

# JORINDE VOIGT, JAPANESE EROTIC ART – FROM 17TH TO 19TH CENTURY 1-64, 2012

## Perspectives on pictures

The collages *Japanese Erotic Art – From 17th to 19th Century 1-64* (2012) were created as a direct continuation of the work complex *Views on Chinese Erotic Art. From 16th to 20th Century* (2011), in which Jorinde Voigt combines notation and collage techniques.

These are inspired by works that were on view in the exhibition, *Der chinesische Lustgarten - Erotische Kunst aus der Sammlung Bertholet* (The Chinese pleasure garden - Erotic Art from the Bertholet collection) in the East Asian art collection in the Museen Dahlem. In the pages of the Chinese album, the erotic love act is explicitly depicted, however the scenery and props have been so artistically designed that the pornographic content becomes less important. Instead, the works provide an insight into the Chinese culture, for example when the tiny lotus feet of the women strike the eye – something that was still an ideal of beauty in China at the beginning of the 20th century. Fascinated by the formal characteristics of the images, Voigt deals with the colour and form of the depictions in her collages. Each area of colour that is visible in Voigt's work represents the artist's view of the respective album sheet, the title of which Voigt takes up and supplements. While her first observation is directed to a rough impression of the motif, with each further "view" the artist gets closer to the structure of the composition. With the help of a colour fan, the artist determines the respective colour numbers of the robes, lovers, wallpaper or furniture. With this synchronous representation of colour and form, elements such as tables, mirrors, shocks of hair or the previously mentioned lotus feet are to some extent recognizable. The artist supplements the almost mimetic representation with notes written by hand, which put the surfaces of colour in a new spatial and temporal context. Arrows and numbers indicate "Himmelsrichtung Nord-Süd" (compass points north-south), "Rotationsrichtung" (direction of rotation), "Rotationsgeschwindigkeit" (speed of rotation), "Windrichtung" (direction of wind), "Windstärke" (strength of wind) or "Umdrehung/Min, Woche, Quartal, Jahr" (revolutions per minute, week, quarter, year), evoking an imaginary rotation. In addition, Voigt marks each depiction of the sequence of her observations accordingly as a "countup" or "countdown". In this way, we are able to follow her gaze, which does not always trace a linear reading pattern. By frequently zooming in on an object, a repetitive consolidation occurs, which is similar to musical processes. Voigt keeps repeating and varying colours and forms until the character traits of the images viewed emerge according to her perception. With this approach, the artist refers explicitly to the Chinese and Japanese painting traditions in which hundreds of views of one and the same motif were produced, for example, *100 Views of Mount Fujii* or *Yoshitoshi's One Hundred Aspects of the Moon*.

The so-called Japanese "shungas", also known as "pictures of spring", served as a model for the latest cycle *Japanese Erotic Art – From 17th to 19th Century 1-64* (2012). The erotic paintings and coloured woodcuts from the Edo period belong to the Ukiyo-e style, which means something along the lines of "images of a flowing world". The artist found images of the shungas in Gian Carlo Calza's book, *Poem of the Pillow and Other Stories. By Utamaro, Hokusai, Kuniyoshi and Other Artists of the Floating World*.<sup>1</sup> The shungas were not considered offensive prior to their prohibition in the 17th century and could be found in all social classes throughout the country. The aim of the artist was to show the "diversity of the sexual possibilities"<sup>2</sup>. In the erotic images, which are renowned for their stylised depiction, the huge and detailed depiction of penises seems rather peculiar. "In addition, in Japan the sexual characteristics often had the function of a 'second sight' and expressed passion, which the 'everyday physiognomy' was compelled to hide due to the strict social code."<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Japanese shungas are much more pornographic than the Chinese images. Their secondary narratives, spun around the erotic act of love, are set in the symbolic visual compositions: partially open curtains, curved vases or the elaborate headdresses of women, as well as approaching boats or excessive grimaces speak volumes. Voigt dissects these "sensuous" images with an analytic gaze, just as she did with the Chinese

originals. However, there are differences: the pre-drawn contours of sections of colour are more clearly recognisable here and resemble comic-like illustrations. In addition, the shapes, which have been cut out of coloured paper, are based on different images from the book and cover 64 sheets in the series. Voigt installed between five and seven different coloured sections in vertical alignment on a sheet and gave them their characteristic notations: “Rotationsrichtung, Umdrehungen/Tag” (direction of rotation, revolutions/day), “Vorgestern  $\rightarrow \infty$ ” (the day before yesterday  $\rightarrow \infty$ ), “Gestern  $\rightarrow \infty$ ” (yesterday  $\infty$ ), “Heute  $\rightarrow \infty$ ” (today  $\rightarrow \infty$ ), “Morgen  $\rightarrow \infty$ ” (tomorrow  $\rightarrow \infty$ ), “Übermorgen  $\rightarrow \infty$ ” (the day after tomorrow  $\infty$ ), “shift km/h”, “Himmelsrichtung Nord-Süd” (compass points north-south), and “Ausrichtung internes/externes Zentrum” (alignment internal/external centre). In this way, Voigt places the silhouettes, which reflect her subjective perception of the shungas, within an objective orientation system. According to Voigt, every kind of information, not only extracts of Japanese art, can be fed into this “matrix” – a graphic space with its own momentum. According to the artist, the “internal centre” symbolically represents our “inner compass”, while the “external centre” incorporates all the “external points of reference” in society.<sup>4</sup> Individual aspects are brought into relationship with one another. In *Japanese Erotic Art – From 17th to 19th Century 1-64*, these poles confront one another at the same time and with equal importance. Likewise, the stringency of the artist’s systematic approach forms a contrast to the chromaticity of the series.

