

CATHERINE DE ZEGHER and KATHERINE CARL A Story around Zero

Drawing in the hands Joëlle Tuerlinckx is highly explorative, a medium for thinking the world through the questioning of the ruling systems that separate it into categories of classes, disciplines, and levels. It is in this activist sense that her drawing has to be considered as a tool for surveying the nature of institutions and charting their archives, collections, and reports in a process aimed at eroding the system from within. Even if this activity only happens in a manner specific to the microcosm of each of the institutions to which she is invited to operate and install work, it is a process that is repeated over and over again, as if to cover the whole area in between the inhabited spaces. As though marking a blank page — which inevitably is never actually blank — Tuerlinckx abundantly and energetically fills the empty exhibition space with her stacks of paper sheets, "drawn-out" screenings, and careful arrangements of common objects. What might seem at first like a chaotic accumulation of marks is in fact a subtle but radical attempt to circumscribe the void and trace a change of structure. Her installations overflow with materials categorized according to a logic that is associative — as opposed to the dissociative structure that usually governs the institutional system. Tuerlinckx works with lines of time and thinking, subjecting these ephemerality to drawing processes connected to measure, scale, and proportion, casting them as artworks. Her exhibitions often operate beyond the conventional time and space constraints of openings and closings, as she appropriates everyday objects and intervenes in the space and activities of the setting of the exhibition in ways that also speak to and question the perceived limits of drawing itself as a defined discipline.

For Tuerlinckx, indeed, drawing goes beyond the sheet of paper — a process she often materializes through extrapolating lines into space, a method also deployed in the sixties and seventies by such artists as Gego, Eva Hesse, and Richard Tuttle, all of whom released the line into space, effectively liberating the line of thought. In the work of these artists, we witness a renewed commitment to materiality and tactile sensibility, with drawing as a "moving" trace in time and space. Inspired by this release of floating and connecting lines, Tuerlinckx unravels the complexity of line through material and spatiotemporal experimentation. During the last century, as the line became separated from the support, the accumulation of human marks that make up the drawing began to appear more clearly to be without a ground. In this way, freed from both support and representation, outside of the conventional system, it has now, more than ever, come to create a place for being that did not previously exist. Drawing, as it continues to be used in Tuerlinckx's work, can be seen as a constructive deconstruction, allowing us to understand marks and lines as constituting the ground and its articulation, rather than the support as merely preconditioning the drawing. The exhibition at The Renaissance Society, for example, captured the drawing process in film projections that depicted graphic marks being traced, erased, and retraced — ultimately defining the background rather than the other way around. At The Drawing Center, on the other hand, working on the floor and on large tables, she made drawings with objects such as metal discs, lengths of string, photocopies, fax papers, newspaper clippings, and enlarged and reduced-scale diagrams — all meticulously arranged to inventory the lines, shapes, textures, hues, and spatial relationships that are often ignored in everyday life. Within the context of a museum, these constellations of items constituted a play on the program, collection, standards, conservation techniques, and cultural functions of institutional spaces. In this way, on the level of critique, her work relates not only to the Belgian legacy of artists such as René Magritte and Marcel Broodthaers but also to the American legacy of Lawrence Weiner and Sol LeWitt.

In making her inventories, Tuerlinckx uses objects as visible and palpable manifestations of her own way of thinking, which upsets the division of the world. Her assemblages of generic things are emphatically non-metaphorical;

instead, they indicate the movement of her thinking about the specifics of the gallery setting and about what is there and what isn't. Tuerlinckx's installations are also sites to display cultural artifacts. In this sense, her practice corresponds to the site-specific political and

aesthetic critiques of early seventies Conceptual artists. Taking the specific phenomenological conditions of a given setting as her departure point, Tuerlinckx deploys a methodology devoted to indicating the expanse of arrays of thought, which can never be fully explored. Besides drawing, her main vehicle for compiling inventories is writing, and her archives and lists disclose manifold meanings. List-making can be an everyday organizational tool that provides insight into thought patterns, even in an associative manner, as can also be seen in the work of Hanne Darboven and Hans Haacke. In her lists, Tuerlinckx makes apparent the often irrational and chaotic process of thinking itself. The simple framework of her installations disguises what turn out on closer inspection to be wildly multiple and relational thoughts. Conceiving of her drawings as a score for action, the artist even approaches the medium as a way of talking about drawing, as a way to inventory it, so critical a tool has it become to her oeuvre.

