

## A Thinking Space on Tour

Monika Bartholomé and Barbara von Flüe in dialogue on the *Museum for Drawing*

BvF – Yesterday, on the way back from Bremen I came across an article by Norbert Schwontkowski, which has a lot in common with your own thoughts on drawing – at least it seems so to me. "A line is always a division," Schwontkowski writes. "Just as the lines in our hand are divisions, and the horizon is divided from the sky. The line and the division are inherent to us and drawing is the simplest thing we can do, since the line comes immediately after the dot – the fingerprint. Our fingers and fingernails are our first tools, soft stone and charred wood our first writing utensils." Schwontkowski searches for an anthropological foundation for drawing. He describes it as being primally inherent to mankind and an archaic form of **(self-)expression**, even **self-assurance**. What interests you about drawing? What has motivated you to keep working in this medium for many years now?

MB – I have been interested in drawing for as long as I can remember. In the 1950s, a lot of streets had not yet been paved, and you could take a stick and mark off spaces for games, or set boundaries for your own territory, this is my land, that's where yours begins. A scratched groove in the road, and the line became a border. Beginning in the second year at school there was penmanship. Sitting there preoccupied with writing llls or mmmms, one curve lined up next to the other, I loved this. Drawing a dream house in pencil, an egg with two windows, a door, and a fence around it all. Drawing lots of houses that always looked the same. Picturing my own life, dreaming. Taking a finger and drawing on a fogged-up window, making tracks in the snow with my feet, falling backwards into it and making snow angels with my arms. Sitting at the kitchen table and feeling the scraped, wavy boards with my hands, tracing the grooves and scratches. Feeling at home. Being sick in bed, and following the linear patterns in the wallpaper with my eyes. I could mention a great many more of those little events that occur to me when I think about my first drawing experiences and the joy of reading and leaving traces not meant to last forever. **Temporary signs of one's own presence made visible and a form of communication with other playmates.**

At 13 I knew for certain that I wanted to do something with drawing, without knowing exactly what it would be. Today, of course, I could give you different reasons. I suffered at school and drawing saved me. Various components come together here. I had always been fascinated by the immediacy of it, without my being aware of this. **Creating a counterpart, a result, which looks back at you and puts something into the world that has to do with you yourself.** I felt an urge inside to express something for which I had no words, a kind of sign language, a pictorial language with which I could express myself. I might also describe this search in terms of magic or ambiguity. I did not want drawings that are sketches and sit somewhere on the paper, ignoring the format, etc. **I was interested in drawings that were pictorial, that regard the format of the page as their own space and deal with it accordingly.** For a long time, I could not really trust words and language. That is why I did not like comics. In the face of a drawing, a picture, language was supposed to fail: It was to render one speechless, to virtually absorb language, words, and digest them until no word of explanation was needed any longer. **Ambiguity is an immediate part of this area of perception, the back and forth between inside and outside.** The built-in doubt as to whether something can be this way or that way or both, which leaves open how a picture, a drawing, is to be interpreted, which takes the picture for what it is, as something other, beyond words and language.

What I am describing here has a lot to do with Norbert Schwontkowski's statement. In this connection you use the terms "(self-)expression" and "self-assurance". For me these two concepts constitute the framing brackets around all possible kinds of drawing: With this, I mean, for example, drawings created by artists, prisoners' scribbles on the wall, tattoos, children's drawings, and rock drawings, which in my opinion mark the beginning of all drawing. **I am interested in precisely this link between anthropology and drawing and writing by hand.** It was for this reason that I founded the *Museum for Drawing*. I wanted a museum dedicated to this medium and to the action that goes beyond areas of research, liberating itself from the notion of whether or not something belongs to so-called high art. I wanted a museum along interdisciplinary lines, one that raises precisely these questions that Norbert Schwontkowski addresses.

BvF – **The self-reflective moment** plays a significant role in this context. You, too, consistently observe yourself as you draw. We witness this moment on various individual pages, but also in the videos that

show the movements of your drawing hand. **And in general, the action of the hand, with its capacity for remembrance, is the central place of what is happening in your work.** This reminds me of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who pointed to the importance of our physical perception in addition to our visual perception. According to him, our relationship to the world is determined by the orientation of our bodies, movement being a form of access to things, which is just as primal as visual perception. With respect to drawing, I believe it is about the hand's two perceptual qualities: For one thing, it is about the perception, so to speak, from inside to outside, i.e., it is a directed movement, a kind of groping, grasping. Another thing is that it also has to do with the perception of a counterpart, an externalization, which means, you create something that detaches itself from you, becomes independent, "looks back" at you, and which is nevertheless closely linked to you.

