearance without a dialogue orientation. Voigt's act of disclosure – in its reception offerings of intuitive association forms, quotations from the text and the perception parameters applied to them (categories of space, time, direction and speed) – resists a complete understanding. The act of reading had the primary purpose of exploring the immaterial medium of the imagination.

Not all reading matter, however, contained the potential for visualization. The powerfully pictorial language of the Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva so dazzled Voigt's faculty of imagination that it thwarted every attempt at autonomous drawing. Voigt expanded her inquiries to include artworks as well (both from historical cultures and from avant-garde movements), which she did not contemplate as pictures but rather "read" as texts. Again and yet again. Her 2011/2012 *Views on Chinese Erotic Art: From 16th to 20th Century* (ill. pp. 142–149) have their point of departure in this assiduous "visual reading" process. As Voigt makes art her object of study, the aesthetic phenomenology of the visible form once again takes center stage. What the text experience offered the intellectual eye as a cognitive act is "eye-catchers" in the process of viewing artworks: significant colors and shapes that guide and direct the jumps and leaps of the gaze.

Jorinde Voigt's analyses of her own attention economy saw a historic perspectivization through her study of Alfred Lichtwark's 1897 *Übungen in der Betrachtung von Kunstwerken* [Exercises in the contemplation of works of art]. Lichtwark's project dedicated to training the eye of the educated middle classes is a guide, based on the "Five W" method of asking questions, to viewing artworks independently. Scarcely any other artist has placed Lichtwark's subjectivization technique, form and content, visual effect and pedagogical ideology in such a compelling relationship to his or her own visual dispositives as did Voigt in her 2014 ten-work series of the same name (ill. p. 17). From colored paper, she cut out silhouette-like sections of significant motifs from the paintings discussed by

Lichtwark (Voigt's preferred instrument here is a scalpel). Combined with quotes from the young subjects of Lichtwark's art-education project and Voigt's own system of criteria for the individual reading of the pictures, the resulting works serve as a preparatory exercise for looking at "Voigt." Every sheet is an aesthetic study; every sheet is also always an aesthetic statement. The silhouette, with or without an interior drawing, is the diagram of an object or a body. In the figure-ground contrast, it reduces the visual data to a characteristic outline in the space.⁴ The shadowgraph, like every diagram – regardless of its iconographic form or its pictorial elements – is not a depiction of anything. Like every diagram it is preceded by an intellectual operation that can be described – in the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari – as transformative.⁵ The results of this operation are expressed in an image, a diagram. In this sense, Voigt's operative notational iconicity is also always diagrammatic. Nevertheless, her drawings have little to do with scientific visualizations, popular information schemas or workmanlike charts of the sort that the American design historian Edward R. Tufte covers in his bestsellers, two of which Voigt has in her personal library. Her drawings are based on a conception of the diagram as a "sketch of a philosophical model" (Voigt) that helps her comprehend the world in its innermost core. Just as Ludwig Wittgenstein remained silent about the things of which he could not speak and sketched what was to be understood, Voigt began during her study of philosophy to "write" thought models (ill. p. 15, right). Wherever the flow of words broke off, she created a diagrammatic drawing with concrete expressiveness. Jorinde Voigt's drawings are concerned with the "multiplicities," "constant variables" and "continuous variations" of life, to quote three leading categories from *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980). For Voigt, this book, required reading for generations of students, represented nothing less than a liberation from the dialectic logic of the Frankfurt school of thought. A "new land" (Voigt) – which Deleuze/Guattari refer to as a "diagram" – opened up, one that was fundamentally unstable and fluid, and in which materials and functions were incessantly whirled around. This "new land," which is constantly coming into being and repudiates clear conditions, consists of immanent "intensity zones" of thinking, feeling and acting. These are the very thousand plateaus that – linked in multiple and manifold ways – ceaselessly create new possibilities for insight.⁶ It is these consistencies that Voigt investigates through the drawing process. When she says of herself, in an allusion to the German conceptual artist Hanne Darboven, that she can only write, then it is the type of asignificant writing that points out, explores and surveys this new dimension of insights.⁷ In 2006 Voigt's works leave the intimate sphere of a culture of the small. Sprawling from floor to ceiling or assuming panorama-like forms, they take on the challenge of monumental modernity in their installation-like presentations. The undisguised handwriting now seems minuscule. Conversely, in the close-up perspective the "big picture" is lost from view, with the effect that the beholder is overpowered (ill. p. 16). The intentional hindrance of an exact reading of the large-format works corresponds to the wall principle applied to smaller drawings. In the picture-like hanging of the works, which visually juxtaposes the successive with the parallel, Voigt's series concept proves to be rhizomatic. For the "normal" viewer, her delicate structures of words and the causality loops are singularly implausible, but for the "innovative" viewer they represent a unique linking process of realities and assumptions that together generate new effects of insights in order to delve beneath the surface of things. Jorinde Voigt thinks in words and phrases, and draws according to the parameters of her perception: geographical coordinates, temporal dimensions, sensory impulses, electrical and meteorological phenomena, direction and speed of movement. As structural elements of the graphic matrix – precisely listed and processed – their influence extends even to the subtitles of the works. Often the drawings are under the suggestive power of signal words: "archetype," "institution," "intimacy," "nexus," "territory." When Voigt contemplates "state," for example, all connotations are allowed, problematic ambivalences are permitted, semantic digressions accepted. Just as she develops a theme from changing perspectives, from this open principle of reflection, there is a multitude of possibilities for entering this expansive drawing space. While actual size is certainly an aesthetic category, the real significance of Voigt's works lies in their conceptual design. The systematic circling of a theme in thought loops is the driving force of her inquiries – preferably developed in series – with a guarantee of exponential complexity. "Rotation," this key word that is the expression of Voigt's artistic disposition and appears in many subtitles of her works, is used here very literally. Like the arrangements based on arithmetic growth formulas, the individual, correlated sheets also have the inherent quality of urgently striving for a new dimension. But it is because of the interminability of this universal approach that Voigt's works grow steadily in their magnitude. It is as if the artist can only understand the world by perceiving, reflecting, drawing and continuing to draw. By committing her observations to paper, she provides information about herself. Whether it is analytical and sober in its approach or controlled and impulsive in its attitude, Voigt's art

of perception is as uncompromising as it is personal.

1 Jorinde Voigt, *Notations*, 2003, unpublished typescript.

2 Piece for 1 Woman Without Mobile Phone, 1 Bag and 1 Motorcycle Starting Up.

3 Piece for: 1 Corvette and 10 Replacement Parts.

4 See Joachim Krausse, "Information auf einen Blick. Zur Geschichte der Diagramme," *form + zweck*, no. 16, 1999, pp. 4–23, here p. 13.

5 See Gilles Deleuze/Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Minneapolis (MN) 1987, pp. 171–172.

6 See *ibid.*, p. 22.

7 Jorinde Voigt in conversation with the author on July 6, 2015.