Tuerlinckx's conception of drawing as not only action but also the communication of action raises the problematic of the relation of the part to the whole. When she presents her inventory, her catalogue is not meant to add up nearly to a whole entity in the manner of, say, a Modernist painting. Hers is not a system but a strategy. As with certain pieces by Bruce Nauman — who has purported to transfer the inside of his head (*Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room*, 1968) and of his studio (*Mapping the Studio 1, Fat Chance John Cage*, 2001) to the space of the gallery — Tuerlinckx's metonymy takes shape as an association between a part and a whole (Nauman's representation of his studio, to say nothing of his "mind," being of necessity only partial), but the relationship is not one of synecdoche. Parts in Tuerlinckx's work do not "stand in" for a totality, which would be an arrangement that limited their possibilities for meaning; her work may create a new scale, smaller or larger, but it always does so in such a way that possibilities are expanded, often through the multiplication of relationships. Her works do not add up to a new system; they acknowledge that they are part of an order that is infinitely larger than any specific system could ever be.

Each of Tuerlinckx's inventories gestures beyond itself, outlining manifold routes that one might travel in the future as well as those that are already well-worn. As did the Fluxus artists, she relies on the physical presence of materials, even when they are used simply to mark emptiness. Her "exhibition negatives" and "gap-objects" consist of round traces — the ring left on a table after a glass of coffee or wine has been removed, for example. "It shows what cannot be exhibited in itself," Tuerlinckx has said. "This borrowing or transfer prepares the question of the mark's proper place of belonging. They have their own shape while also retaining the memory of another situation." Often thought of as empty spots, these circular marks are actually multiple in themselves, insofar as they function as thresholds and transitions into other situations.

Tuerlinckx's *A Wonderful Journey around Zero* speaks eloquently of circumscribing the void, which is seen here as an open space for human marking in a world that is otherwise fully systematized and structured. Under this conception of drawing, which recognizes that a single mark can articulate and change the background itself— which is to say, the order of our social reality — the medium allows for a rare "open" space in our society, one that is available for the conscious formation and critical development of subjectivity. Treating the material visibility of this nonexistent "open" space as a new possibility is an essential feature of Tuerlinckx's drawing: her marking of emptiness brings distinctness to indistinctness. At The Drawing Center, she added a drawn circle to the institution's front window and cut a small circular area from the plaster of the back wall, permitting a direct view into and out of the director's office. As her *Wonderful Journey around Zero* uncannily resonates with the institution's story of attempting to create such an open space in the void of Ground Zero, each circle stands on its own, acting as a conduit between the inside and the outside of the public presentation space. But each circle is also literally circling around the world from space to space, as she carries them with her from institution to institution.

It is particularly useful to consider how Tuerlinckx's art stands in conscious dialogue with the work of another great Belgian critic of institutions, Marcel Broodthaers. As with his oeuvre, Tuerlinckx's overflows with material and visual puns. In *Inventory of Drawing* a cluster of

vitrines became not merely the means by which the "real objects" could be seen, but the very focus of the viewer's gaze. She also coyly arrayed scores of small frames for drawings on what she termed "the administrative wall" behind the main gallery, placing them in such a way that they seemed on the verge of spilling over into the gallery and yet remained largely beyond the limits of the public's sight. In so doing, the artist meant to stress that we tend to forget that cultural institutions consist of people: artists, writers, visitors, and, behind the wall, the staff, who often work in difficult circumstances, sharing a belief in the transformative potential of art. The frames she used on "the administrative wall" were backless and adhered directly to their support, neither holding nor protecting the works; indeed, many of them contained photocopied images of the vitrines in the exhibition, now offered as art objects twice over through different sign systems. The tautology was humorously compounded: as the frames encompassed another object whose function was also to frame, they could not maintain the composition or contain the meaning of its contents, thereby losing the ability to perform their expected function.

There is a kind of humor in Tuerlinckx's art, and it highlights how the creativity of plentiful associations can confound precise documentation. In her work, systematization subverts systematization, rendering the very concept absurd. This intuitive correspondence echoes with Broodthaers's art, which itself often overthrew tautologies — as with his rebus plaques and his 1964 plaster assemblage *For a Glorious Future of Artistic Behavior*. This latter piece, placed at the entrance to his first gallery show, consisted of the title written in script next to rows of eggshells aligned like text. Seeing the words and the eggshells in equivalent positions, the viewer expects a discursive function to emerge, but both methods result in insufficient descriptions. Similarly, in each zone at The Drawing Center, Tuerlinckx affixed small visual labels, some on index cards, to "explain" or at least denote the presence of the artwork. By creating a new representation of the exhibition event on a smaller scale, the wall labels approached a condition of autonomy, which resulted in a surreal *mise en abyme*, with the labels themselves calling for further clarification. Her checklist and map of the exhibition zones served both as descriptive documentation and as her own creative statement, thus invoking the fertile, if unstable, status of the diagram in visual representation and of the index in text.