MB – Yes, that's right. Self-reflection always plays a great role in my work. It has never been enough for me to take a sheet of paper and leave something behind on it. I wanted to know how and why precisely this or that comes about and include the means that I use, for example, lines and the blank piece of paper, in the drawing process. I often felt it to be a deficit during my studies when we just started painting and then got all excited about the result, without questioning our underlying means and perceptual aspects. For me, thinking about the medium in which and with which I express myself must be a part of it, or more exactly: **A reflection on the medium is expressed in my drawings, at least I hope it is.**

Perhaps the impetus for this goes back to my childhood. I must have been five or six years old when I visited my grandfather, who was a goldsmith, in his workshop in Pforzheim. Among other things, there was a pencil drawing lying there, which showed a very detailed illustration of a finely chased ring. I asked him if I could see it and he answered that the ring did not exist yet, it was a draft drawing. I was utterly confused. How could someone draw something so beautifully and precisely without ever having seen it? Back then I could not understand that at all, and this encounter triggered a lot of things in me. For one thing, I wanted to be able to draw so well, and another thing is that, to my way of thinking at the time, his choice of a reverse way of doing things touched on a disturbing issue. Can an inner image that stems from the realm of the imagination become reality? As a matter of fact, I have passed from copying the outside world to recording the inner world. This involved a long process of searching and only after my studies, when I was working on my own in relative seclusion did something like my own language come about, which made possible this back and forth between inside and outside.

When I say that, in drawing, my eyes follow the hand, then it describes this path. The normal sequence would be the hand following the eye, if I were to direct my gaze from the inside to the outside, i.e., to focus on something outside of myself. This is the way I proceeded for a long time because I believed that only in this way would I be able to draw like my grandfather. Maybe you can compare this type of perception with photographing. I see something and shoot a photo. I aim at an object and capture it. **But if I follow the hand with my eyes, I am letting the outside world in.** The direction is reversed and the outside world shoots me, just to stick with the metaphor. Thus, it takes a large amount of trust on my part in order to take in the world that I encounter. But in doing this, I perceive things differently. This is a very important theme.

And this is how it is with drawing, **I trust my hand, allow it to make decisions whether to let a line progress this way or that way.** In this sense I look on at how something comes about. Drawing is naturally predestined for this type of approach, since it is so direct and can come about with no great effort, and the pencil, as an extension of the hand, immediately shows what condition we find ourselves in, whether that suits us or not. This immediacy has always enthused me; not being able to cover up anything, not glossing over anything, not erasing. Either the line is strong or not, either it has enough intrinsic life in order to endure and indicate something beyond itself, or it doesn't.

BvF – You began your studies in the 1970s, at a time when drawing as a medium was undergoing reassessment and upward revaluation. All of a sudden, it was not the finished work that was so interesting, but the work process, the fleeting, the unfinished, what was still open. In Switzerland in 1976, there was an important exhibition called "Mentalität: Zeichnung (The Mentality: Drawing)", which Jean-Christophe Ammann organized at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne. One of the articles in the catalogue was written by a friend, the artist Rolf Winnewisser, and there, among other things, we read: "The line of reality and the line of imagination are engaged in discussion. The questioning line and the answering line, **the indicating line**, and the proving line. If drawing were to be allotted the function of a question more decisively, it would take on a philosophical function." This questioning of the way of being in the world, of the

connections between inside and outside, I find in your work, not only in the drawings but also in the collections you have been assembling for many years now. Above all, I have in mind the *Sammlung für Lucy Snowe (Collection for Lucy Snowe)* and *Kosmos Personalis*.

