

## **Beth Sarasin: An Introduction to her Work**

Address by Dr. Petra Hesse on the occasion of the opening of the Foundation's exhibition of approximately fifty works and the launch of a book entitled *Beth Sarasin: A Heart of Glass* at the University Library Basle, 29 September 1995

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Looking at your invitation, you must have asked yourself what can a literary scholar, more particularly one specialising in Slavic literature, tell you by way of introduction about the work of a visual artist?

I also asked myself this question when I was invited to speak this evening and, spontaneously, various links between literature, or the science of the same, and the visual arts suggested themselves to me. Of the possible connections, semiotics, i.e. the theory of signs and sign systems and their meanings, above all seems to me to promise insights into the work of Beth Sarasin:

Works of art can generally be understood as complex signs.

A literary work, whether improvised, recited or written or read, can be described as a sequence of signs that unfolds in time.

Drawing, painting and sculpture, on the other hand, are systems of signs arranged in space.

The distinction between the arts of time and the arts of space is well known from art history. However, it is only at first glance, only apparently, that literature and the visual arts address entirely different (a priori) categories of knowledge: detached from each other, space and time can only be thought of in the abstract.

In contrast, in our actual perception, space appears to be a sequence of individual signs that we register one after the other, depending on intensity, viewing direction, etc.

Conversely, we register the 'passing' of time through changes in space, e.g. the course of the sun; or, removed from nature, we check the time based on the respective status of clock hands in relation to a dial, etc. The metaphors of movement for the 'passage' of time ('course', 'flow', 'lapse') clearly indicate the connection between their perception and spatial conditions.

In both instances, we read elements of our spatio-temporal environment as meaningful signs. With regard to the decoding of meaningful signs, i.e. of signs pointing to something, our everyday perception is not essentially different from our perception of a work of art. In both cases, the question 'What does this mean?' aims at creating a connection that is ordered somehow between the individual signs perceived (including experience).

According to the theory of signs, connections thus ordered can be captured in contrastive pairs: bright/dark, up/down, regular/irregular, etc.

And that brings me to my actual subject, for it is precisely the latter contrastive pair (regular/irregular) that appears to me fundamental to the work of Beth Sarasin. When I think beyond the drawings and examples of graphic art exhibited here to the sculptural works, objects etc. much of which is represented in the book also launched here this evening, I would like to take the contrastive characteristics even further to an antithesis of geometry and chaos.

In her sculptural work Beth Sarasin tends to the precisely calculated, basic geometric shape: again and again, she returns to the cube. The drawings, too, that were created (before, but also after) in connection with individual sculptures, are constructed with geometrical precision.

In contrast, the line proliferates in a large group of drawings and graphic works without following external rules. Occasionally, the pictorial representation almost disappears in the dis- or better anti-order of the lines. Chaos prevails.

But one can only speak of a predominance of geometry or chaos at first glance: the strict geometry of the sculptural cubes is cut through, as some of the corners are cut off: perfection is diminished, and the basic form complicated.

The chaos of drawn lines, in contrast, reveals itself as a labyrinth: the eye is sent on its way, on a quest, and finds connections; coming, as it were, into the open of a recognised figural representation, i.e. an ordered representation based on experience.

Starting from opposing extremes, the process of observing the work of Beth Sarasin thus leads us to a new view of space: we bring the dimension of time into the context of the spatial work of art. We see (that which is clearly recognisable) less than we shape, based on recognition—perception becomes a progression in space **and** time.

One could object that every artwork in principle requires a seeing with understanding ('you only see what you know or understand'—and understanding, too, presupposes knowledge).

But it seems to me that in the case of Beth Sarasin's work, the essentially inconclusive process of formative seeing lies at the very centre of our interest: ultimately, the spatially fixed signs (geometric shapes, proliferating lines) are less important than the process of perception that they trigger.

Thus, the—accustomed and seemingly ordinary—beauty of the basic geometric shape becomes the goal of seeing precisely where we first have to reconstruct its perfection with our own eyes; the cube with the imperfection or missing corner must be recognised as such.

If visual reconstruction is realised, the question of the relationship between perfection and disturbance arises in consequence: it expresses itself as a curiosity about the relationship between the whole and its parts, between that which exists materially and that which is missing. The eye literally becomes the yardstick of measurement—in search of a hidden formula. The concrete work stands before our eyes as a sign pointing to an immaterial signified. As in the case of the cube cross-sections, this becomes equally evident in the graphic representation of spiral calculations, which were developed in cooperation with the Fraunhofer Institute.

However, not only the eyes, but the hands, too, are challenged time and again: the surfaces of Beth Sarasin's sculptures are perfectly finished whether in marble or in chromium steel. But the tactile reconstruction of the forms ends at the cuts that traverse them—here, it is already a matter of ordering them oneself: one's own individual arranging of the parts of a cut cube, or of defective cube shapes, on or next to each other.

The drawings similarly require to be put in relation to each other, most especially the early ones from the 1960s that were created under the influence of the strongest painkillers: frequently they are as if enclosed in a single overall form that acts as a framework, such as a square, an ellipse or a circle. The interior of these forms, however, splits into intersecting, sometimes irregular, but densely and regularly hatched fields and tiny geometric shapes. Our visual habits lead us to interpret brighter and darker hatched fields perspectively, i.e. spatially, e.g. in a drawing of 1968 entitled 'Venezia, under control'. But this interpretation lacks any single meaning: when looking at it, the slightest change in the focus of the eye leads to a new three-dimensional interpretation; one space tips over into another, as it were, one that in turn does not last—the entire depth effect oscillates, creating almost a feeling of dizziness.

This spatial multiplicity of meaning still characterises the graphic art of the following years, which is based on the principle of multiplying basic geometric constructions. Again and again, the impression of a view of the earth from a great height is created. The interpretation of individual forms, their assemblage to landscapes, for example, or to an enigmatic notation (neumes), in short: to an interpretable system of signs, thus presents to the creative vision a new task at every moment.

Beth Sarasin retains this principle to the present day, as the graphic series 'Coup d'œil' of 1993 shows: it is not the completed creation, but rather the beauty of its signs, to quote Alexander Pope, that is 'in the eye of the beholder'.

As the years go by, Beth Sarasin's observant eye becomes aware of ever more areas of human life: eroticism, laughter, masking, the fundamental meaning of which is demonstrated in the 'Venezia' drawing of 1986: here, the central figure has as many faces as turns of its head—the 'face' sign in its ambiguity is unmasked by the mask. The 'true' face of the human figure thus appears as a function of the moment in space and time.

The drawings form a particularly fascinating group where in each work the geometrically ordered and the organically rampant are connected. This includes the 'Dragon enmeshed' of 1995 as well as one of six cube sections from 1993 in which a female figure is enclosed in a cube. The 'Burning Sections' of 1989 can also be interpreted as a synthesis of geometry and chaos—although here, the chaos is not the quasi organically rampant, but the elementally destructive.

To the present day, processual openness regarding the arrangement of spatial signs remains a defining characteristic of Beth Sarasin's work. This openness doesn't facilitate our perception in any way—on the contrary, it prolongs and complicates such perception, never allowing it to come to a definite end.

Among the first to formulate the importance of this openness to modern art was a literary theorist. Which brings me back to my initial question: what can a literary scholar tell you about the work of Beth Sarasin? She can quote the statement of Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who in 1916 wrote in his essay 'Art as Technique':

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important ...

With this statement by a literary theorist I would like to send you, and your shaping eye, on your way through the exhibition of drawings by Beth Sarasin and also through the book of her works which are not exhibited here, as a *secundum comparationis*.