

“In the Crucible of Meaning”

John Yau

I.

For the past decade, Jorinde Voigt has been creating large-scale drawings on paper, using traditional materials such as ink, oil stick, pencil, watercolor, and, more recently, collage. In the drawings that she did before incorporating collage, the artist combined line and text to diagram both factual and fictive activities, such as the flight of eagles, geographical directions, wind patterns, rotations, shifting horizon lines, top-ten pop charts, kisses, and electrical currents. Whirling across the paper, the sinuous patterns of lines and arrows—some of which may overlap—mark relentless change as well as convey the potential for chaos and ecstasy that resides within any system. Classification and pandemonium are inseparable. It is on the porous border of this vast abyss—what is called “infinity”—that Voigt investigates the caesuras between perception and knowledge, form and dissolution. One of the guiding principles behind the drawings is the application of rigorous procedures: algorithms to decide the direction of a line or the Fibonacci sequence to determine the number of lines branching off the initial one. Chance and persistence are essential. The turbulent networks of lines transform the paper into both the artist’s imaginative space and a visual map of the movements of various elements in time.

II.

Voigt’s selected activities underscore the recognition that all of us are enmeshed in an unstable field of visible and invisible forces, ranging from the microscopic to the immeasurable. Time is marked by continuity, repetition, change, and upheaval. Amid a constant assault of every kind of data, the artist’s focus on a handful of activities can be read as a meditation on time passing, the indifferent universe, nature, culture, and erotic union. One senses her unwavering awareness that time is always pulling her forward, toward chaos, as well as her desire to both affirm and shape its force. Rather than turn away, she keeps finding ways to examine its inevitability. It seems to me that Voigt’s project is predicated on a series of fundamental questions that are philosophical in nature: With all that is going on around us, how can one heighten one’s sensitivity into a receptive state of consciousness? How does one accept time’s relentless passing, even while trying to reveal what it means to live in its flow?

III.

Voigt works on thematically related, numbered groups of drawings. She is simultaneously meticulous and impulsive. Her work exists in the territory between writing and drawing, between precision and speculation, and so resists definition within a single category. She is a diarist, information gatherer, cartographer, meteorologist, mathematician, physicist, fabulist, close-

reader, and classical musician, who, in the act of drawing, is attuned to both the minute and the infinite, to the fact that she is a solitary inhabitant of a planet drifting between a forgotten origin and an unknowable future.

IV.

Between November 2009 and October 2010, Voigt walked through the botanical gardens of every city that she visited. These included Sydney, Mexico City, London, Rome, and Berlin. Speaking about *Botanic Code* (2009–10), the artist stated, “[t]he outcome of such a visit to a botanical garden is a group of painted aluminum rods; an algorithmically developed ‘code’ that takes as its theme my walk and perceptions along the parameters of color, proportion, performance, season of the year, norm and infinity—and creates a new matrix for perception.”¹

By using a camera and other means to detail her experience, she was able to rigorously organize her perceptions of the plants that she encountered in a garden. She focused on the colors found in each plant, and their varying levels of prominence. She documented each plant’s height and circumference and took note of its Latin name. Using a strict set of logarithms, she developed a color code through which she classified and transferred a record of her experience to the aluminum poles.

The arrangement of colors on a particular pole reveals the levels of visibility that struck the artist when she saw a particular plant during her walk. Leaning against the wall, the pole cannot be circumnavigated and seen in its entirety, reminding us that experience is always fragmentary and partial, that the most ordinary elements of reality exceed our comprehension, and that, paradoxically, we must break it down into fragments in order to comprehend reality at all.

At the same time, when walking through a garden, and by going this way and not that or that way and not this, the artist was able to synthesize purposefulness and chance. Although she was not influenced by either of them, I am reminded of Georges Seurat’s belief in a scientific approach to painting and opticality, as well as the work of Carl Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy and ecology.

Each rod contains one to seven colors, with writing and lines near the bottom. The area occupied by each color is determined by its prominence in the corresponding plant. By establishing the parameters of perceptual distinctions, the artist tacitly acknowledges that the individual exists in a reality beset by random and chaotic forces. In contrast, a botanical garden is “a well-tended area displaying a wide range of plants with their botanical names.”² Universities and scientific research organizations maintain them for the purpose of research and education. Historically, they can be traced to European medieval medicinal gardens.

While *Botanic Code* extends out of Voigt’s earlier concerns, it marks both a departure and breakthrough, which helped usher in a new, ongoing phase in the artist’s work. For one thing, the botanical garden provided a specific field of research, paving the way for other, clearly defined

areas with which to engage the fragmentary nature of experience, and the fact that it doesn't all add up.