MB – It is interesting that you associate the period of the reassessment and revaluation of drawing as a medium with the 1970s. My own experience during my studies was different. I felt pretty much alone with drawing as an independent medium. In Cologne in 1971, at the former *Werkkunstschule* (School of Applied Arts) – in addition to classes for painting and sculpture – they offered subjects like illustration and free graphics, but there was no drawing class. This is why I wanted to go study with Beuys; only, he had just lost his professorship. But there were exhibitions that provided me with important impulses. For example, there was the show of works by André Thomkins at the Museum Morsbroich in Leverkusen in 1973 and one with works by Markus Raetz in Amsterdam at the end of the 1970s. Both played on the idea of perception, which is something that was occupying my thoughts even back then.

The questions with respect to the way of being in the world, as you refer to it, played a great role in the *Sammlung für Lucy Snowe* and *Kosmos Personalis*, **this back and forth between inside and outside and outside and inside**. In an exemplary way, I wanted to attribute the personal, the subjective view its own meaning, its own space. This also has to do with the fact, that at the time I studied, particularly in Cologne, but even afterwards at the Academy in Düsseldorf, it was not a given that a woman artist would gain recognition. Hardly any role models existed, and the big exhibitions, such as the *documenta* and the Venice Biennale, almost all pretty much left out women. Certainly it is no coincidence that back then women went into the media of drawing, performance, and video art, since these were not so completely dominated by male role models and did not have anything representative about them. Here it was not about the painting hanging above the sofa or the "further linear development" of a purportedly objective art history with its listing of successive -isms. The assertion of the subjective gaze on the one hand and the presenting of this gaze in its own space both took a stand against art history's tendency to think in terms of progress. It was also important to me to break through this routine of emphasizing the recognition factor that prevailed on the art market. **The interest in the open, the fleeting, and the unfinished** you describe in connection with the upward revaluation of drawing certainly also has something to do with this. There was a strong desire to break out of the previous understanding of art. I searched out the open in a different way, not in the individual work, but in juxtapositions and references and **by emphasizing the subjective view to the world**.

BvF – What you describe is exciting. And it occurs to me that this turn towards your own subjective view of the world, and also to your own inner worlds, was a movement back then, which was closely connected with the medium of drawing, especially in Switzerland – you named two important positions in this respect, André Thomkins and Markus Raetz. In this connection for Germany, certainly the *documenta 5* (1972) deserves mention, particularly with its "Individuelle Mythologien (Individual Mythologies)", which introduced works by Michael Buthe and Paul Thek, among others. But there was also Nancy Graves, who showed her large room installation in the Neue Galerie.

With the *Museum for Drawing* you now provide an insight into your largest collection to date, which consists of postcards, book jackets, newspaper articles, video works, but also original drawings. Here you do not so much deal with your own path as a woman artist, but place your own work in a larger **context**. How did this collection come about?

MB – I founded the *Museum for Drawing* in 2009, after I had not been able to locate any museum that dedicated itself exclusively to drawing. The first thing I did was to secure a domain and set up a website ([www.museumfuerzeichnung.com](http://www.museumfuerzeichnung.com)). For a long while what you could read there was that a museum was currently in the making.

I talked it over with friends, wanting to know what such a museum might look like. **Fairly quickly it became clear to me that this was not to be a museum exclusively for art**. There were many discussions and ideas and the scope ranged from visions of a museum in the Internet up to concrete plans for building a museum of our own. Ultimately, it became what it now is, and the decision to work not only with originals but above all with reproductions delivered the decisive impulse to realize this idea. This decision has brought me enormous freedom, making drawings from all over the world accessible to me, something which no traditional museum, no exhibition and also no constant traveling could have made possible. In this way, I am able to integrate material on certain themes that I have been collecting for a

long time now, for example, on subjects like the comic in art or on the hands' capabilities and capacity for memory. The *Museum for Drawing* has again decisively broadened my view to the medium. **I do not collect with a goal in mind; it is rather incidentally that one thing or another falls into my hands** and I put it with material I have already collected. In a certain way, the breadth of the museum concept forces me to follow this approach, meaning not to differentiate between so-called high or low art. The entire spectrum stands in the foreground and this is something I find very exciting. To this extent my own attitude to comics has changed as well and language written by hand is a vital part of it. Perhaps it is only logical that I first worked on the *Sammlung für Lucy Snowe* and *Kosmos Personalis*, two works that reflect my own view. Perhaps enough self-assurance had to be there before I was able to concentrate on drawing's entire spectrum. The question of what I like or what contradicts my notion of drawing is really no longer threatening, but rather opens things up. **In this respect, my own project has actually drawn me into other worlds, which otherwise might have remained closed to me.**

BvF – Yours is a nomadic museum, consisting of this **grown archive**, which settles at a certain location, finding here a certain structure or "exhibition". Your artistic interest is manifested in it, which defines the concept of drawing more broadly than traditional art history does with its view to the autonomous work of art.