It is also worthwhile to consider Tuerlinckx's work in conjunction with the writing of the scholar and critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, in particular his 1984 essay "From Faktura to Factography." For example, Tuerlinckx takes issue with an anonymous text he quotes, which first appeared in 1924 in the Soviet journal *Lef*, that introduces the idea that "an advertisement with a photograph of the object that is being advertised is more efficient than a drawing of the same object."² She contests this over and over in her practice, particularly in a collaboration with Willem Oorebeek that presents found newspaper photographs coupled with geometric diagrams. In one such piece, for example, the duo selected a picture of Dick Cheney standing in front of an identical large-scale video image. In another work, a group of female Arab demonstrators hold up identical pictures of a young boy. These images are accompanied by a series of drawn overlapping squares — some solid and some just outlines — that illustrate the way the photos seem to absurdly lack all meaning except for that generated by the repetition of the same. Such a multiplication of images precludes decoration, illustration, representation, and explanation.

Tuerlinckx, like Broodthaers, can be thought of as a sociologist investigating art institutions — conceived of as organizations composed of dedicated individuals — who engages each of those individuals in her process. To staff members at The Drawing Center, for example, her bare tables in the main gallery did not appear to be "empty," as they had memories of Tuerlinckx working there day after day when she prepared the installation. This connection between artistic production and sociological practice is discussed by Buchloh in his influential essay "From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." There he delves into such Lawrence Weiner works as *A Square Removal from a Rug in Use* and *A 36" x 36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* both 1968, in which the artist employs the square to make marks on institutional structures.³ This play of

shape, material, and inscription onto the institution is visible in Tuerlinckx's work as well. The round cross-section of a column from the main gallery of The Drawing Center, for example, reappeared in the same space as an element in her installation, where, represented in two dimensions, it seemed smaller in scale. While corresponding to the larger round, it was made generic, able to be rolled from one place to the next and thus to carry a trace of the institution into a new context. Similarly, she transferred an exemplary piece of the system of the city of New York — the grid of the squares in the sidewalk of Broadway — to the north wall of The Drawing Center in thin, precise graphite lines. On the south wall, she remade this grid over and over from memory. It quickly went askew, thus becoming her own.

As much as Tuerlinckx can be seen as advancing a new kind of institutional critique, she is also dedicated to enacting shifts of location, material, and process. The holes she cut for viewing at the front and back of the gallery at The Drawing Center and her films and diapositives at The Renaissance Society were specific applications of her principles concerning stretching and the dialectic of the inside/outside. These latter pieces depend on the concept that projection, no matter of what image, creates an extension, a connection between the lens and the image. A projected beam of light is an immaterial carrier that lengthens an image, transferring it to a new place. Tuerlinckx's stretch films capture her as she creates drawings; the films erase and retrace and present the drawings in a format that the artist was able to modulate through editing, cutting, and using slow motion. Likewise, a "walking segment" marked on the floor with colored tape presented at the Fridericianum at *Documenta XI*, 2002 allowed for Tuerlinckx to in effect transfer the path of her motion to the Galerie Marie-Puck Broodthaers.⁴ This trace of walking can be seen as one of many manifestations of Tuerlinckx's process of thinking.

Indeed, extension beyond usual parameters is a hallmark of Tuerlinckx's oeuvre, even when she works with elements that are a small segment of something larger — with divisions of lines, lengths of elastic, even fragments of conversations carried out via fax, parts that paradoxically broaden because their aim is not to measure but to re-categorize. With the artist always investigating untapped reserves, her leftovers would become central material if the setting were shifted. As Henri Bergson explained so lucidly in *Creative Evolution*, "nothing" is neither the void nor the negation of form, but is rather something relative to context; it is simply something that does not fit our expectations, or that we cannot fit into the framework in which we find ourselves working.⁵ That which for one culture is deemed "nothing," or "meaningless," thus may be a quite substantial, and desirable, something in another.