In *308 Views on Plants and Trees* (2011), Voigt combined notation and collage for the first time. The title alludes to the Japanese tradition of woodcuts in which Utagawa Hiroshige, Katsushika Hokusai, and Tsukioka Yoshitoshi depicted 100 views of a familiar motif, such as Mount Fuji, the moon, or the city of Edo. In counterpoint to the central themes of these justly famous, Japanese portfolios, Voigt picked familiar plants and trees, such as the rhododendron and the ginkgo, as motifs.

In the case of the trees, the cutout patches of colored paper correspond to the silhouettes and color of the trees as observed by the artist, while in the case of the plants, the size of the patches decrease as she moves closer to inspect the leaves, branches, and stems. The artist collaged thirty to fifty possible views on each of seven large sheets of paper, suggesting that there are infinitely more. In addition to the patches of color, the artist included fictional data regarding space and time. She used arrows and numbers to indicate the wind's direction and speed. No matter how circumscribed or ideal the situation might be in the actual botanical gardens, Voigt recognizes that change is constant, and that art must acknowledge life and the possibility of upheaval if it is to be true to reality. Such consciousness introduces a current of urgency into the work. I am reminded of these oft-quoted lines from Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress":

But at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.³

V.

In *100 Views on Chinese Erotic Art: From 16th to 20th Century* (2011), Voigt responded directly to an exhibition, *The Chinese Pleasure Garden: Erotic Art from the Bertholet Collection*, which she saw in Berlin at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Approaching the erotic works with an almost scientific detachment, Voigt cut silhouettes from colored paper that corresponded in color and profile to a particular element, such as the outward shape of a woman's black hairdo. She determined the number of silhouettes by how many times she looked at the detail. In addition to a woman's hairdo, the silhouettes include a bathtub, the naked bodies of the entwined lovers, a bed, and a sash.

Removed from their context, the silhouettes name only themselves. A sense of solitariness saturates them. Although our perceptions bring us into contact with reality, often having us look at the same things again and again, this experience also isolates us. I cannot help but think that fragments anticipate reality's dominion over us, for time breaks everything down. The point is not

to resist, but to succumb with our eyes open, inflecting our engagement with the erotic and celebratory.

By unraveling the erotic views into their constituent parts, the artist essentially undresses the encounter, turning it into a collection of visual and written data. Although this is not Voigt's intention, one could say that she undoes Cubism by restoring authority to the fragment.

The stacking of seven red baths in a drawing forms a visual record of the number of times the artist glanced at this detail. Ensnared in a tangle of curving and straight lines, each of which documents an aspect of constantly changing reality, the baths maintain their identity, even amid the turmoil. The seven distinct shapes underscore that perception is a transformative continuum, that we never see the same thing exactly the same way.

One can liken this aspect of Voigt's art to a piece of music, where each cut paper collage (performance) is a unique variation on the original element (written score). Her drawings (or what she calls views) are made up of numerous performances, which she configures into something larger.

The tension between form and entropy, silhouette and instability, underscores the artist's awareness that one's experience, no matter how refined and aesthetic, does not exist apart from either the ordinary world or the unresponsive universe. The self-contained fragments seem to be stand-ins for the fragments and details of memory, which we must constantly reassemble to form a narrative. However, by stripping away the story and context, leaving us with only a collection of details, some of which are repeated multiple times, Voigt encourages us to re-imagine an encounter from multiple perspectives, thus reconnecting us with our erotic desire(s). We are compelled to decipher the profile of the entwined bodies, which exist in a world from which we are excluded, just as our own thoughts remain inaccessible to others.

VI.

In *Piece for Words and Views* (2012), the artist's most ambitious work to date, Voigt made thirty-six collaged drawings in response to Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. The collaged drawings are not aligned to the book, but traverse its contents. She has transformed her reading into a lexicon of highly charged signs, making them the basis of *Piece for Words and Views*—an album at once personal and open to scrutiny.

Here, I want to make a few additional observations about Voigt's engagement with Barthes's book. The first is that, in contrast to her previous projects—*Botanic Code*, *308 Views on Plants and Trees*, and *Views on Chinese Erotic Art: From 16th to 20th Century*, all of which are based on seeing colors and outward shapes—*Piece for Words and Views* comes out of reading. This means that Voigt had to develop a shape capable of visually transmitting the word or phrase she had in mind. After selecting pictograms for certain words and phrases—a black X or a red heart, for example—she cut out a corresponding monochromatic shape. The challenge was to translate

abstract phrases into visual signs. For the phrase, “the arms of desire lifted to the sky,” the artist chose blue paper, evoking the sky and the longing for an answer. The “origin of all places” is a black circular shape (a hole?), while “tunnel” is usually a black semi-circle with a hole in it, seeming, in some pieces, as if it has been stretched out. (In making her lexicon of signs, Voigt reverses Barthes, who often analyzed visual images found in advertising and other forms of mass media.)

