

A PASSION FOR DRAWING

THE GUERLAIN COLLECTION
FROM THE CENTRE POMPIDOU PARIS

Exhibition Facts

Press conference	10 October 2019 10 am
Eröffnung	10 October 2019 18.30 pm
Dauer	11 October 2019 – 26 January 2020
Venue	Tietze Galleries
Curator	Elsy Lahner, ALBERTINA
Works	150
Artists	20
Catalogue	Available for EUR 29,90 (English & German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via www.albertina.at

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A Passion for Drawing

The Guerlain Collection from the Centre Pompidou Paris

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Drawing has never been so multifaceted and diverse as today. Never have artists resorted to so many different formats and techniques, never has the genre been reconsidered and redefined in so many directions. Artists devise and use their own methods to address their themes: ink is extracted from root beer; drawings are covered with beeswax; their surfaces are treated with an electric sander. Drawing on paper has long ceased to be a prerequisite. One can just as well draw on the wall, or a line may be drawn with wire instead of a pencil. Formally, anything is possible: from delicate and meticulous to gestural and expressive, from geometric abstraction to photorealism. Drawings are inspired by construction plans and architectural sketches, by children's book illustrations, comics, or graffiti. Artists draw their motifs from our history of art and culture or borrow from television, the Internet, and newspapers. Drawing enables them to explore new ways and perspectives to translate complex thoughts, capture fleeting impressions, or tell stories.

In the mid-1980s, the diversity and broad spectrum of drawing sparked the enthusiasm of the French collectors Florence and Daniel Guerlain. Over the years, their passion has led to the compilation of one of the most prestigious collections of contemporary drawings, featuring many of the world's leading artists. In 2012 the couple donated a major part of their works to the Centre Pompidou in Paris. From this collection we are presenting works by twenty artists illustrating the idiosyncrasies of drawing in the twenty-first century and offering a representative overview of current discourse. Once again the Albertina Museum explores drawing, which may be today's most innovative and open discipline in visual arts.

Especially for the exhibition at the ALBERTINA Museum, Nedko Solakov realized his *Albertinadoodles*. With these drawings, Solakov leaves the dimension of the paper. He regards real space as the home of his figures. Executed in black permanent marker, his figures end up on walls and in corners as unexpected and ironic commentaries on the given space and situation, where they wait to be discovered by the viewers.

Artists: Mark Dion, Marcel Dzama, Marcel van Eeden, Catharina van Eetvelde, Jana Gunstheimer, Erik van Lieshout, Robert Longo, David Nash, Cornelia Parker, Joyce Pensato, Chloe Piene, Pavel Pepperstein, Javier Pérez, Anne-Marie Schneider, Kiki Smith, Nedko Solakov, Renie Spoelstra, Aya Takano, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, Jorinde Voigt

Wall Texts

Mark Dion

Born 1961 in New Bedford, Massachusetts, USA. Lives in New York City, USA, and works worldwide.

Mark Dion is an ardent collector who has made his passion the subject of his work. In his installations he arranges objects in display cabinets and showcases according to his own criteria and systems of classification. He often works with artifacts from museums and other collections and is particularly interested in zoology, botany, and archaeology. Dion questions objective scientific methodology as the only valid approach to interpreting the world. He investigates how museums and educational institutions shape our understanding of history, biology, and other sciences. Dion understands nature as a cultural construct.

Drawings have become an integral part of Mark Dion's work. Detailed and precise, they portray his typical settings: the *Bureau of Remote Wildlife Surveillance*, for example, was in fact realized. All objects, from the coffee cup to the table fan, are rendered with utmost precision. In *The Return – A Microcosmological Cabinet for New South Wales*, Mark Dion deals with the exploitation of Australia by Europe. The *Musée départemental Arles antique* actually exists: Dion reconstructed it and committed it to paper. Depictions of wildlife reflect Dion's interest in ecological themes as he visualizes their living conditions in an environment appropriated by humans. Executed in red and blue colored pencil, Dion's drawings are in part reminiscent of naïve children's drawings. The two colors convey something didactic and call to mind ledgers, where the use of the red and blue pencil is also familiar. The duality of the two colors also illustrates the poles of true and false.

Marcel Dzama

Born 1974 in Winnipeg, Canada. Lives and works in New York City, USA.

