

Waiting For The Motionless Gesture

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Corinne Laroche's repertoire is made up of lines, hatching, dots and their corollaries: grids and squares. This graphic design vocabulary immediately recalls the avant-gardists and in particular, the pioneers Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and Josef Albers, and the dots, lines, patterns and squares that characterise them. Although this legacy is important, it is the following remark of Robert Morris that best contextualises Corinne Laroche's work: "the background is neither the margin nor the fringe of the implicit".¹

Cartography of the grid

What is the background in Corinne Laroche's work? In a number of her pieces, the ones that will be discussed here, the support—a white sheet of paper—first receives the tracing of a grid, sometimes visible and explicit, sometimes invisible and implicit. Next, some of the squares of the grid are filled, and the intersections of certain lines that make up the grid are reinforced. The grid spreads over a single plane², flat and without texture. While a grid can be used as a background, much like an arcane of the drawing, in the case of Laroche's work, it is brought to the foreground by the squares and dots it features, in a back and forth movement that annuls the illusion of depth. The background and foreground complete one another, interlink and reveal themselves to each other through the grid. But what does the grid represent? Like borders on a map, a grid separates spaces on a sheet of paper. It marks out the territories, some of which will be filled with tracings, while others will remain blank. It is an interlacing of straight lines—secants—a projection of thought without any referent in nature. It is the sign of a planned image rather than an imitation. The matrix Laroche generates becomes a canvas that

circumscribes gesture, provides points of reference and a support that guides the hand and constructs the drawing. In *Mes très Riches Heures*, a series that has been developing since 2006, Corinne Laroche performs a very simple gesture: she fills the printed squares of squared paper sheets in notepads with hatching. It starts off as a game, as she scribbles a route on a sheet of paper (an act that recalls her exploration of the city of Berlin when she had just settled there). Then the gesture takes over the whole page. She produces several sheets in a row, it is "writing that develops; the hand frees itself and settles into a rhythm".³ The gesture is minimal and non-theatrical; it is insignificant and requires no dexterity. These qualities are important and the artist finds "liberation"⁴ in them. She has indeed no more decisions to make; the gesture becomes automatic and soothing. However and maybe in spite of her desire for simplicity, hatching in a square brings a certain degree of narrative to the work. First she highlights the square, then the grid that constrains the form and the interrupted lines. A story unfolds, and beyond form, these pieces tell the story of a length of time.

After some experimentation, when Corinne Laroche gets down to the production of these works, she sets herself a defined and pre-established period of time. She produces one drawing a day, for a month, then a year. Having started one of the series on the 22nd of June 2010 and finished it on the 21st of June 2011, she decided to list them by season, thus structuring four series entitled *Summertime*, *Herbst*, *Inverno*, *Printemps*. Her process is therefore similar to that of Hanne Darboven who never stopped recording the passing of time and its materiality. The connections between the two artists go beyond this fundamental aspect. There are also formal connections—the use of grids and graphic similarities

in certain works—as well as similarities related to process. Both artists produce—with fundamental differences—pieces that bring the calendar into play and make the notation of figures related to this formal matrix central to their artistic practice. Darboven, as a German artist, made the tallying of figures comprising dates the foundation of her work, in a quest for universal abstraction, doubled with a tradition profoundly marked by writing and history. This is where Corinne Laroche's work is different: when she records dates, times, durations and place of production, this factual data written on the back of her sheets highlights the duration of her labour, the slowness and the importance of time put into words, as well as the experience. Although these indications are an important and even essential part of her personal practice, they cannot be seen on her drawings. They belong to the intimate and are not a tally of time per se, but rather the sign of the *jouissance* of the present moment.

In praise of slowness

The works on blotting paper are made up of one or several sheets and feature black or blue dots that come in various number, size and density. They are produced through the superimposition of sheets; the artist applies the tip of a felt-tip pen onto the top sheet, without moving, for a pre-determined period of time, then raises her hand. She lets the ink spread and will sometimes hold the pen down until the borders of the dot start bleeding and losing their usual shape, until embryo lines start appearing. The ink transfers from one sheet to another, with decreasing intensity. Works with a similar process are produced with coloured sheets causing the dots to take on a yellow colour. Just like black or blue ink infiltrates the blotting paper, here it is bleach that empties the support material of its colour. The dots can be on the margin of the sheet, truncated and partial, cut by the gap of the superimposed sheets. In this case, the missing part of a dot can be found on another sheet that could become an element of a different piece, like a ghost revealing the out-of-frame, the elsewhere or the infinite. The positioning of the felt-tip pen as an extension of the hand puts the gesture of the artist on hold. The work draws itself through the transferring of the ink onto the paper where the felt-tip pen lies and through the propagation from one sheet to another. The image appears through a capillary effect whose speed varies according to the number and size of the dots and the porosity of the support material. This process