Whether taking the form of a stretch, a shift, or a remake, Tuerlinckx's installations always consist of excessive immediacies and responses, of a buildup of objects arranged on tables or in vitrines — or, in the case of The Drawing Center exhibition, a buildup of the vitrines and frames themselves. The fax lines, rounds, measuring sticks, and strings are neither mimetic nor abstract, as they do not emerge exclusively from the imagination and thus do not "imitate" nature. They are what Rosalind Krauss might categorize as the "neuter" copy — which, despite its name, should not be viewed as unproductive, or unreproductive, as it is richly fertile. Indeed, Tuerlinckx revels in the lushness of the unbridled possibilities of the copy. For The Drawing Center show, the artist experimented with the institution's letterhead and mailing labels to investigate how the copy releases perspectives other than those expressed by the original. In the process of photocopying, lines of the grain in the paper, the shadow cast by the paper's edge, a stray crease — all can be exposed as a new mark or fuzzy area that did not show up in the original. On the other hand, an imperceptible sliver of the letter "D" printed on the paper may disappear. The new incarnation shares many traits with the old while bearing its own identity. Extraordinary, in this context, has been the conceptualization of a publication series to accompany her exhibition project. Not content to remake The Drawing Center's infrastructure, Tuerlinckx remade the *Drawing Papers* publications series, another element of the institution's brand, in her *Parallel Drawing Papers*. Her new series resembles the original in format, yet instead of one template being printed in multiple copies, each other 120 (and counting) publications constitutes an individual artist project unto itself.

Although Tuerlinckx's remakes are certainly not traditionally mimetic, they can be considered as a kind of mimesis of thinking. Tuerlinckx writes that "by object, I mean a visible and palpable manifestation of my own thinking."⁶ The term "mimesis" — a concept more commonly referred to as "imitation" or "representation" — is traditionally above all thought of as the representation of nature. Mimesis is invariably stylized because it frames reality, which has no prescribed borders. "Mimesis of thinking"⁷ does not apply to nature but to mind; it is a multiplication, a means of gesturing beyond, to the outside of oneself and one's operations. Very significantly, it is an act that opens the system by investigating the realm of the phenomenological. Tuerlinckx points out that differentiation, choice, and disagreement are crucial in this terrain. Furthermore, her oeuvre is dedicated to a kind of mental discernment that involves phenomenological and sociological relations.

With this, Tuerlinckx actively creates a new visual economy for Conceptual art, which can be seen here as promoting a feminine principle of association, interrelation, and mutuality — a model very different from "objective" Conceptualism. Even though she points out that materials, shapes, colors, textures, and the placement of things and the relationships between them are part of the already inscribed institutional order, her projects are infused with her own choices and careful selection of distinctions to be drawn specifically through the spatialization of these objects. This is seen readily with her "scale 1:1" works. The terminology references similarity (1:1), but her works do not form a solid whole. They do not aspire to explore sameness. Scale always marks a relation with something else. In fact, none of her works offers the possibility of being adequately represented. Instead, Tuerlinckx discloses many of the manifestations of the thing itself — in Kant's terms, the "thing in itself," and in Greek, the "*noumenon*," from "*nous*" or "mind." This is the unknowable, indescribable reality that underlies phenomena. Paradoxically, while it is usually opposed to the phenomenal, it is nonetheless always related to the phenomenal and coexists with it. So the thing in itself is something else too. Attempts to know it inevitably proliferate. Tuerlinckx reveals the importance of these relations throughout her whole body of work; indeed, it is nearly impossible to delineate discrete objects in her oeuvre. Her "ball" of transparent cellophane tape, started during the installation of *pas d'histoire pas d'histoire* at the Witte de With in 1994, is an object that grows in relation to the amount of leftover time she has during the installation of exhibitions. The essence of Tuerlinckx's practice is not contained and exemplified by her individual objects; it relies on an infinite set of relations. The artist is specially attuned to that most alluring zone: the invisible space between art objects, between the infinite possibilities of all their various versions. Joëlle Tuerlinckx's oeuvre pries open the notion that it is not possible to fully constellate the unknowable by presenting slices of the infinite. Through excess, there appears to be an evacuation of meaning in her work, which the audience of the exhibition then feels compelled to reinstate — a challenging but rewarding experience.

1) Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Lexique Drawing Center Catalogue/Exposition*, unpublished, 2005

2) Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography" in: *October*, Vol. 30 (Autumn, 1984): 98

3) Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions" in: *October*, Vol. S5 (Winter, 1990): 105-143

4) Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Lexique Drawing Center Catalogue/Exposition*, unpublished, 2005

5) Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998), 281

6) Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Lexique Drawing Center Catalogue/Exposition*, unpublished, 2005.

7) Boris Groys, "Mimesis of Thinking" in: *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c. 1970*, ed. Donna De Salvo (London: Tate Modern, 2005)