Something out of a Bad Dream is the title of a work by Marcel Dzama that is exemplary of the artist's production in general. Like in a dream, various sequences coincide, resulting in a bizarre overall picture. Temporal levels overlap, physical laws are undermined, and proportions are ignored. People—it is unclear from which epoch they originate or whether they have sprung from a film, play, or fairy tale—go about their business, undisturbed by what is going on around them.

For his watercolor and ink drawings, Marcel Dzama uses such earthy colors as brown, ochre, khaki, mustard yellow, or wine red on unbleached paper. He makes the ink himself from root beer. Dzama's reduced color palette recalls the sepia tone of old photographs, giving the impression that the drawings date from another age.

Marcel Dzama positions his figures against an empty background, in an undefined space—a compositional form that can also be found in Inuit art, which is only one of the many references from which Dzama draws his inspiration.

In contrast, his drawn collages are much denser and could have originated from a notebook in which the artist records his dreams, nightmares, and horrific visions. Handwritten entries are supplemented by cut-up text. Here as well, the varied content forms a structure that invites associative and intuitive interpretation.

Marcel van Eeden

Born 1965 in The Hague, Netherlands. Lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland, in Karlsruhe, Germany and in The Hague, Netherlands.

Marcel van Eeden relies on an extensive picture archive consisting of antiquarian printed matter. All of his pictorial material dates from the time before his birth. It does not illustrate historically significant milestones or celebrities but concentrates on things that cannot be recognized, mostly on pictures of happenings and people that have meanwhile fallen into oblivion. Browsing through his material, Marcel van Eeden selects motifs and combines them. Subsequently he translates them into the medium of drawing. The artist works with a Nero pencil, a deep black, oil-based chalk pencil that lends itself to the creation of moods and effects. He frequently also uses text, which he positions like in a comic strip.

For the series *Corrections* Marcel van Eeden works with *errata* slips from art catalogs. There is no obvious thematic connection between corrections and image, yet viewers are free to discover something for themselves.

The series *Cat 9: Explosions* is part of an extensive group of drawings divided into categories and subcategories. The series always begin with a sheet bearing solely the title of the category or subcategory, followed by a varying number of drawings. For example, category *Cat 3: Art* has the subcategory *Cat 3.1.3: Landscapes*. The series *Explosions* only consists of a main category as of yet, although additional subdivisions would be conceivable for the artist.

Catharina van Eetvelde

Born 1967 in Ghent, Belgium. Lives and works in Paris, France.

For Catharina van Eetvelde, drawing is a form of communicating, a way of thinking. It is not only the basis of her artistic production, her most important means of expression, but also a fundamental attitude, almost a state of consciousness that defines how she experiences and explores the world and makes things comprehensible for herself. Through drawing, the artist comes into contact with her surroundings. Having grown up in a scientific environment, it was the artist's early desire to bring the scientific and the non-scientific together; to tell of a world in which the rational and the irrational can coexist.

Her drawings are thus reminiscent of equations and chemical formulas, experiments or technical drawings for which a legend to decipher them does not exist.

In recent years, Catharina van Eetvelde has conceived numerous drawings on the computer or on a drawing pad and has then either translated them into animations or meticulously transferred them onto paper by hand. The drawings are so delicate and fragmented that they appear to be plotted.

Jana Gunstheimer

Born 1974 in Zwickau, Germany. Lives and works in Jena, Germany.

In her work, Jana Gunstheimer invites the viewer to constantly question reality. In the series *Methods of Destruction* she makes use of known works of art. Copying them in great detail and true to scale, she also invents a story for each of them, describing how the picture was damaged or destroyed. In the drawn copies, this fictitious act of destruction becomes visible and traceable.

Nanna as Virginia or Black Lady is an oil painting by Anselm Feuerbach from 1861. In Jana Gunstheimer's drawn version she reports how the work was found damaged in Hitler's Führer headquarters in Munich at the end of World War II. Looters had cut Nanna's head out of the picture. According to Jana Gunstheimer, Claude Lorrain's pencil drawing for his *Landscape with Hagar and the Angel* from 1646 was irreversibly destroyed by the wife of a collector in 1825: wishing to express herself artistically, she erased the middle section of Lorrain's drawing and replaced it with her own drawing.

The Kiss is part of a larger group of works entitled *Image in Meditation*, which is concerned with the humanization of artworks. Characteristics such as fatigue, lack of motivation, and self-doubt encroach upon the works and lead to psychological or physical changes. In *The Kiss* Gunstheimer has combined two preliminary studies by Adolph Menzel: having turned the depiction of the woman over, she mounted it mouth to mouth to the front side of the depiction of the man. The couple has thus overcome the obstacle of space in order to reunite in a kiss.

