

## Book Review

# Monika Leisch-Kiesl: ZeichenSetzung / BildWahrnehmung

## Toba Khedoori: Gezeichnete Malerei

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Marcel Duchamp's installation *Sixteen Miles of String* (1942) is the starting point for the aesthetic and philosophical analysis of marks, images and drawings by art historian and philosopher Monika Leisch-Kiesl, Professor of History and Theory of Art in Linz, in her new book, *ZeichenSetzung / BildWahrnehmung*. Duchamp's surrealistic work of art was constituted by 16 miles of ordinary white twine stretched from ceilings and crystal chandeliers, crisscrossing the canvases exhibited at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion in Manhattan in 1942. Leisch-Kiesl emphasizes above all the new visual configuration and the special perceptual situation the thousands of sections of twine create, which involve both the artist and the viewer. This labyrinthine system of lines generates a new kind of space without beginning or end, in which no object is set up and the public is right in the middle. The lines trace thoughts and gestures at the same time, creating a drawing that is always becoming, opening new forms and movements in space. Leisch-Kiesl looks similarly at Sophie Taeuber-Arp's artworks, namely her series of small drawings entitled *Movements de lignes* (1939), in which the artist traced unspectacular lines to open up a conceptual space that evokes a new perceptual experience. Both artists worked with lines and traces and created conceptual drawings that disclose a particular spatial and temporal dimension of reality, which challenges the quality and possibilities of our vision. Their works of art introduce the main topic of the book, which deals with image theory developed from the 1990s to the end of the 2010s specifically in the field of drawing (which is a key area of the author's research). Leisch-Kiesl aims to explore the specific aesthetic and philosophical meaning of drawing through the large-scale compositions of the Australian artist of Iraqi origin Toba Khedoori, who has participated

in a number of international group exhibitions (Venice Biennale, 2009; Liverpool Biennial, 2006; São Paulo Biennial, 2004 among others), although the theoretical and aesthetic reception of Khedoori's work in German-speaking areas is not particularly relevant. The analyses of five of Khedoori's minimal drawings allow the author to develop the new phenomenological and semiotic theorem of the *ZeichenSetzung* in order to investigate not only the "logos of images" (Gottfried Boehm), but also the *evocation* power of drawings as representations of reality. How do images become marks? And how do marks become images? Khedoori's delicate compositions on large thin sheets of waxed paper provide the ideal occasion to explore the effectiveness of lines and marks interpreted as gestures of both hand and thought. Her wall-size drawings maintain a strong relationship with the commonplace world of objects – stairs, wood, windows, chairs, train compartments, doors, walls and fences – without simply representing them in a mimetic way: every element appears familiar yet decontextualized, deprived of any sign of life and radiating a geometric translucence. Khedoori depicts simple icons and everyday milieus detached from any context or background, aimlessly disembodied and altered through perspectival distortions, which seem to oscillate between solidity and evanescence, at once in motion and also crystallized in a timeless "neither-here-nor-there".

In her work *Untitled (Window)*, a relatively small drawing of a window emerges in the middle of the large-scale sheet of paper as an immediately recognizable everyday architectural element. Leisch-Kiesl focuses on the familiarity yet melancholic disconnectedness of this object, which generates a "certain pulsation of proximity and distance" (41). The use of in-between elements such as doors, windows, walls and tunnels generates a movement of "semantic vibration" (130), which is at once static and active and thus able to challenge both the symbolic potential of the lines and the perceptive processes of the subject.

Khedoori's works deal with neither (photo)realism nor pure abstraction, but appear at once implacable and shaded, familiar and unrecognizable, monumental and ephemeral, in a continuously fleeing presence that affects both emotion and thought.

