

Visiting the location

It begins with a visit to her studio in Bern. Close to a disused railway track, surrounded by run-down industrial buildings, entrances in odd corners, inaccessible ramps with black and yellow warning stripes, grey facades, crumbling plaster, there's a set of steps leading up to the first storey of a faceless building. It's pitch black inside, from the corner of my eyes I can just make out a monstrous goods lift, maximum loading weight eight tons. Finally a large room with white distempered walls opens up behind a pile of wooden crates. A window so high up it would require a turntable ladder to open it, but it nevertheless casts light on the three-metre-high studio. Mattresses have been leant on their sides, waiting for the completion of the bright red coat of paint that has been started, coffee filters have been dunked in plaster to form a stable arrangement that counters gravity and their own fragility. I can see drawings on the walls consisting of tiny dots that condense into fantasy figures before my astonished eyes. Is that a rabbit? The ears are unnaturally large, but the dimensions are right – no, that's not a rabbit, is it? A stroll along the wall and I encounter a horned figure. That's a – did I say devil? But no, it's just an animal, although clearly not a cow.

I stand in the studio and know this highly-charged topos of the authentic site of creative production all too well, but still I can't resist it, because spread out before me is a world that is so familiar and yet seems oh so strange.

Window

In his *Grammaire des Arts du dessin*, Charles Blanc gave precedence to drawing over paint: “Le dessin a cet autre avantage sur la couleur, que celle-ci est relative, tandis que la forme est absolue.”¹ Today his distinction between the female and the male principle, to which he assigned painting and drawing respectively, can only be viewed from a historical perspective. Blanc is nevertheless interesting on this point inasmuch as the esteem enjoyed by drawing and its “intellectual” underpinnings remains to this day. The ability to draw was already regarded by Giorgio Vasari as an unmistakable sign of talent,² and still constitutes a decisive criterion for admission to art school. At the same time it has remained an intimate medium, a window through which we feel we come closest to following the artist's eye and understand his or her point of view. Bünter's drawn oeuvre comprises some 400 leaves, which she herself divides into two rough categories: free sketches and construction drawings for the objects she develops.

Sketches

A pair of legs dangling in the air, a babe asleep, a man's head wearing a flat cap in front of a blossoming shrub, wind-tossed palms, a bristly brush, objects in motion. Pencil, ink or crayon on paper, Bünter



Abb. 1

1 Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des Arts du Dessin. Architecture, Sculpture, Peintre*, Paris: Renouard 1867, p. 22. A century before this Claude-Henri Watelet described the discussion about the rank of drawing and painting in his article “Dessein” in the *Encyclopédie*, cf. *L'Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste d'Alembert, Paris: 1751–1772, reprint New York: Pergamon Press 1969, 5 vols., here vol. 1, p. 937. Cf. also Oskar Bätschmann, “Zeichnen und Zeichnungen im 19. Jahrhundert”, in: *Zeichnen ist Sehen. Meisterwerke von Ingres bis Cézanne aus dem Museum der Bildenden Künste Budapest und aus Schweizer Sammlungen*, exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Bern, 29.03.–02.06.1996 and Hamburger Kunsthalle, 05.07.–08.09.1996, pp. 24–34.

2 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, trans. Mrs Foster, 10 vols. Forgotten Books, Central, Hong Kong, 2012 [Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, cultori ed architettori*, 9 vols, Florence 1568].

employs the classical materials. What order do all these different motifs obey, are there coherent groups, clusters of topics, or narrative structures? Or is the only remaining thing the chronological order – with or without any suggestion of a developmental principle?

I shall pick out two drawings and describe them so as to explore the functions and purposes of the depictions, over and above their semantic meaning, and clarify the way they work and their possible readings:

(Ill. 1) At the centre of the picture we see the ruffled hair of a small figure viewed from behind. It is wrapped in a large cloth, and in motion. A form develops in Bünter's highly typical manner from the dashed lines, from the small, detailed formation of dots. The turn of the head to the right, together with the dynamic lines in the pulled-up shawl form the centre of the drawing and allow the sensual experience of a figure in motion to be conveyed. The graphic pattern on the draped cloth and its faithfully foreshortened perspective underline the sense of dynamism.

(Ill. 2) Three rows of graphic elements have been placed one behind the other in strict order. Together, their rounded edges produce a powerful wave-like motion, further heightened by their mutual inclination towards the left-hand margin. Being a transparent construction, the drawing reveals the inner and outer structure of the ensemble. Twenty-one uniform elements leaning on and mutually supporting each other, ensure stability within instability. The rhythmic movement of the homogeneous but as such rigid forms is vaguely reminiscent of objects from everyday life, such as roof shingles. Running vertically in a restless, imperfect typeface are letters done with the old Brother Deluxe 660TR portable typewriter on which Bünter writes her linguistic outpourings and literary artefacts, forming the words: "nicht genug" – "not enough".