Erik van Lieshout

Born 1968 in Deurne, Netherlands. Lives and works in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Erik van Lieshout focuses on the society in which he lives, on marginal phenomena and those that become visible through collective coexistence in urban space. In his films he deals with the living conditions in working-class neighborhoods, the position of outsiders and minorities, conflicts with the state and bureaucracy, and the gentrification of urban districts. His drawings are created in preparation for or parallel to his films but represent an autonomous position within his artistic oeuvre.

They monumentalize a particular filmic moment or deepen partial aspects. Usually in the form of mixed media with charcoal, oil or acrylic paint, watercolor, and collage, they are limited to a few colored accents. Using an expressive and sketchy drawing style, the artist expresses socio-political frictions.

Erik van Lieshout often depicts himself and people from his surroundings, in addition to people he encounters during film projects and people he observes by chance. Well-known characters, superheroes, and musicians also appear in his works. *Tim Dog* is an example. This very early drawing depicts the eponymous US-American rapper who in the 1990s caused an uproar with his hostile songs.

In 2005 Erik van Lieshout tried to overcome a personal crisis with the help of psychotherapy. The works dating from this period deal with psychological illness and personality disorders. With the image of a skydiver he conveys the feeling of being exposed and the helplessness experienced by people suffering from depression. By contrast, the ride in a hot-air balloon symbolizes the unbelievable highs characteristic of mania. And a man in a bar is so convinced of himself that his “big balls” literally hang to the ground.

Robert Longo

Born 1953 in New York City, USA, where he lives and works.

Robert Longo is famous for his monumental photorealistic charcoal drawings. They are mostly powerful, dynamic images fascinating us with their stunning technique and impressive motifs. Robert Longo captures situations in the greatest moment of tension, their emotional climax. With this approach, the artist is interested in pointing out socio-political circumstances and power structures.

The studies on display here provide insight into the artist’s working process. Their margins are white, as they were taped to protect them from the charcoal dust. The artist uses these drawings to test the composition and study the effect of light and shadow. Robert Longo uses images with which we are familiar from published photographs that have become part of today’s popular culture. By translating them into his drawings, he highlights themes to which we tend to close our eyes.

He underlines their relevance for society, such as in the case of a secret meeting of Ku Klux Klan members or the bombardment of Baghdad. In the *God Machines* cycle, Longo deals with the three great monotheistic world religions: each of the drawings depicts a site of religious pilgrimage, such as the Western Wall in Jerusalem in the present case.

David Nash

Born 1945 in Esher, Surrey, England. Lives and works in Blaenau Ffestiniog, Wales.

David Nash makes use of the medium of drawing for the purpose of documentation and to transfer his three-dimensional sculptures onto the two-dimensional plane. *Village Husk* refers to photographic images of a village in the Middle East that was destroyed during war in 1987. At first Nash made an installation of twenty-six blocks of charred maple. In turn, the drawing relates back to this installation: the charcoal, now used as drawing material, echoes the blackness and dryness of the charred wood and calls to mind the sooty debris of what used to be a village.

In addition to autonomous individual objects, the repetition of forms arranged to create dome compositions is a characteristic feature of Nash's work. Numerous smaller elements reminiscent of rock formations build up to form a larger whole, as in the drawing *Red Dome*, which refers to an installation of the same name from 2006.

Cornelia Parker

Born 1956 in Cheshire, England. Lives and works in London, England.

Cornelia Parker is best known for her large-scale installations. Many of her conceptual works can also be understood as drawings. Employing unconventional tools, she explores entirely new terrain for the genre of drawing.

For her *Wire Drawings*, the artist melts down metal objects and draws them into wire. The metal is drawn to the desired length and thickness by a so-called drawing plate, passing through a series of ever-smaller holes. In *Three Fathoms and a Thimble* it is a silver thimble threaded as wire through the eye of a sewing needle. In *Measuring Niagara with a Teaspoon*, a teaspoon has become wire the length of which corresponds to the height of the Niagara Falls. The *Bullet Drawings* on display here also belong to this series of works: Cornelia Parker melted down .44 Magnum revolver bullets and constructed fragile grids with the wire thus gained. These abstract geometric structures float, framed between glass, in three-dimensional space, thereby casting a shadow on the surface behind them. From a distance, wire and shadow appear like fine pencil drawings in which the murderous power of their source material can no longer be discerned. The title is a play on words alluding both to the genre of drawing and the drawing of wire.