renders the encounter between the ink and the paper visible and it also functions as a tool to measure time, through the size and ductility of the dot. Indeed Corinne Laroche's first drawings of this kind timed the duration spent producing them (*5 mn, pas plus* - 2012). However, the artist goes beyond the exploration of this fundamental aspect of her work, related to how long the pen rests on the paper, to reveal what will become the materialisation of a pause, a moment beyond time itself where conventional temporality lets go. In this regard, it is important to stop to reflect on the link between Corinne Laroche's work and her practice of tai-chi-chuan. The martial and spiritual Chinese art, described as internal, relies on vital energy, the chi that slowly transfers through breathing, into a search for harmony between the body and the soul, a balance between horizontality and verticality. The Taoist "*wei-wu-wei*", meaning "acting-without-acting", is at the root of this practice. It is not about inaction but rather about an action in harmony with nature and the cosmos. In these blotting paper pieces, Corinne Laroche proceeds by placing the felt-tip pen onto the sheet without doing anything more. The ink then slowly transfers by itself. Slowness is in fact one of the keys elements of Corinne Laroche's process. She observes what is happening, between the stillness of the hand, extended by the tool (her pen) and the appearance of colour, which through its expansion becomes form. She slows down the process of the creation of the work and invents a motionless gesture, carried out by the hand, which in turn itself becomes nothing more than an intermediary.

Emancipation from the grid

If we go back a little in Laroche's career, we will find that these more recent pieces originate from works produced with the same tools, but where dots made up the structure of the grid. Laroche's first blotting paper works date back to 2008. The artist reflects on their genesis: "it was when I came across an old sheet of blotting paper in a family cabinet that I remembered the function of this type of paper during my first school years. In my mind, the connection with the notion of expansion from an anchor point already present in my work was almost immediate. Therefore I started drawing a grid with a pencil on the sheet of blotting paper, then, I planted a black felt-tip pen in the middle of each square and waited for the ink of the pen to spread to the limits of the square. With my drawings in a notepad, *Mes très Riches Heures*, I perform

a simple "minimal" gesture. With dots, I no longer do anything, I just connect two elements. I am all the more interested in this process because it brings together various elements of the practice of tai-chi. It isn't always useful to visibly move in order to act; positioning yourself and being in the right place, settling within yourself is already an action that gives rise to movement, which in turn produces effects"⁵. Corinne Laroche starts therefore to invade the page with a diffusion of dots on the blotting paper, filling the squares formed by a grid. After, she applies her felt-tip pen at certain intersections, before placing it at random on the page. The same process is applied to the superimposition of sheets to which it is intimately linked. The artist states: "until the summer of 2012, the superimposed sheets were piled together on top of one another in a neat fashion. Then I started deliberately arranging the sheets in a chaotic manner to produce more random compositions, which led to a different type of work, performed in two stages. The first consisted of randomly placing the felt-tip pen on a purposefully disorganised stack of sheets; the second consisted of putting sheets together according to a proposition that seemed new and interesting"⁶. The formal decisions that preside over the production of Corinne Laroche's pieces, as well as the minimal gestures she chooses to perform, represent a step towards a form of "liberation" for the artist. With the disappearance of the grid—of regulation, if indeed the grid has this function—appears the random, controlled or rather suggested chance, and an even more assertive step towards a distancing from both the authority of the creator and even a certain paternity of the work of art.

Complementary system

Beside the progression towards liberation from personal rules, Corinne Laroche's work seems to be based on a series of oppositions and synergies. When she found out that thanks to digital technology, it was possible to empty and fill a photographic image, she appropriated this technique in its most elementary form: working on pixels. This method was commensurate with problematics already present in her work: boxes formed by the grid, size varying according to focal length and finally, squares and scattering starting from a centre, all within a practice that remains infinitely manual and thus demonstrates its own relationship with time. She starts