The museum has its initial public debut now at another museum, namely Kolumba, where it is being displayed for a good four months. The temporary character is revealed, in part, in the exhibition architecture that you have realized with its harmony of portable panels made of simple plywood and tables and stools. The furniture serves to connect, creating a unity that supports the idea of the collection, providing it with space where it may be physically and intellectually grasped. You lean the panels against the museum walls; They are not attached but remain potentially movable, which expresses the provisional character of the arrangement. Although the collection of the *Museum for Drawing* has come about more or less randomly, and you have more or less collected everything that fell into your hands, now the exhibition, or respectively the arranging, has been a completely conscious act, in which the criteria for inclusion and exclusion play an important role. How do you make your choices among the multitude of exhibition pieces? What role does this process of selection, assembling, and arranging play?

MB – The material piles up on tables. I leave it lying there, play around with it, and suddenly **new aspects come about that I had not perceived in such a way before.** The themes result from the image material in the collection, and thus, for example, I get interested in the thematic traces in a broad sense, and then I begin to assemble and search for an arrangement: small-format books, articles, letters, photos, drawings. **The act of placing things in relationships is essential in doing this. It is a process that constantly renews itself.** Components are exchanged and plugged in again in other places, **like an organism.** But at some point I decide upon this one arrangement. It must be able to hold up and sustain. Compared with conventional museums, the *Museum for Drawing* has a great advantage that it does not need to worry about conservatory matters since I work almost exclusively with reproductions. This allows me an unbelievable freedom. Of course, you might ask whether justice is done precisely to the medium of drawing if you work almost exclusively with reproductions. **How can you pay tribute to a greatly differentiated charcoal drawing if it has been made much smaller and stands on a shelf,** and the printed quality is poor as well? I am aware of such limitations but my first concern is for the diversity of human expression and sparking enthusiasm for it. Drawing is an integral part of human expression like dancing, writing, telling stories, singing, and making music.

The *Museum for Drawing* is perhaps rather a kind of **archive for drawing..., a thinking space ... on tour.** The flexible exhibition architecture affords me a lot of possibilities for engaging with the respective exhibition location. I can vary the design and the arrangement of the panels to fit the size of the rooms, the proportions of the walls, etc.

BvF – "A Thinking Space on Tour", I like that a lot as an image for your project. Space for thinking – thinking in space. It is about thought that here detaches itself from language in order to enter a visual discourse, an exploration using artistic means, to use those concepts that have been discussed in recent years. Working with reproductions and the loss of information which goes hand in hand with this appear to me as being essential to the process of recognition, they are even a prerequisite for it. The reproduction brings the individual exhibition pieces into dialogue with one another, so to speak: They gain similar dimensions, are similarly abstracted, and simplified. All of a sudden, a tattoo might stand next to a cave

drawing, and then questions arise, for example concerning the way they have been scratched, or incised, marking presence, leaving a trace. With the aid of the reproduction, things and structures become visible, which it had never been possible to see like this before.

The reproduction also changes our way of perception, an observation that Walter Benjamin had already made in his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. **It is no longer about contemplation, but about comparative viewing, about seeing relationships, similarities, and differences.** About **thoughtfully seeing**, in keeping with your concepts. Of course, this also reminds us of André Malraux's project. He pursued similar interests with his *Musée imaginaire*. However, he limited himself to the medium of the book and firmly fixed the arrangement of the "exhibits", whereas you use the concept of space. This spatial aspect seems to me to be important for your project, not only in the sense of the room installation, but also in a metaphorical sense. I have the notion of a great web that pits an open, movable system of references against Modernity with its clear arrangements and values.