Joyce Pensato

Born 1941 in New York City, USA, where she died in June 2019.

Joyce Pensato already took to drawing cartoon figures in the 1970s. Her huge collection of toy figures, which she found in the streets among discarded junk or bought at Internet auctions, served as her models. Layers of black and white charcoal and chalk applied in erratic gestures cause the outlines of her protagonists to blur. Pigments have been erased, she has wet the paper or distressed it with an electric sander, creating holes and tears. Despair, anger, disappointment, apathy, or madness can clearly be read on the face of Mickey Mouse, a character normally associated with positive feelings.

With her motifs, Joyce Pensato referred to the icons of popular culture also referenced by Pop Art. Yet she destroyed the beautiful appearance and ruthlessly broke open the surface. Her art was inspired by the Abstract Expressionism practiced by Jackson Pollock or Sam Francis, an approach concerned with gesture and materiality. Pensato's work combines elements from these two actually diverging movements. Graffiti art is also a recognizable influence in Pensato's work: occasionally she lets her creatures appear like punk underground versions of their cartoon models.

Pavel Pepperstein

Born 1966 in Moscow, Russia, where he lives and works.

Pavel Pepperstein defies familiar categorization like no other contemporary artist. The writer, fashion designer, and rapper already sought to make his way without his country's political acceptance when the Soviet Union still existed. In his work, he equally borrows from Pop Art, political cartoons, and children's book illustrations. Russian culture meets Greek mythology or allegorical representations. Pepperstein's work is also characterized by a strong interweaving of word and image. The title of the series *Riders on the Storm*, for example, harks back to a song by The Doors, becoming an idealized symbol of revolution and change. The drawing *The Dancing Woman* is part of the series *City of Russia*, which reflects Pavel Pepperstein's concern about the gradual architectural destruction in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin, Pepperstein suggests the establishment of a new capital, geographically located between the two cities, to end the rivalry between the metropolises once and for all. In the design of this city, the artist gives free rein to his imagination, creating a city with pyramids, Malevich towers, and Kandinsky skyscrapers. Mother Russia, the woman with a red headscarf, protectively spreads her skirt over the city to shield it from looming destruction. Having donned different costumes in other works, she dances with an extraterrestrial or with the personification of America.

Javier Pérez

Born 1968 in Bilbao, Spain. Lives and works in Barcelona, Spain.

In his work, Javier Pérez deals with such processes as becoming, growing, change, and decay. He creates hybrids of plants and animals—entities that start from a given form and are transformed, developing growths and shoots. The series *Primigenios*, which consists of ten drawings, is based on sculptures the artist created using both organic materials like intestines, skin, or hair and solid materials, such as bronze, iron, or porcelain. The duality of these materials is reflected in the drawings. Pérez used parchment—animal skin—as a support, as well as mineral pigments. *Primigenio* means primitive and primal, from which modifications may take form. The drawings depict metamorphoses between animals and plants dissolving to recombine in new structures: an exploration of the fragility of existence.

Chloe Piene

Born 1972 in Stamford, Connecticut, USA. Lives and works in New York City, USA.

Chloe Piene already began exploring the human body when still a child. She asked herself what characterized her as a human being, what defined her body in its substance. She has remained true to this theme to this day: the human physique is her main subject. For the artist, the skeleton provides a basic structure on which to support the body—a substructure that is not visible but carries everything. The boundaries between anatomy and exteriority, between the visible and the invisible, become blurred and are reversed.

Vesper depicts a kneeling woman. As the figure is shown frontally, the lower legs are not visible; the same holds true for the head, which is leaning backward. Only a few lines delineate the arms, which are reminiscent of wings. The focus is on the devout woman's body. In its composition and powerful, albeit disciplined linearity, the depiction is reminiscent of works by Austrian fin-de-siècle artist Egon Schiele. Piene, however, does not lose herself in a detailed rendering of genitals, leaving out these parts of personal intimacy.

Piene is interested in exposing hidden structures with her drawings. This is reflected by her choice of materials. By drawing on transparent vellum as in the work *2 Heads*, she makes the outer shell permeable and thus questions the existence of what is ostensibly evident.

Anne-Marie Schneider

Born 1962 in Chauny, France. Lives and works in Paris, France.