The book emphasizes the "irritating" quality of Khedoori's drawings (as well as the Drawing as a form of contemporary visual art), which swing between detailed illustration and enigmatic placelessness, destabilizing the viewer because of their lack of (or incongruences in) perspective and their unfolding and open-ended trait. Despite the high precision of Khedoori's touch, a closer look reveals detritus and personal traces of the artist – parts of the wax, little insects, dog and human hairs, a shoe print and dust particles – that are strewn throughout the waxed works, reminding the viewer of the at once physical and ghostly plasticity of Khedoori's gesture. Minimalist three-dimensional objects are depicted on the two-dimensional surface of huge sheets of paper in viscous emulsions of

synthetic wax, and place the viewer in a timeless and enigmatic space of both mediation and uncertainty.



Fig.: *Untitled (Rope 2)*, 2011  
Oil on canvas, 94.3 x 59.4 cm

Leisch-Kiesel stresses this ambivalence of Khedoori's drawings in their immanent realization: the enigmatic and open character of Drawing lies in the fragmentary gesture, that is in the proper act of tracing lines and marks, much more than in the final static composition. Drawings become marks generating a special communicative situation between artist and viewer which challenges the power of seeing and shows the complexity of the subjective processes of perception. In this regard, Khedoori's compositions seem to recall, in a certain way, the style of a biblical parable, in which immediately identifiable elements and situations – work in the fields, the baking of bread, family conflict – actually hide enigmatic marks and meanings which are able not only to render the familiar ambiguous, but also to provoke the established way of perceiving and believing. The author asks: “What do these icons of the world of objects narrate? A window, a door, a stab? They are simply recognizable in their lapidary representation – and then? They certainly do not lead to a real given situation, but they do not lead to a dream world as well” (125). Leisch-Kiesel uses the notion of “conceptual narrative” to interpret not only the quality of Khedoori's works, but also the development of drawing from the 1990s, noting that the drawing “brings narratives into play, although it is still not clear what they are telling” (85). Through analysis of seven key terms (*kunstgeschichtliche Situierung*, *Phänomen Zeichnung*, *Betrachten einer Zeichnung*, marks/*Zeichen*, *das Konzeptive – das Narrative*, *Denk-*

*Formen, Raum und Zeit*), the author explores the development of the linguistic and visual turn in the field of drawing in close dialogue with the most relevant phenomenological and semiotic perspectives (of Peirce, Derrida, Deleuze, Lacan and others). Drawings demand attention be given to the effectiveness of the marks and generate reflection on the psychological and phenomenological mechanisms of perception. Leisch-Kiesl therefore emphasizes the time quality of drawing, together with its fragmentary and incomplete nature: “If paintings present Beings, the drawn line presents Becoming” (N. Bryson). The intangible and phantasmic materiality of the conceptual space of drawing with the uncertainty of its edges communicates a “vague sense of lost completeness” (A. Newman). Unlike the unified space of paintings, the white page of a drawing disperses the substance of the depicted object yet accentuates its potentiality. The use of the pencil (but also of oil paint) on the paper is a way to inhabit a space of becoming and uncertainty that introduces the experience of time and evokes imagination and an attitude of listening.

Leisch-Kiesl examines the visionary minimalism of Khedoori’s works in order to develop a new theorem that is capable of grasping the particular feature of the phenomenon of drawing as not only space to generate meaning, but also “direct inscriptions of the world” (*Zeichnung als direkte Markierung der Welt*, 78). Lines and marks are thus interpreted as “acts of thought” (109) able to inaugurate new constellations of meaning and perception. The author speaks of “*ZeichenSetzung*” to emphasize the special capacity of the drawing to open a space on the paper, that is to create a space that did not exist before – as we have seen with Marcel Duchamp. Within this perspective Leisch-Kiesl refers to the consideration of drawing by French philosopher Alain Badiou, who has commented on the disjunctive and fragile character of pure drawing and the *intensity of its weakness*. Drawing is able to institute a new world without the strength of images and the force of colors that characterize painting, “but by the minimalism of some marks and lines, very close to the inexistence of any place”. The relationship between surface and gesture is dialectical as well:

In one sense, the paper exists, as a material support, as a closed totality; and the marks, or the lines, do not exist by themselves: they have to compose something inside the paper. But in another and more crucial sense, the paper as a background does not exist, because it is created as such, as an open surface, by the marks. It is that sort of movable reciprocity between existence and inexistence which constitutes the very essence of Drawing.” (A. Badiou)The gesture of drawing opens up a new imaginative and theoretical landscape that challenges the viewer to experience new rational and imaginative landscapes. With its ephemeral yet potential quality, a drawing can evoke notions, ideas, images, emotions, associations and thoughts about reality. Translating in a certain way Paul Ricoeur’s famous idea “*le symbole*

*donne à penser*”, this book insists that *drawing gives rise to thought*. The “semantic vibration” between capture and slide generates a process of interpretation of signs, which has traits of necessity and even of violence. Referring to Gilles Deleuze’s aesthetic expressed in his book *Proust and Signs* (1964), in which the French philosopher explored the meaning of signs within Marcel Proust’s work *In Search of Lost Time*, Leisch-Kiesl offers an interesting aesthetic interpretation that culminates in a meditation both on drawing as a sign-producing gesture and on the subjective capacity to be emotionally and theoretically affected by signs. The signs of drawing create a resonance space “in which the perceiving subject not only spins his/her thoughts, but also feels and imagines” (186). The “reign of signs”, according to Roland Barthes, represents an apprenticeship system that activates sensibility and thinking. Moreover, the semiotic potentiality of lines and marks stimulates the viewer and challenge his/her capacity to see, to comprehend and to imagine. The fragmentary character of drawing generates a special lack of wholeness, which *forces the subject to think*. Drawings become hieroglyphics that have to be interpreted in their immanent semiotic meaning and in the “trajectory of thought” they generate. With regard to this interpretation, in the chapter entitled “*Das Bild ist ein Akt und kein Ding*”, Leisch-Kiesl develops interesting phenomenological considerations on the “activity of images” in order to explain their effectiveness and their immanent potentiality to affect, to transform and to provoke the subject both theoretically and emotionally. Consequently, she emphasizes the active role of both the image and the eyes (*Bildakt* and *Blickakt*) to point out the “appellative trait of signs” (*appellativen Zeichenbegriff*, 210).

In this perspective, drawings correspond to an artistic visual praxis which forces us to see, to develop ideas and to express emotion through the materiality and mediality of marks (217-233): “Drawing seems to be the medium of the fugitive per se, thereby gaining its strong presence” (230). In the last part of the book, proceeding from the philosophical considerations of the young Derrida on the figure of the “différance”, the author highlights significant aesthetic elements of drawing which could be used as conceptual trajectories to approach Toba Khedoori’s works as well. *Le trait – le retrait, La brisure / la trace, Das Einmalige / l’unique* are a crucial category that enlighten – even without completely explaining – the evocative, unfolding and fragmentary nature of drawing. The depicted lines and marks disturb any stable presence, they are *brisure / traces* that interrupt any consequentiality and collocate the gesture and the effect of drawing in the future, expositing it to a “*navigation première et sans grâce*” (Derrida). The incompleteness of drawing and the unfolding nature of its conceptual narrative release from any traditional mimetic and static representation of the real as well as from its concluded figuration. However, such openness neither guarantees ipso facto the evocative potentiality of signs nor opens up new tra-

jectories of thought or new ways to inhabit time and space. In any event, drawings also have to move desire from fragments of imagination and the detritus of memory. In this sense, Khedoori gently encourages viewers to examine more carefully her waxed surfaces, which are not saturated mentally and materially by narrations and figurations, but appear to be spread with traces and detritus from her studio floor.

Leisch-Kiesl's interesting aesthetic and philosophical analysis of Toba Khedoori's drawings becomes an occasion to illustrate a theory of signs in which reception – the possibility of being theoretically and emotionally affected and challenged by signs – assumes a special function. The large-scale and precise yet elusive miniatures affect the vision from mark to mark, disturb any direct assumption of meaning and give rise to thought through their unexpected “semantic vibrations”. These convincing aesthetic and philosophical elements give momentum to the consideration of drawing and signs in Leisch-Kiesl's new book and are particularly worthy of being read and discussed in contemporary academic and artistic fields.