The Big Sky (Diminished)
Notes on Bettina Carl's Drawings

In a short, unfinished text pondering the relation of painting and drawing, Walter Benjamin proposes a "highly important and extensive distinction within the graphic arts". "The study of a head, or a landscape by Rembrandt", he argues, "may rightfully be contemplated the way a painting is", whereas it would deny "the inherent sense" of a child's drawing, for example, or certain modern graphics, "to put them vertically in front of oneself". What we encounter here is "a deep, essential problem of the visual arts". According to Benjamin, "one may assume two sections that cut through the world's substance: firstly, the longitudinal cut done in painting, and secondly, the cross-section as found in certain graphics. The slicing seems to effect representation, to somehow contain the things, while the cross-section's quality is rather symbolic: it contains signs." [1]

Thus, we consider two distinct dimensions of an image. Verticality is associated with a painting fixed on a wall, and with the display of depictions. Then there is the drawing paper: defined horizontally and spread out on a table, it offers signs to be read. On the one hand, a painter wishing to thrust his vantage point upon the viewer may mount his easel right in front of the motif to be caught. A draughtperson's operation, on the other hand, is closer to writing: his horizontal progress on the paper's surface results in a linear abstraction of the motif. The two cuts or dimensions are associated with either a painter's method or a graphic principle. Nevertheless, all visual forms to some extent may draw on both these dimensions, regardless of which mode seems to predominate in a particular image. Among architectural drawings, for example, one finds vertical 'representations' as much as horizontal 'codes': Walter Benjamin's "longitudinal cut" would correspond with a sheer plan presenting us the building's outward form as we would see it *in situ*, while the horizontal cut as reified in a floor plan is not a copy of anything visible: it asks to be read, not be to contemplated.

Obviously, Bettina Carl's *Big Sky: Uster* (2007) prompts the viewer to approach the drawing as if it were a painting. The format of almost 80 x 60 in. already discourages us from spreading the paper flat on a table. Moreover, the title suggests the work's motif is a landscape, which also befits the vertical character of painting. Therefore we expect here to witness the figuration of a wide sky and a suburb of Zurich, within an image adjusted to the same phenomenological axis that links an upright body to the world. Hence, such an image would show the horizon as a level line, and placed at a height that would seem convenient in our visual field.

At first sight, *Big Sky: Uster* does actually meet such expectations. Towards the top, some dark, densely-hatched areas frame the drawing. Stretching over a topographic motif, they suggest a span of gloomy sky. Looking closer, however, the orientation thus initially gained is lost. Half-way down, adjoining the left margin, we find, for example, a field of pencil lines one would probably take for a rocky slope at first. However, once we approach that part, we discover a biomorphic shape, a serpentine being – or simply a hose? – squeezing into some kind of anus. Similarly, a viewer ready to see a landscape will detect a mountain-top in shades of blue within the area at the drawing's top right. On further examination, however, this presumed peak enclosed in greenish meadows turns out to be merely a geometric configuration that is not located in an illusionary space, but

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[1] Walter Benjamin: "Malerei und Graphik", in: Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. II/2, *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. Main 1977, p. 603.

rather nowhere else than the paper's surface. Throughout the drawing's densely gathered forms, a close inspection reveals nothing but a proliferation of graphic marks: tracings created with various instruments, and shaped by different grades of focus, speed and pressure. Soon, one will lose sight of the horizon that had defined the image as a "vertical cut" through the "substance of the world".

Our gaze may not rest, however, with the modernist conclusion that any pictorial representation, once scrutinised, will merely dissolve into material marks on a surface. Because, inquiring further of the drawing, we will be surprised to find the sky again, and also the horizon. Near the geometric configuration mentioned above, we recover the sky in a pencil-written text that reads: "The Big Sky / verkleinert (diminished)", quoting the title of an American Western from 1952. Paradoxically, one has to come even closer to discover the horizon, too: bending down to a pencil line which is dotted, as in maps and diagrams, one can read the word "Horizonte (horizons)" in very fine and tiny letters. So, at last we encounter the "Big Sky" and it is indeed "diminished" - but only as the result of contemplation, of a process that has caused the monumental drawing to tip over: from the vertical, "representational" axis of a painting into the horizontal level, to the "symbolic cross-section" of certain "graphics" that Walter Bejamin alleges to hold "signs".

Within Bettina Carl's large drawings, tension is manifested in the contrasts of close vision and clear view, of drawing and painting, and of inscription and representation. Her smaller-sized works often gather this tension in the suspended relation of the detail and the whole. Taking *The Relevant* (2006) as an example, we look at a drawing consisting of three sheets of paper. At least the work's two upper parts each bear enough consolidation to also satisfy as drawings on their own. At the same time, they form an obviously figurative, even anthropomorphic entity. The paper on top offers a head and shoulders, the bottom one a torso cut above the chest, and both body parts are linked with an outline running all way through the rather 'abstract' drawing in the middle.