Anne-Marie Schneider is a master of visual reflection. She draws daily like others keep a diary. When drawing, the artist allows her thoughts to flow and depicts her everyday life as she subconsciously perceives it. Complex personality structures or human relationships are translated into simplified forms. Using pencil and ink, acrylic, or watercolor, she puts lines and flat shapes onto the paper with ease. Her drawings are minimalistic and explicitly figurative. She chooses cropped perspectives so that the motifs cannot always be identified. The backgrounds remain empty—the artist does without narrative contexts.

The result is an overall structure, a rhythm of motifs and empty spaces in which all parts are related to one another and convey a common context. In this way, Anne-Marie Schneider reflects an enigmatic, personal, and intimate universe, which she contrasts with reality.

Kiki Smith

Born 1954 in Nuremberg, Germany. Lives and works in New York City, USA.

Humans and the human body, mostly the woman's body, are in the focus of Kiki Smith's versatile production. With her art she responds to social issues of her time, such as the discourse on sexuality, gender, and identity, as well as feminist themes.

Since the early 1990s Kiki Smith has dealt with the coexistence of humans and animals. History, Christian and other religious iconography, legends, fairy tales, and mythology mingle in her narratives, in which ultimately everything becomes interwoven. Birds are often found in Kiki Smith's works, such as in *Woman with Bird*. They visualize the world's beauty and for the artist also symbolize souls leaving their physical shell from time to time.

Whisper Drawing is part of a series of drawings based on the artist's sculptures of yelling or whispering figures. The heads touch, with the mouth of one figure being close to the ear of the other. Kiki Smith starts out from the subject, from personal experience. She has drawn on delicate, handmade paper that appears to be organic, almost like skin. It thus conveys the sensitivity and vulnerability of all living things.

During a short phase of her work, from 2000 to 2002, Kiki Smith concentrated on the relationship between woman and animal, expressing her reverence for nature on the one hand while analyzing matters of hierarchies, role allocation, and (sexual) identity on the other. In *Tiger Biting Neck* she shows a naked woman fearlessly interacting with a tiger. The figure resembles the artist herself. She represents herself as a companion and questions the roles of enemy and victim.

Nedko Solakov

Born 1957 in Cherven Bryag, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Nedko Solakov tells stories using the most diverse media. However, drawings form the foundation of his work. They describe brief, mostly absurd episodes with unexpected twists, partly things experienced in everyday life, partly complex socio-political circumstances. His later drawings have been combined with texts: neither do they explain the image nor does the image illustrate the text. Solakov always works in series, and although every drawing represents an autonomous story, together they also form a narrative when arranged in a particular sequence.

With four *Subreality Bites*, the artist grants us insight into a peculiar sub-reality. In his *Misbehaving Stories*, stories become protagonists in their own right. They behave badly, are offensive or naughty: for example, an older story almost spoils a family celebration; thirteen fairy tales are threatened to be abandoned by their mutual hero, which unsettles the prevalent fairy-tale order; slipping away from its storyteller, a cheerful story turns into a sad one, which is tragically hardly noticed by the sole listener.

Renie Spoelstra

Born 1974 in Drachten, Netherlands. Lives and works in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Renie Spoelstra draws landscapes. She discovers them in photographs or in film footage or specifically searches for places she then visits herself. The artist photographs and films these places from various perspectives, at different times of day and with the changing light. The resulting visual material forms the basis of her drawings.

The artist works with charcoal, which she applies to the paper in multiple layers. A lighter type of charcoal derives from willows, whereas American charcoal is made from cedar, its pigments being more saturated and darker. Siberian chalk, by contrast, has a metallic effect and tends to be bluish, sealing the surface. Spoelstra applies loose charcoal powder with cotton balls, and with sponges and goose feathers she defines portions and sets lines.

The results resemble cinematic scenes that could have been shot by David Lynch or Alfred Hitchcock. The dark depictions have something sinister and uncanny about them. Through shades of gray and the use of light Spoelstra creates the impression as if something were lurking beneath the surface or hiding in the dark. Although the landscapes are created by the human hand and identified as properties offered for sale by their sober titles, all of these pictures are devoid of people. The artist fathoms the paradox between natural and cultivated scenery, treating the latter as grown natural landscapes in her depictions.

Aya Takano

Born 1976 in Saitama, Japan. Lives and works in Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan.