MB – You have stated this wonderfully succinctly, this seeing of connections, but unlike André Malraux, I do not want to reproduce the world's art. My concern is a different one. I can explain it best with an example: Yesterday I came across a letter that my uncle wrote in pencil in 1944. He was 18 years old at the time and two weeks later, as they say, he reportedly "fell" in the war. I also still have a few pencil drawings of his. These handmade testimonies to a senselessly shortened life go straight to the heart. A text message would never have had this quality of making it possible to sensually experience the transient presence and personality of an individual. For me, the handmade quality has something magical about it and it shows **the uniqueness of a person, of a life lived. This keeps me going.** André Malraux's concern was the history of art, something objective. Moreover, his project was based on the collecting tradition of a great European power, France – many of the examples he provides come from Parisian museums, whose collections were fed in part with booty brought back from Napoleon's forays. We need to be cautious in this respect. Reproducing or presenting the world's drawings would be presumptuous. I do not want to file away the history of drawing between the front and back covers of a book. I want to let it unfold and to extricate it from the context of pure art. **There are other existential questions that concern me.** The spatial, the haptic, the grasping of things in their original sense is very important to me. I love creating spaces, be they very large or very small like the red box for *Sammlung für Lucy Snowe*. Lucy Snowe received her own box in order to take in, gather together, and house the various fragments of her work. Unlike the predetermined sequence of pages in a book, in the box the loose-leaf pages, booklets, and objects may be brought into a certain arrangement or laid out next to one another. Depending on what page lies next to the other, something new comes about. **It is not the things or the pages themselves that change, the change comes about alone through the relationships they enter.** For example, there is the reproduction of a charcoal drawing by Martin Assig, showing a face with a dark mouth opening, which lay on my desk next to an open art magazine. The magazine showed Roman Signer's house on skis. The door of the house is wide open and shows a dark interior. The door and the mouth as dark openings conjured up a mysterious inner connection, the house becoming a face and the face becoming a house. Such possibilities for perception and shifts in the perception astound me over and over again.

BvF – Now your museum has installed itself for a period of four months in the rooms at Kolumba. Nevertheless, it is an institution without a firmly established location or a clearly defined form. It is an ephemeral project, which emphasizes the short-lived and transitory aspect of the **constellation**. With this fleetingness, the *Museum for Drawing* contradicts the idea of the museum as an institution with its traditional responsibilities of collecting, preserving, and conveying to the public an appreciation for and information about what is displayed. This moment of institutional critique plays an important role in the artists' museums of the 1970s. I am thinking of an example like the *Musée d'art moderne* by Marcel Broodthaers, which consisted of everything that belonged to a museum (transport boxes, postcards, wall texts, invitations), but which did not include the work of art. Does the questioning of a museum's role in society play a role in your project?

MB – I saw Broodthaers's *Adlermuseum* (Department of Eagles) at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf in 1972. I was immediately enthused although I did not quite understand what exactly it had to do with the eagle. This intellectual discourse did not interest me so much; but for an artist to have his own room in a large museum, that I liked. This world inside the world. **With the *Museum for Drawing* I do not wish to question the museum as an institution, but I would like to do away with its boundaries and expand**

**its space for action.** I, too, collect, and I, too, would like to preserve something. But the function of conveying something to the public is perhaps more playful and does not lay claim to being academic. I wish to do away with conventional classifications into the various fields – here ethnology, there history, technology, design, architecture, 20th-century art, medieval art, Roman art, etc. – I want to get rid of such specializations. The *Museum for Drawing* is interdisciplinary and its origin goes back to this experienced deficit. It is a "nomadic" museum, as you mentioned, meaning that it may be a guest at as many other museums as possible – not only art museums – in order to call attention to the medium in all its diversity and in its meaning for us as mankind. The function of museums has also perhaps changed in recent years. It is no longer about preserving cultural goods. In this age of digitalization, the concern is increasingly about concrete **vididness**, about "handling", about spaces, and hence about creating islands of respite beyond what is commercial. There are already a lot of museums and many important collections as well. I would like to "use" these existing institutions in order to infiltrate them, so to speak, with my own museum so that a **humorous, light-hearted, but yet critical discourse** may be sparked.