In the earlier works, the shape’s outward form was fixed, changing only in the way each of the matching silhouettes had been cut. Unlike *Views on Chinese Erotic Art: From 16th to 20th Century*, where the silhouette of a woman’s hair stays more or less the same, in *Piece for Words* and *Views a stingray* is seen from below, in both a three-quarter profile and from the side.

Although Barthes was a literary theorist who influenced numerous schools of thought (structuralism, semiotics, social theory, anthropology, and post-structuralism), which focused on different ways of apprehending and reading of the world, it is important to remember this single fact about everything he did: he was adamantly against doxa (popular opinion which becomes orthodoxy and vice versa). He believed in the imagination. Throughout his life, he pursued the difficult and the elusive, the obtuse meaning rather than the obvious, the easy, or received. In *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, Barthes defers meaning in favor of nuance and momentary associations. The result is a book of hesitations, stammerings, gasps, and caesuras—of the voice and body. Intent on slowing everything down, he patiently analyzes that most intense and overwhelming of states, unanswered desire—the language of complete love, and the deep solitary state it throws the lover into. There are sections devoted to “mad[ness],” “embarrassment,” “jealousy,” and the associations that one has with clothes worn at certain moments. It is a book in which Barthes examines extreme states, like a watchmaker carefully separating tiny cogs, springs, and interlocking wheels. Nothing is too small or inconsequential. I don’t think I am exaggerating when I say that he demonstrated how it is possible to read the world freshly, without cynicism; that he restored joy, innocence, and vulnerability to analysis. These are the states of being Voigt shares with Barthes.

VII.

A Lover’s Discourse is a series of fragments arranged in alphabetical order, beginning with “to be engulfed” (s’abîmer) and ending with the “will-to-possess” (vouloir-saisir).⁴ There is no overarching narrative holding the book together. At the same time, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s epistolary novel about unrequited love, is one of Barthes’s touchstones. At the end of the novel, Werther, who is deeply in love with Charlotte (who has married Albert, eleven years her senior), elects to shoot himself, using Albert’s pistols. In the section beginning “When my finger accidentally,” Barthes focuses on the moment when Werther,

after accidentally touching Charlotte, obsesses over this brief instant of intimacy, rather than fetishizing it:

“But in fact Werther is not perverse, he is in love: he creates meaning, always and everywhere, out of nothing, and it is meaning which thrills him: he is in the crucible of meaning. Every contact, for the lover, raises the question of an answer: the skin is asked to reply.”⁵

Voigt’s sign for “unrequited” is a silhouette of two disembodied golden-yellow hands barely touching, with the fingers of the one on the left (Werther) extending, while the fingers on the right (Charlotte or “Lotte”) are demurely pointing down, except for the pinkie, which has risen to meet what she will never have. The reason Voigt chose yellow paper for all the phrases connected to Werther is because in the novel he wore yellow pants, which was the popular fashion of the time. In the face of reality’s uncertainty, Voigt constructs a world in which nothing is arbitrary.

In each drawing, Voigt collaged a number of the visual signs (her fragments), and drew linear signs representing “Melody,” “Direction N-S,” and the “Speed of Rotation.” The new algorithm she introduced into these drawings consists of signs representing the way someone engulfed by love might section off time: “The day before yesterday; yesterday; today; tomorrow; the day after tomorrow.” By breaking time up into such manageable units, the bereft lover is able to (temporarily) prevent himself or herself from falling into a pit of despair. This consciousness of chaos’ inevitability is a constant in Voigt’s work. And yet rather than succumb to despair or rail against time passing, she finds a way to celebrate it.

Inspired by Barthes’s close reading of desire and love, Voigt creates signs that evoke amorous intensity with a coolness that enables the viewers / readers to find their own way into this world, to have their memories stirred, to consider what it means to be alive in time. One senses the intimacy, tenderness, and even violence (the turbulence of one’s emotions when in love) in her sinuous lines, precise notations, and the cutting out of each sign. Desire and heartbreak are indissoluble. Everything she does resonates with the “shimmering beauty of the body.” I am reminded of what Susan Sontag wrote about Barthes: “Defending the senses, he never betrayed the mind.”

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- 1 Jorinde Voigt, *Botanic Code* (Cologne, 2011).
 - 2 “Botanical Garden,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Botanical_garden (accessed May 25, 2012).
 - 3 Andrew Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress,” in *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elisabeth Story Donno (London, 2005), p. 50.
 - 4 In the English edition, only the original French is arranged in alphabetical order.
 - 5 Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 2010), p. 67.