Together with Takashi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara, Aya Takano belongs to the Superflat movement in Japan. In her works she unites high culture with subculture and thus speaks to a broad audience. Dealing with Japanese postwar culture, consumerism, idols and pop stars, science fiction, and pornography, she bridges the gap between traditional cultural concepts and popular culture.

In her series of drawings *The Old Days Before the War*, Aya Takano explores Japanese society before World War II. She juxtaposes role models of the past with contemporary ones and expresses her wish to break loose from prescriptions and restraints in order to pave the way for an unburdened future. With their huge eyes and elongated bodies, her delicate, androgynous figures resemble typical manga characters. Through a slight reddening of their joints and limbs, Takano suggests the vulnerability of adolescents. Her figures float in empty space, weightless and timeless. Watery, almost transparent, they lack solid bodies and elude gender attributions. The artist sees her figures as symbolic representations of particular existences.

Sandra Vásquez de la Horra

Born 1967 in Viña del Mar, Chile. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

Sandra Vásquez de la Horra production is rooted in the culture of Latin America and the history of her native Chile. Traditions and myths, superstition, Catholicism, the effects of colonialism, and the dictatorship of the Pinochet regime are all literally reflected in her work. But she also borrows from ancient Greek mythology or finds inspiration in her own memories. Her drawings are populated by people and animals, hybrid creatures, deities and spirits, heroes and anti-heroes. Death is omnipresent, personified by the figure of Santa Muerte, a skeleton in women's clothing with or without a scythe who is venerated in Mexico and Central and South America and called on for love, happiness, and health.

Sandra Vásquez de la Horra uses graphite and colored pencil and places her figures in the center of the paper. She often adds the handwritten titles of her works in large letters, which makes the drawings look like illustrations for books or posters. She draws on found paper, such as old account books from former East Germany. The drawing process ends with the artist dipping the sheet in melted beeswax. On the one hand, the wax makes the paper appear older and more fragile; on the other hand, it forms a protective layer that encloses and preserves the drawing.

When presenting her work, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra arranges the individual drawings in various groups, so-called "clouds," in which large and small formats tell their own stories.

Jorinde Voigt

Born 1977 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

The horizon is the dividing line between the earth and the sky. It serves as an aid for the orientation of human perception and is dependent on the conditions of the landscape, as well as the spectator's position and height. Jorinde Voigt considers how the horizon line changes from the point of view of a moving observer and what forms it could take in the process. In her horizon drawings she goes through various possibilities and also includes the possible color spectrum of the horizon.

In her *Symphony Studies*, Jorinde Voigt analyzes the energy and oscillation of music and depicts them in an imaginary space of musical possibilities in which several parameters such as melody, rests, rhythm, repetition, vantage point, or cardinal direction interact.

In her works, Jorinde Voigt investigates scientific processes such as thermal movements, the beats of a pulse, or the flights of eagles, but also deals with pop songs and kissing couples. Her drawings are visualizations of thought processes. She does not, however, translate actual scientific investigations into drawings. Instead, they are graphic representations through which she makes facts and dynamic systems comprehensible to herself. The artist strives to enable a different perspective on complex structures of action and on the world in all its intricacies and simultaneity. In her representations, she subjects herself to self-imposed rules, algorithms, and encodings. Here, mathematical meticulousness meets artistic freedom.

Florence and Daniel Guerlain in Conversation with Elsy Lahner

Elsy Lahner (EL): Why did you focus on drawing in your collection? As you have also collected paintings, sculptures, and photography, what is it that fascinates you in particular about drawing?

Florence Guerlain (FG): We have been collectors of every kind of art for thirty years or so. When we decided to change the public face of our foundation, located quite far from Paris in the countryside, we created the Contemporary Drawing Prize which brought us closer to artists using this medium and led to our buying more works on paper. For Daniel, drawing is the first gesture in any creation, which is fascinating. We could certainly not imagine living without being surrounded by art. Drawings are more sensitive, with regards to conservation issues, and cannot be shown in just any context, so that makes our universe considerably smaller.

EL: In which kinds of activities is your foundation involved? What is its role?

Daniel Guerlain (DG): Our foundation is the sole entity which supports the Contemporary Drawing Prize created thirteen years ago. However, as we have a circle of friends with over two hundred fifty members, we organize round-table discussions, visits to exhibitions, and trips abroad to discover and visit various art sites, museums, and private collections. In September, we will take a group to Houston to see the new Menil Drawing Institute. For the opening at the ALBERTINA, forty friends from the members circle will come to see the exhibition and discover a few magical places in Vienna.