BvF – In the *Museum for Drawing* visitors may hold the individual exhibits in their hands – this, too, marks an important distinction from the traditional concept of a museum. The person desiring to know what is there before him or her may take the reproductions and catalogues from the shelves and look for the respective information. And so we return again to the idea of the hand: This **physical moment of perception**, or perhaps the word appropriation is more apt here, is something I find extremely exciting because it produces an intimacy that may be compared with the intimacy of a situation that arises between you as the drawer and the sheet of paper. Are you interested in such issues?

MB – When I began with the *Sammlung für Lucy Snowe*, it no longer seemed to me to be enough to simply hang drawings on the walls. I missed a correspondence between the intimacy that is there when I draw and the presentation of the results in an exhibition. My thought was whether it did not require a conscious decision on the part of the viewer in order to be able to look at the works. He or she was to surmount a little bit of opposition, like that of having to open a door to a house or a room in order to be able to see something, or opening a drawer to be able to deal with the contents. With a book, I need to open it first and only then can I deal with the contents, the world between its covers. Opening it is like an overture, a preliminary pause that emphasizes the particular closeness between the book and the reader. Opening something, unfolding it, leafing through it, all of these are small actions that are necessary in order to approach a work. This means taking time, which suggests proceeding with care. I like this. Taking something into one's hands, turning it around, reading in it, putting it back, this is the way I imagine the *Museum for Drawing*.

BvF – In the way you present it at Kolumba, the *Museum for Drawing* shows your **radically subjective view to the history and function of drawing**. Its installation form introduces a private character to the rooms of the museum, especially with the furniture you created for it that is oriented to human proportions. The room always reminds me a little of a study, a studiolo, the kind we know from Renaissance painting. In a work by Antonello da Messina, for example, St. Jerome sits in a kind of portable study made of wood; it looks like he might collapse it and pack it up. And it is constructed in a way that he only needs to turn around to reach by hand everything that is important to him. Do you see the *Museum for Drawing* as a kind of **toolbox** as well, the "usage" of which urges you on and stimulates new ideas within you? Does occupying yourself with other media such as writing, photography, video art (all of these being components in your archive) provide an impetus to expand your own toolset? To take your drawing work beyond its conventional means of pencil/brush and sheet of paper?

MB – The **study** is a very beautiful, fitting image. By this I imagine a room where you can browse around and discover things so that you can immerse yourself there, hit upon something by chance, or run off in the wrong direction, delve into other worlds, at any rate with no need for being result-oriented! And the way you describe it hits the nail on the head: folding up, packing away, moving on, and unpacking it all somewhere else. If the *Museum for Drawing* were able to achieve this, that the drawing and the drawing act were felt and recognized as a form of expression deeply tied to mankind – in principle something **like studying in a universal sense** – this state of being curious, this being able to reach one's own conclusions, then that would already be a lot.

The place that hosts my Museum will exert its effect on the exhibition, or respectively on the

arrangements, influencing the view to it. Might it perhaps contribute to a new mutual attentiveness? In my own work as an artist, before this project I was already working with writing, combinations of images and writing, video and photography. What have become increasingly frequent are my ventures into other areas of research, such as ethnology and the interest in cave drawings, brain research, and the social sciences. For example, I deal with the handwriting young people today use less and less, and this directs my attention to letter-writing, to the respective writing style, and the very individual history of a person connected with this, the way I have experienced it from the aforementioned letter written by my uncle. It might well be that these themes influence my work as an artist and bring me to other forms of expression – for the moment I cannot yet tell. I notice that my attention is changing. It is calling for other orientation alignments, for me new ones. This is an adventure, a journey into worlds partly unknown to me. **On the other hand, I also feel the losses much more clearly that go hand in hand with the new media.** The ways and methods of communication have completely changed. Instead of writing down directions to somewhere with a pen and paper, today most people follow programs like *google maps* and no longer have to ask people. Granted, I do not want, nor am I able, to close my mind to these innovations; after all, drawings that came about with the aid of computer drawing programs, of course, also belong in the *Museum for Drawing*. But with my museum concept, I, too, assume responsibility for preserving things, just like every other museum does.

Nevertheless, the *Museum for Drawing*, with all its described ambitions and its claim to go beyond the sector of pure art, remains an artist project. It is important to me that I make this clear: the project is subjective, playful, and free. I feel no obligation towards anyone else, and the project calls for this freedom.