Both drawings present a general artistic problem. How do figure and surface relate to one another, and what conditions must be fulfilled before dynamic processes can be visualised? In order to clarify this, it would be necessary to inquire into the principles behind the picture. The answers remain dependent, however, on the artist's technical abilities. But the concern in these works is not with systematic deconstructions, fanciful combinations or stiff academic exercises. Central are courses of action and their goals. And these enable us to undertake an analysis of both Bünter's construction drawings for her objects as well as her free sketches. I shall refer to these courses of action as: constructing, playing, and remembering.

Constructing

When we talk of constructing, it also redolent with the promise of purposeful composition. The plans drawn up by an architect are done, for instance, to build a house, a technical blueprint shows how to make a machine. When we look at Bünter's construction plans, they are likewise guided by a purpose. Squared timbers are piled up, rods supported by ribbons, mattresses leant against together so as to form the imaginary bows of a proud ship (Ill. 3), and slender panels are pieced together to create a sheltered space. These drawings survey the room, check resistances, and present balancing acts far removed from empirical experience. We find the close-up, the overhead view, the bird's-eye view and the distant view. Contrary to normal practice however, these construction drawings are not produced before the installation is made, but generally afterwards. The aim of the drawings is to trace out the installations – which generally consist of numerous parts – and capture them visually in all their complexity. Like a documentation or the retrospective study of a work of art that has already been made. In this they fulfil the goals of a construction drawing in the closer

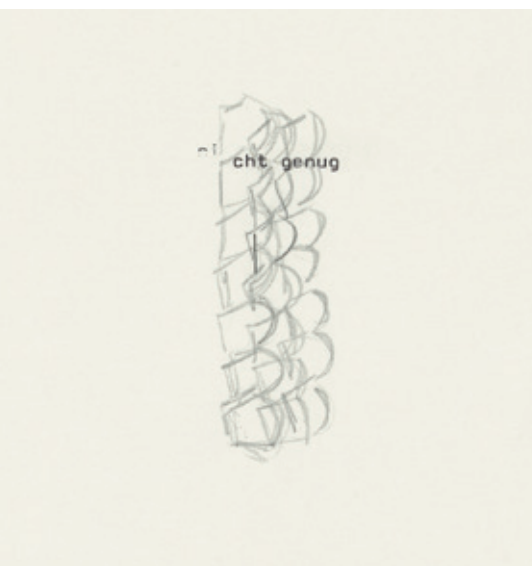


Abb. 2

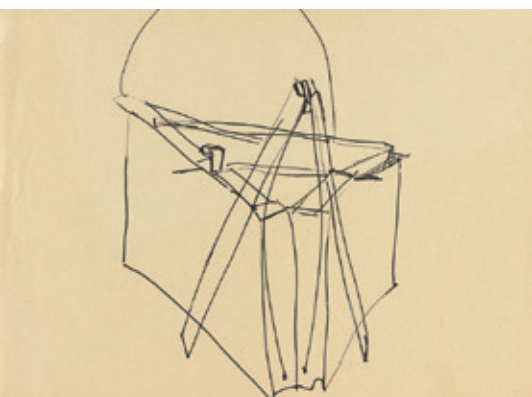


Abb. 3

sense as the depiction of a technical construction, albeit shifted in time. Paradoxically, another, more important step comes prior to constructing, prior to the rational, formal and cognitive act of recording: playing.

Playing

“For, to speak out once for all, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and *he is only completely a man when he plays*.”³ In Schiller’s letters on aesthetic education, the formal instinct and the play instinct are treated as virtually incompatible, and only to be brought into harmony with one another through the ideal of beauty.⁴ Today, play can look back on a long tradition as the initiator of art.⁵ Talking with Renata Bünter, it is soon apparent that play is one of the mainsprings of her work. In keeping with Schiller, it represents the greatest freedom, and Bünter liberates her art radically, surmounting the properties of the materials and attempting to suspend physical laws through play. Her “heroes” are wood, plaster, plastic, rubber and paper. The artist sails for instance her mattress ship across a plastic sea, which has to be plumped up every day, and the horizon finds itself caught in wooden frames. Her drawings, viewed as a technical means to capture the flash of an artistic idea, the celebrated “split second”, are an expression of the dualism of reflection and dynamism. Through them the artistic game is either stopped or actually set in motion. This is an intelligent course of action during which a “feedback loop” is set up between the mind, the drawing hand, and the picture that comes about.⁶ But time and again Bünter also attempts to loosen this tight link, experimenting by drawing while half asleep, or with the help of serendipitous blots.⁷

What is the goal of this split from a reflecting and controlling self? One possible answer lies in the significance of the words and phrases that constantly appear in her work. Like a perpetuum mobile, they set chains of thoughts in motion and create a meta-level that contrasts the personal experience of the artist with that of the viewer. I would like to connect the open structure of these literary utterances – which is also conveyed typographically in the hazy if non fading script – with Wilhelm Schapp’s thoughts in his *Philosophie der Geschichten*. In this work he regards people as “entangled in stories,” not only in their own but also in those of the people around them.⁸ And it becomes apparent that every story is by necessity ambiguous and that the reading depends on one’s standpoint. Applied to the sections of phrases and texts in Bünter’s works, they mark the beginning of a story which we can, as it were share, but which is taken in differently by each recipient. The basis for such differences lies in memory.