EL: Do you research an artist over a longer period of time, or do you rather buy pieces of art spontaneously?

DG: I would say both. For instance, we have bought a great deal of work by Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, Marcel van Eeden, and Pavel Pepperstein, as well as others, and then single pieces by Martin Dammann and Richard Prince. Either way, we tend to buy spontaneously.

EL: How important is the general recognition of an artist in making your decision?

FG: We don't concern ourselves with that. Whether famous or not, we buy work if the artist fully complements the rest of the collection.

EL: Do you buy works from the same artists over time?

DG: If you look at our donation closely, you will be able to see that we follow certain artists, such as Silvia Bächli and Anne-Marie Schneider, and many others, while others not. If we want to have a beautiful collection, all the drawings must be of excellent quality. And that does not always happen!

EL: You both like to travel, and your collection is very international. Where do you discover your artists?

FG: We go to galleries, museums, and the homes of collectors in search of artists with whom we fall in love.

EL: Do you travel a lot to see exhibitions of “your” artists and to get to know others?

DG: We don’t travel specifically to see our artists. We go and see them whenever they are shown in either a solo or a group exhibition.

EL: To me, the proportion of female to male artists seems to be very balanced in your collection. Is that something of which you are mindful when acquiring new works?

DG: No, when we buy works of any kind, we evaluate the quality, the sensation we feel inside when we see them. We don’t first calculate to see if the work is by a woman artist or a man. We amused our- selves by looking at the comprehensive catalogue to find the actual balance. Of about 200 artists, 136 are men and 54 are women. For the Drawing Prize, 17 have been women and 19 men—almost on par.

EL: And in our exhibition, we are showing the work of eleven women out of twenty artists in total. For the Contemporary Drawing Prize, what exactly is the committee’s role?

FG: For the first meeting, each member of the selection committee brings information on a list of artists they would like to see considered. We eliminate a number of them for various reasons and then, when we have around six or seven artists about whom we are almost all in agreement, we travel to visit them in their studios. Together, we then vote to keep three of them, and we announce the names in December in the chapel of the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts during a reception which brings together the friends of our foundation, curators, sponsors, the members of the selection committee, and the nine members of the jury, five French and four foreign members, who change every year.

EL: And then these three artists present their work in front of the jury, which then selects the winner?

DG: The three artists come to explain their work to the nine jury members, each for thirty minutes, in front of their works, which have been hung for the occasion in the Salon du dessin, where we have a dedicated space for our prize. The members of the jury will have received information regarding the artists’ work; and if they wished, they will have had the opportunity to visit the artists in their studios.

The vote is conducted by secret ballot and is recorded by our board of directors, which counts the number of votes each artist receives and keeps the name of the winner secret until it is officially announced at the Palais Brongniart during the Semaine du dessin, Paris's "Drawing Week," traditionally held in March. The winner receives € 15,000, while the other two finalists receive € 5,000. And each of them is given a very beautiful bottle with the Guerlain bees of Eau Impériale, a magnum of Ruinart champagne, and a liter of Beluga Gold Line vodka. For us, each of the artists chosen is a potential winner. They have the same value in our eyes once the members of the selection committee, of which we are a part, give their votes. There is no first place, second or third. One last thing, the board of directors provides its opinion and its consent regarding the purchase of work by the winner, which the foundation offers to the Musée national d'art moderne.

EL: In current discourse, contemporary drawing is defined more openly. A line in space can be a drawing just as an animated film can be a drawing in motion. What is your definition of drawing?

DG: Fred Sandback with a line in space, William Kentridge with his filmed drawings, Cornelia Parker with her wirework in projected shadows are for us drawing artists. Incidentally, we regret not having bought work by Kentridge earlier.

EL: Those great Bullet Drawings by Cornelia Parker are also part of our presentation at the ALBERTINA. Nevertheless, I have the impression that you generally acquire drawings based on paper. Would you agree?