This cleft structure strongly recalls the *Cadavre exquis*. Under this title, the surrealists promoted a practice of collective drawing. Each participant outlines part of a human figure, for example, then has it disappear by folding his share of the paper before he hands it on. The next person continues the ends of the lines drawn by his predecessor. [2] Leaving aside for once the *Cadavre's* reference to depth psychology, so meaningful to the surrealists, the method serves to inscribe discontinuity into an image, and also a contingent relation of the detail and the whole. Regarding Benjamin, again, one might say: the classical function of representation is broken here, but this is not owing to the liquidation of the figurative. In fact, this breach is effected by playing off the horizontal logic against the vertical: the semiotic order of "certain graphics" as opposed to the integrity of the "longitudinal cut", which is still represented by the *Cadavre exquis*. When a line is begun by one draughtsperson and continued by another without accounting for the final image, that line may be disrupted within a logic of representation. Without any rupture, however, the same line will neatly fit in the order of contiguity, inherent in any row of neighbouring graphic signs.

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[2] In their *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme,* Breton and Éluard define the *Cadavre exquis* as follows: "Jeu de papier plié qui consiste en faire composer une phrase ou un dessin par plusieurs personnes, sans qu'aucune d'elles puisse tenir compte de la collaboration ou des collaborations précédentes. L'example, devenu classique, qui a donné son nom au jeu tient dans la première phrase obtenue de cette manière: *Le cadavre – exquis – boira – le vin – nouveau*", André Breton and Paul Éluard: "Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme" (1938), in: André Breton: *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet, Paris 1992, p. 796.

In Bettina Carl's *The Relevant* we find a similar constellation, as a closer inspection will show. Starting at the bottom, we see an androgynous rider grabbing her horse's reins. Her beefy arm is bordered by an outline that continues upwards, on to the middle part where it runs on in several arches. Here, the line first bounds a shape that easily appears figurative - a sturdy shoulder - when added to the arm below. Next, the line confines a rounded form which may still be read, albeit with difficulty, as a head. With this gigantic, faceless skull, the figure would be 'done' already. But in a drive to the left, the line continues further upwards, briefly loosing any figurative implication, before it enters the third part of the drawing. Slightly shifted to the right, here the line runs on within a markedly figurative realm: it continues and ends in the outline of a second figure that might serve as another complement to the rider's torso below. Wearing a red hat, this repoussoir figure seems to gaze towards the top right margin of the drawing. And here, the curving line returns once more within this vertical triptych, in a densely woven, intricate mesh of threads, nerves, wires, twigs, ramifying endlessly - one cannot not tell exactly what it is. In this cluster, the former outline has evolved into a motif of its own right, and it has even been allotted its own viewer within the drawing. The movement has come to a halt it seems, and the line is now twisting around itself.

Drawing a line further and further equals a merely operational connection. Here, however, in the illusionistic setting of a figure facing an object, the line continued does also constitute a representational context. The continuity in one part determines discontinuity in another: as loosely connected as the drawing's elements may appear, they are firmly linked in the operational logic of drawing. But wherever depiction rules the relation of elements, the movement of the running line is cut short. Maybe Bettina Carl has drawn herself into the picture here. At least, the optical distance from the repoussoir figure to the meshwork might match the one the artist has to resume if she wants to gain an impression of the pictorial quality of the whole. Stepping back, she *interrupts* the flow of production, the connection of fragments and graphic marks. Does this suggest that in the upper part of the work too, the process of generating meaning might expire and conclude in an allegory of graphic art production? This is not very likely because so far, one aspect has been entirely neglected: while the figure sprouts up across the three papers mounted one above the other, on the bottom sheet the figure on horseback rushes somewhere else. In her left hand, she even holds a big arrow pointing in that direction, an arrow with the words "the relevant". We may take this as a hint that the drawing could continue just as well at another edge, or in a different way. Moreover, this reveals that whatever really matters will only appear later, on the next sheet of paper and the next again, and thus the relevant will always, indefinitely be postponed.

In that sense, Bettina Carl's work does not conclude in an 'organic' way - it is not to be understood as a manifest, necessary entity. On the contrary, the classical hierarchical relation of the whole and the part is inverted here. The latter is not subjected to the demands of a preconceived result, the part is rather a starting point and a momentum in an open-ended working process that does without a necessary aim. Whether small-scale or large, all of Bettina Carl's works evoke a "representational" verticality proper for painting. Yet all her drawings are but pieces, in the sense of extracts or paragraphs, of a production carried on ceaselessly, it seems, along the horizontal, 'symbolic' axis of drawing, continuing from line to line and from one sheet of paper to the next. Maybe it would be adequate to say that this work, the artist's method and its results, is a work of meshing. In this intricate web, a thread is grabbed in the vertical dimension of painting, at the instance of a "longitudinal cut"

through the "world's substance". Then the thread is yarned on horizontally, on the level of the graphic "cross-section", only to return once more as a motif, in the realm of verticality - or vice versa.

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