with her own photographs, puts them in black and white, takes the light out of them through an extreme simplification of their structure, reducing them to a set of dark and light pixels. Nothing much remains of the original photograph that becomes an outline, a tool to guide the gaze and the hand. Laroche then prints these outlines which act as a guideline for drawing or filling the squares of the grid, in a sort of modern grid method. The artist addresses figuration with the abstract sign of the square unit, creating pieces such as *Motherland Mar(i)ée*, where a figure appears: this work is a polyptych made from a photograph of her mother. This work represents a personal cartography where the original image gradually loses its importance, as the half-figured/half-abstract representation of the outline becomes ever-present. The works of the series *Rectus-Inversus* bring together four outlines produced from combinations of images that become four drawing diptychs, in which negative and positive are combined. Based on these same redrawn pieces, the series continues with *Extension I*. The propagation process can again be found here⁷, from one sheet to another and from one series to another. These drawings made to mirror each other are also placed on a print that removes some of their matter to transfer onto another sheet. Beyond the emptiness that they represent, the reserves that emerge become material and generate form. Emptiness becomes full and in return energy circulates and completes itself to form a whole. Other drawings use the same process, reducing the figurative image to an arrangement of pixels that are produced with coloured pencils on coloured sheets. Form emerges from colour through a sign reduced to the entanglement of lines. Instead of completely filling the squares with hatching, the artist inscribes them with a simple cross, enabling the colour to come though. If this is enough then why do more? Here, the minimal gesture is used in a sketch that allows for "the invention of shapes that renounce images"⁸ as Georges Didi-Huberman suggests when discussing minimalism. Fullness and emptiness, black and white and colour, the mathematical rigidity of the grid and the movement linked to the lines that compose it, the stasis and ductility of the dots: these formal factors do not indicate a binary system, but rather the two sides of a whole, of notions and shapes which, far from clashing, interlock and become complementary. Since Kandinsky, a line is nothing more

than a dot in movement, stretched into time. And these are precisely the two signs that Corinne Laroche develops in her work.

Drawing in the work of Corinne Laroche is the tracing of micro gestures, of pared-down actions inside which purity and precision can be found. The artist implements graphic rituals based on repetition and transformation, whose processes are codified in order to better liberate gesture, reach a motionless movement and express the present moment as well as life force. The latter aspect recalls the theory of art of late Renaissance painter and architect Federico Zuccaro in his treatise *Idea de' pittori, scultori ed architetti*, published in Turin in 1607. In this text, he radicalises his predecessors' theories on drawing or *disegno*⁹ and in particular the Vasari legacy which places him at the origin of the three major art forms—painting, sculpture and architecture—by linking theory and practice.

Zuccaro's modernity and singularity lie in his identification of two types of drawings: internal and external, united in creative transcendence. The *disegno* reveal a sign of God inside us: *disegno, segno di dio in noi*. While the etymological interpretation may seem a bit far-fetched, this idea reveals a complex and meticulous theoretical proposition¹⁰: Zuccaro defines drawing as lines and brings attention to the mental delineation that materialises intention. Accordingly, the vital power of drawing comes from the recovered connection between spirit and nature which, "far from any kind of mysticism of art, [upholds] the complete freedom of human inventiveness by assimilating it with divine creation".¹¹ In other words, drawing is at the heart of all creation, it is creation. Corinne Laroche's drawing is profoundly connected to the meaning of her project, to its development over time, to the manifestation of sensations and thoughts; drawing renders the artist's desire as well as her life force visible.

- (1) Robert Morris, "10 hypothèses de travail", in Christophe Cherix and Valérie Mavridorakis (éd.), Mel Bochner. Spéculations. Écrits, 1965-1973 (Geneva: Mamco, 2003), 217.
- (2) It is interesting to note that Corinne Laroche often looks at Byzantine icons that only have one picture plane.
- (3) Corinne Laroche in an interview with the author, Paris, 15 July 2014.
- (4) Idem.
- (5) Corinne Laroche in an email to the author, 27 October 2014.
- (6) Idem.
- (7) Propagation in Corinne Laroche's work dates back to the series Foulles (2004-2006), where each piece made up of several drawings was produced through a sequence of drawings that transferred the shape from one sheet to another through a process of propagation.

- (8) Georges Didi-Huberman. Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde (Paris, les éditions de minuit, 1992), 35.
- (9) Disegno in Italian means drawing (dessin in French) and intention (dessein in French), which today each have distinct meanings. But in old French the one word dessein encompassed both conception (project) and creation (finished work).
- (10) To learn more about this, read the fascinating essay by Ralph Dekoninck, "Disegno / Segno di Dio. Les origines de l'art selon Zuccaro", in Anaël Lejeune and Raphaël Pirenne (dir.). Le dess(e)in, entre projet et procès (Brussels; (SIC), coll. Mut zum Druck, 2009), 27-35.
- (11) Ibidem, 28. Zuccaro is influenced by the humanist tradition contemporary to his time, which suggests that man's creative capacity brings him closer to God.