FG: Generally we acquire drawings based on paper, but we have some exceptions in the collection, like Susan Hefuna who sews on fabric; Catharina van Eetvelde who works with linen, silk, cardboard, cotton, paper, all mixed; Philippe Favier who draws on glass and slate writing tablets; Rob Wynne who uses thread sewn on tracing paper; Wei Qingji who draws on newspaper mounted on silk; Jessica Stockholder creates textile collages; Daniel Tremblay uses beads on tammy cloth; David Webster draws on x-rays; Wim Delvoye tattoos the skin of pigs; there is Christo and his wrappings; Giuseppe Penone and his charcoal prints and tape under glass; Bernard Moninot uses acrylic and lamp black on glass; Cathryn Boch uses a lot of threads sewn into paper; Omar Ba, who we have followed from the start, draws on corrugated fiberboard; Roger Ackling focused sunlight to burn wood.

EL: You prefer collecting series of works, a greater number and smaller in size, rather than a large drawing. Do you see it that way?

FG: I have no real explanation beyond that it is easier to look at a series of smaller works than to hang huge drawings like the ones that we were able to buy from the Swedish artist Erik Dietman or from Françoise Vergier.

EL: Let's talk about the artists whose works can be seen at the ALBERTINA. Robert Longo is best known for his large-scale charcoal drawings. You have some really wonderful studies by him. Have you ever been tempted to buy one of his large drawings?

DG: Longo's studies interest us more than the very large formats because, apart from the fact that the latter are not drawn by him alone, we find there is an intimacy, a sensitivity, and a beauty in the small formats that we don't find in the large drawings.

EL: The works of Jorinde Voigt have been on display at Art Basel for several years now. You have some earlier works from 2009 and 2010 in the collection. Did you already buy these then? When did you get to know her work?

FG: We discovered Jorinde Voigt's work at Madame Hoffman's home during a visit to her collection. There were four black-and-white drawings with a great—and very moving—plastic simplicity. They appealed to Daniel immediately, and very quickly we bought works by this artist. At the Salon du dessin in the Paris Bourse, there was a gallerist next to our space, and on the last day we went to speak to him. I lifted a small curtain, and there we discovered four marvellous drawings by Jorinde Voigt which we bought. We have been following her work ever since.

EL: For our exhibition, Nedko Solakov will draw some of his “doodles” on the walls in addition to his works we are showing from your collection. Did you ever think about buying these kinds of site-specific work for yourselves or have you ever commissioned specific drawings? If not, why not?

DG: Never. We have never commissioned works on paper from any artist. There is no reason for that, which should not be interpreted as our not having a willingness to do so.

EL: How did the donation to the Centre Pompidou come about?

FG: Alfred Pacquement, Director of the Musée national d'art moderne, was going to retire in 2013, so we decided to donate part of our drawing collection to the museum. The opportunity arose with the departure of the director to whom we wished to give this present. In 2012, Jonas Storsve, the curator of the Graphic Art Collection at the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, in Paris, came to choose the drawings he wanted to see in the museum's collection and selected 1,200 of them. We are very happy about it. The exhibition of a portion of the drawings has been a great pleasure for us.

EL: What are some of the treasures you still have in your collection?

DG: Of course, among nearly four hundred drawings, we still have some treasures, such as a series of drawings by Giuseppe Penone, Etel Adnan, Marwan [Kassab-Bachi], Afrika [Sergei Bugaev], Olga Chernysheva, Omar Ba, Pavel Pepperstein, Viktor Pivovarov, Javier Pérez, from whom we purchased our first series of fifty-two drawings, Friedrich Kunath. . . . It is really quite difficult, almost painful, to place one above the others.

EL: How do you perceive your role as patrons of the arts?

DG: That role has been thrust upon us in the eyes of others. We are greatly honored, but we do not benefit from it at all.

EL: In retrospect, what are some of the specific tendencies or developments that you have personally witnessed with regard to the medium of drawing in the last three decades since you started collecting works on paper?

FG: One could say that in the past there were movements that grouped artists together, such as fauvism, impressionism, Supports/ Surfaces much later, and many others in France, the Russian avant-garde, German expressionism, surrealism, which brought together visual artists and writers from multiple countries. These days, the art market, the Internet, have created an individualism among artists that is disarming.

EL: What does this specific presentation of highlights from your collection at the ALBERTINA mean to you? What is its significance?

FG: The exhibition at the ALBERTINA of a selection from the donation which we made to the Centre Pompidou brings us immense pleasure and a great sense of pride because this museum is the most important museum in the world for its collections, its drawings are known the whole world over. It is a great honor and a major acknowledgment which warms our hearts. This museum has shown such a great interest in exhibiting the collection, which we have developed over all these years, showing that it is of the highest quality. We are very proud.