3 Friedrich Schiller, *Letters On The Aesthetical Education Of Man*, Letter XV, trans. Tapio Riikonen and David Widger, *In Aesthetical Essays of Friedrich Schiller*, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6798/6798-h/6798-h.htm> (accessed 19.08.2012)

4 *ibid.*

5 *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, ed. Karlheinz Barck et al, Stuttgart and Weimar 2003/2010, 7 vols., here vol. 5, pp. 577–618.

6 Cf. Rebekka Hufendiek’s essay “Draw a Distinction. Die vielfältigen Funktionen des Zeichnens als Formen des Extended Mind”, in: Ulrike Feist/Markus Rath (eds.), *Et in imagine ego. Facetten von Bildakt und Verkörperung [Festgabe für Horst Bredekamp]*, Berlin 2012, pp. 441–466, in particular p. 452.

7 Cf. Friedrich Weltzien, “Von Cozens bis Kerner. Der Fleck als Transformator ästhetischer Erfahrung”, in: *Ästhetische Erfahrung. Gegenstände, Konzepte, Geschichtlichkeit*, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 626, der Freien Universität Berlin 2006, pp. 1–15.

8 Wilhelm Schapp, *Philosophie der Geschichten*, Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 4 ff. See also the chapter “Die moderne Geschichtslosigkeit und die Frage nach der Zukunft des Erzählens” in: Odo Marquard, *Skepsis in der Moderne. Philosophische Studien*, Stuttgart 2007, pp. 64–66.

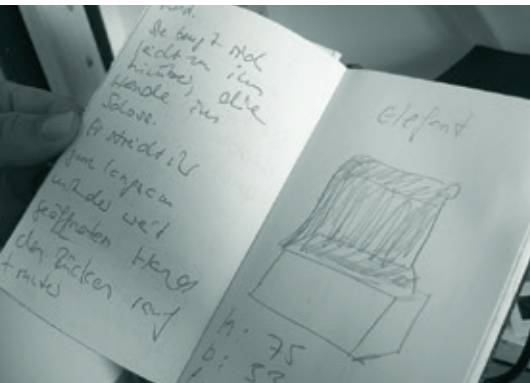
Remembering

Writing is of course one of the oldest means of storing memories.⁹ Through the accessibility this grants, they are simultaneously retrievable and communicable, and can be fixed. With the invention of the daguerreotype, another important medium for conserving memory came to be added in the nineteenth century: photography. But what conditions must be met in order to visually convey – not only by drawing, but also by photography and language – the indeterminacy and equivalence between the insignificant and the significant¹⁰ that it is so important for memory?

In Bünter's rubber prints we constantly find rear-on views, those ruminating representatives of the viewer in the picture.¹¹ Their depersonalised form in an obscured picture space and the washes in the pallid colours of a paintbox that has been left too long in the sun, are the techniques she uses for the memorative structures that are employed. For her photographs Bünter turns to manipulations performed during the printing stage. The documents from the family album in what today is a quite uncustomary, minute format actually make the photographically recorded object quite unrecognisable. Yet regardless of how close we get to these photos they retain their distance and disclose themselves as the failed attempts at a reproduced story. Memory needs a stimulus. Ultimately Bünter finds the trigger in the texts, which resemble passages from a story while ignoring its inner structure and consistency. It is only logical that she has now also turned to the ultimate medium for recording memory: film.

The complex canon of remembering has left a deep mark on the subjective mind. But it is not the artist as diviner, as author of her own biography that is central to her work, but rather the approximation to an object of our experience, which as a phenomenon requires mediation and order.

The work of art, which does justice to the superiority of art over history¹² in its claim to immediacy and synchronicity, emulates the process of memory and allows us to participate.



9 Sigrd Schade/Silke Wenk, *Studien zur visuellen Kultur. Einführung in ein transdisziplinäres Forschungsfeld*, Bielefeld 2011, cf chapter III, "Mediengeschichte und Medialität der Geschichtsschreibung", pp. 128–131, in particular p. 129 ff.

10 Aleida Assmann speaks in her essay "Individuelles und kollektives Gedächtnis-Formen, Funktionen und Medien" of changing structures of relevancy and patterns of evaluation, in: *Das Gedächtnis der Kunst. Geschichte und Erinnerung in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, Kurt Wettengl (ed.), Frankfurt am Main 2000, pp. 21–28, here p. 21.

11 Regine Prange, "Sinnoffenheit und Sinnverneinung als metapicturale Prinzipien. Zur Historizität bildlicher Selbstreferenz am Beispiel der Rückenfigur", in: Verena Krieger/Rachel Mader (eds.), *Ambiguität in der Kunst. Typen und Funktionen eines ästhetischen Paradigmas*, Cologne and Weimar 2010, pp. 125–168, in particular p. 151 ff.

12 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Bildkunst und Wortkunst", in: Gottfried Boehm (ed.), *Was ist ein Bild?* Munich 1994, pp. 90–104, in particular p. 91.