



Big Science

Drawing in the work of Corinne Laroche

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This publication presents a comprehensive overview of the work of the Paris-based artist Corinne Laroche and its development since 2006. This visual artist addresses her material and the expressive potential of her chosen medium in an intense and sustained manner, to the point where medium, material and process become the subject of her work. In Corinne Laroche's art, the act and process of placing lines, hatching and dots on a sheet of paper or a series of sheets, becomes the subject itself. This systematic approach gives rise to images that have their own internal logic and dynamic.

Several of Laroche's works feature illustrated compositions that not only appear figurative but do indeed represent objects outside of design (such as people, faces, or landscapes). Nonetheless, Corinne Laroche's production –since its beginnings outside of the realm of drawing–has always been fundamentally abstract-minimalist (p. 140). However, as we shall see later on, her work is distinct from purist currents of abstract minimalism that completely conceal the artist's subject—as in American Minimal Art of the 1960s (the sculptures of Donald Judd or Robert Morris, for example).

Laroche works primarily with variable elements with a uniform basic structure. Inside this structure are modules within a defined field of action (established by the artist) that shape the process of creation and the final structure of the work or groups of works. For a number of years now, the framework that determines the location and scope of these units (with the exception of *Fouilles*, p. 70) has generally been provided by a grid structure either pre-prepared, or drawn by Laroche using a ruler and pencil. Examples of this method can be found in *Mes très Riches Heures* (p. 84), drawings produced since 2006, or in the earlier

work on the same theme, *HH-Sombra*. However, the grid sometimes exists independently of linear markings on paper in Laroche's work, made visible or rather hinted by the arrangement of the modules in a particular drawing, as was the case in the *Calque et reports* series (p. 142) created from 1999 onwards.

The grid determines the form and size of the square units that match the individual squares in the serial structure. The form of these units is accentuated as Laroche draws over the lateral lines reinforcing them, before filling them with descending diagonal hatching. This concentrated gesture, performed in a very confined space could almost be qualified as stationary movement. This graphic operation becomes a process in its repeated application to individual units within a graph: the work as a whole emerges in the extension of these individual modules.

The contours of each unit define the scope of this graphic operation that involves minimal gesture. In the specific case of *Mes très Riches Heures*, the result of this method of work is a homogeneous dark gray surface that is nonetheless subtly agitated and irregular, allowing the white of the paper to peer through in isolated places. The way the artist inscribes herself into the grid structure of the paper by filling the individual squares with hatching, transports and transforms the role of the drawing hand, the action of the body, and the artist's mental concentration in the process of drawing.

Working with a grid where all the elements are equal in terms of form and significance and are non-hierarchical (if one disregards specific position within the grid) was a common approach in Minimal Art in the 1960s. Consider for example, the paintings of Agnes Martin or the sculptures

and drawings of Sol LeWitt, or indeed the work of Piet Mondrian, who, in the 1910s, paved the way for this kind of practice. In French art, François Morellet could also be mentioned in this context. Subsequently, and indeed up until the work of Corinne Laroche, the grid has been used, questioned and destroyed in both abstract and figurative works. This was demonstrated in a particularly impressive way in the exhibition *Rasterfahndung. Das Raster in der Kunst nach 1945 (Pattern investigation. Grids in art from 1945 onwards)* at the Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart in 2012. It is interesting to note with regard to Laroche's pencil drawings, that Sol Le Witt also filled in the square fields of his grids in a linear manner in his drawings, such as the drafts for his large murals. However, he primarily used layers of lines drawn with a ruler positioned in various directions. This serves to soften his graphic impetus. In the case of Laroche—as already stated—the diagonal hatching that develops from the top left to the bottom right, in the individual squares in her work does not give up its gestural impetus despite the control, concentration and systematic repetition across the entire surface of the page. As a result, her hatched squares are not completely homogeneous; instead, they appear upon closer observation to vibrate, even to breathe. The hatching pattern found in the significantly more expressive *Fouilles* drawings (p. 69) lives on in Laroche's grid works, occupying the paper in a self-absorbed and deliberately 'blind' manner, functioning somewhat as a model to itself. In her pencil drawings on black paper (p. 16), the hatched squares also take on a metallic quality and, at the same time, a sculptural character. As a result, the drawings in their overall structure recall Carl Andre's grid-shaped ground sculptures made from industrially manufactured square sheets of metal.

While the works of *Mes très Riches Heures* form a homogenous structure on paper, Laroche has, in most of her work since 2006, combined hatched and empty fields in a system of coordinates on a grid (pp. 6-7). However, there is no such regularity in her work when it comes to elements such as ornaments and motifs. Instead, schematic, often fragmentary images (or post-images) of objects and landscapes emerge. They cannot be immediately or easily identified, or even understood through association. There are of course exceptions; some works contain clearly defined motifs and their subject matter is alluded to in the title of the work, as is

the case in *Motherland Mar(i)ée, Spree, or Portrait* (p. 105). Then appear combinations of pixel squares of a black-and-white image that has been enlarged on a computer. The texture of these works comes from computer-processed photographs that have been enlarged, as is the case of the image of the artist's thumb, which was transposed into the linear coordinate system of certain drawings in the form of a computer print (p. 48).