Voigt’s collages focus on questions regarding human awareness, speech, cognition, intuition and association. The artist explores how information is stored in images and in what way they visually communicate with their counterpart. Does our memory of what has just happened change while we are in the process of looking at something? Is there some kind of shift during the process of eye-mind-hand-paper? The transfer of content to a specific system, which remains open to being viewed by others, is an important function of diagrams as the producers of new levels of meaning: “a diagram presents a scarce number of central arguments and in doing so also a discursive space for reception and theory. The diagrammatic representation modus allows for cognitive knowledge to be communicated as a visual process, even as ‘cognitive art’, which itself requires a visual surplus in order to stimulate new cognitive processes.”<sup>5</sup>

What happens if we look at Voigt’s new version of the shungas with the same spontaneous approach that Voigt took when viewing the originals? Seen from a distance, the sheets are reminiscent of Far-Eastern characters, written vertically; a reference to the unity of images and writing predominant in Japanese and Chinese art, as well as in the shungas themselves. Notation means symbols and writing in the classical sense of the word and is a central aspect of all the artist’s works. In the exhibition space, the colourful silhouettes – removed from their initial context – also create an impression of hovering ‘free particles’<sup>6</sup>, in which something fragile is inherent.

Notations can be final results, for example Claude Heath’s blind drawings or Morgan O’Haras *Live Transmissions* <sup>7</sup>. In Voigt’s case it is notations on her own transforming movements that are the main focus of her work. Transformations are characterised by the fact that they provide one possibility among many: All the works by the artist are immanent in this model concept. They consist of variations, repetitions and scope for possibilities that are between real implementation and a fictitious draft. In *Japanese Erotic Art – From 17th to 19th Century 1-64* Voigt transfers a picture into a new picture. She translates images of historic paintings and prints into diagrams made up of picture and text elements. Voigt is not a conceptual artist in the sense of Sol LeWitt, who proclaimed in his *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*: “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art”<sup>8</sup>, as in her works it is the specific aesthetic aspects that are decisive. However, her method of working is strictly conceptual, structuring and systemizing – supplemented with sensual sources of inspiration. It is precisely this “blend of visual poetry and analytical presentation”<sup>9</sup>, perceived by Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt to be characteristic of the artistic, diagrammatic way of thinking, which permeates Voigt’s works. Since beginning her notations in 2003, Voigt has developed a coded form of writing in order to transfer characteristics from acoustic and optical phenomena into complex visual compositions using parameters and algorithms. With her Japanese collages she creates a portrait: one that goes far beyond her perception of Far-Eastern classics drawn from the history of culture and art.

- 1 Cf. Calza, Gian Carlo: *Poem of the Pillow and Other Stories. By Utamaro, Hokusai, Kuniyoshi and Other Artists of the Floating World*. Berlin 2010.
- 2 Pilcher, Tim (Ed): *Erotische Comics - das Beste aus zwei Jahrhunderten*. Munich 2010, p. 18.
- 3 Pilcher (2010), pp. 18-19.
- 4 Jorinde Voigt in conversation with the author, Berlin, December 11, 2012.
- 5 Schmidt-Burkhardt, Astrit: Plötzliche diese Übersicht. Kunst unter dem diagrammatischen Imperativ, in: Leeb, Susanne (Ed.): *Die Materialität der Diagramme. Kunst und Theorie*. Berlin 2012, p. 74.
- 6 Jorinde Voigt in conversation with the author, Berlin, December 11, 2012.
- 7 Heath draws blindfolded or with the help of special equipment so that he pictures objects solely by feeling or imagining them. O'Hara, on the other hand, observes a human action and transfers the movements with both hands at the same time onto paper. Both artists allow the results of their spontaneous actions to stand alone without modifying them later.
- 8 Sol LeWitt, 1967, cited in: Lee, Pamela; Mehring, Christine (Hg.): *'Zeichnen ist eine andere Art von Sprache'*. *Neuere amerikanische Zeichnungen aus einer New Yorker Privatsammlung*. Stuttgart 1997, p. 110.
- 9 Schmidt-Burkhardt (2012), in: Leeb (2012), p. 74.

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