Despite her roots in American and European Minimalism, Laroche's work—including her dot works (cf. p. 115) drawn with a black felt-tip pen on blotting paper—transfers the study of units and the grid into an artistic discourse on the aesthetics and processes of the reproduction of images, both in photography and the mass media. Examples include the Ben-Day Dots and the offset grids that are used to reproduce half-tones and mixed colors. Artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Sigmar Polke made these techniques the theme of their work in the 1960s, a decade which saw the emergence of Minimal Art but also the apogee of Pop Art.¹ Corinne Laroche's semi-figurative, semi-abstract works—such as the *Point de vue* series—recall the work of American artist Chuck Close, who has been using grids since the 1970s to make portraits that, close up appear to be decomposed, small abstract modules, but when viewed from a distance, form effigies.

Laroche's bipolar system of "conceptual pointillism", to invent a term, is based on the difference and dialectic between black and white fields or between differently coloured fields (*BB-...* drawings, p. 45), on a binary code of "yes" and "no", created in contemplative work, i.e. the placement (drawing/symbols) and free space (paper). This interaction, which is intensified by the quantity of the modules, results in a concentration and dissolution of vague forms on the surface of the sheet. This system is further intensified in the format of the diptych or the inversion (positive-negative) with black and white particles (cf. *Rectus-Inversus*, p. 8). The same applies to the use of the module system in the large-scale formats that cover entire walls such as *Once upon a time...* (p. 50-51) or in the multi-part works such as the diptychs, for example *Extension I Black* (p. 39).

In his book *Point and Line to Plane: Contribution to the Analysis of the Pictorial Elements*, published in 1926, Wassily

Kandinsky referred to the abstract point in the context of art as "the result of the initial impact of the tool with the material surface, with the basic surface. [...] It is with this initial impact that the surface is impregnated".² A point placed with artistic intent on a canvas or a sheet of paper is an independent entity with regard to the "basic surface" beneath it. This entity changes its relative tone with the modification of its size and form. It is precisely this phenomenon of point placement as occupation of the page that Corinne Laroche strives to show in the group of works *Points limites* (p. 132).

It is also interesting in this context to consider Niele Toroni's conceptually charged brushstrokes that he first employed in 1967 as a figurative tool beyond pure painting on canvas. This technique is related to that of Laroche's dot works, developed in the field of drawing on paper that she has been producing since 2011, with a black felt-tip pen and blotting paper. These dot works can be understood as an abstract variant to the more landscape-oriented or figurative works she has been producing since 2009 using the same technique (p. 116). However, while Toroni executes his analytic compositions of identical brushstrokes (brush no. 50) at regular intervals of 30 cm so that the intensity of his strokes and paint application remains homogenous, Laroche varies the sizes of the circular black forms made with a black felt-tip pen that she places on the white blotting paper for a defined period. As is the case in all of Laroche's works, this method has an analytic-conceptual component: stasis (the hand holding the pen without moving) and motion (the diffusion of the ink through the paper) are interlinked. Despite the concentrated, precise application of this method, the resulting black or coloured dots constitute living entities through which materiality, the inscription of the artist's spirit and body (the movement of the hand) and the presence of drawing tools become manifest.

Placing dots on paper that expand in a controlled manner and enter into a relationship with their surroundings (the boundaries of the page) and with one another, Laroche reflects on the dot as the nucleus of a possible line or hatching, of a motion forever implying expansion and diffusion—phenomena that are relevant to all of her works. However, temporality and chance at the moment of the artist's gesture are also significant to her work process. Time as a constituent factor becomes an important theme

in her drawings. In the minimalist song "From the air" by Laurie Anderson, from the album *Big Science* (1982), the American performance artist and musician sings: "this is the time. And this is the record of the time". This phrase describes pertinently the particular temporal character of Corinne Laroche's work. Her works depict time as a chain, or even the chain reaction of individual acts of drawing in which the process of the genesis of each page is left to be retrospectively deconstructed, even if the precise order of creation within this process cannot be retraced. Each work illustrates and records the temporality and time of its creation. Thus it is both a process ("time") and a storage medium ("record of the time") in one. Each work also captures and stores the particular internal position of the artist, which is externalised in the act of drawing. There is an externalisation of the artist's very personal timing and rhythm when working: "the progression of drawing in slowness and in a rhythm of repetitive gestures is an attempt to be present in the current instant, to experience only this instant and to clear my mind of all other issues and projects..."³ In an era where attitudes to graphic representation are numerous and often arbitrary, drawing in Corinne Laroche's work reveals itself to be a serious game that is governed by rules including survey, exploration, assertion and the questioning of the medium. The result is a "Big Science" of a very specific kind—a science that brings together concept and image, concentration and movement, gesture and system—a sensory science that as a result, unfolds and configures itself in the dynamic interpretation of the observer.

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- (1) For more on this topic in relation to recent photographic art, see the transformations of Thomas Ruff's pixelated Internet images.
 - (2) Wassily Kandinsky. *Point and Line to Plane: Contribution to the Analysis of the Pictorial Elements* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1947).
 - (3) Corinne Laroche in an email to the author, December 22, 2014