

DYNAMICS—CREATIVITY—PRECISION

BETHA SARASIN

Text by Susanne Zeilhofer on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition at the Bernd-Spiessl-Symposium in Basle (18 June 2005)

There's no rule that forbids wishing – hoping for miracles.

Like a flash of light, this aphorism of multitalented Basle artist Betha Sarasin illuminates a facet of her dazzling and electrifying personality. Always driven by the desire, the never-ending search for basic structural elements and the regularity behind visible reality, she breaks the traditional conventions and rules that inhibit the creative mobility of the intellect, mentally moving in multiple dimensions. Betha Sarasin's artistic oeuvre can hardly be summarised under a generic term. Her kaleidoscopically complex work spans a wide arc from large sculptures and installations to works with glass, graphic works, drawings and pictures – figurative as well as concrete, works based on alienation effects and *trompe-l'œil* renderings.

Born in Aarau in 1930, she trained as an illustrator at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basle from 1946–50 and since 1951 has worked very successfully and lucratively on graphic works, illustrations and advertising for Italian Lines, Danzas, Olympic Airways, LVZ Zurich and PTT Switzerland. Through her marriage to Peter Wyss in 1951, contacts were made with radio and television, the world of the limelight and the artistic avant-garde – a milieu that has shaped Betha Sarasin to this day.

Inspired and influenced by her mother who worked in the fashion scene of the 1920s in Zurich in the summer and in St. Moritz in the winter, Betha Sarasin also gained access to the glossy and glamorous world of Italian haute couture and later prêt-à-porter as a fashion reporter for various newspapers in Florence and Rome. Elements of this extroverted, sometimes mannered period run consistently through large parts of her work, especially the drawings with their dynamically sweeping lines, the graceful elegance and the enormous expressiveness of the hats and gowns of the ladies depicted, which convey a nostalgic air of past Roman grandezza.

Her mother clearly recognised her daughter's enormous potential early on and consequently kept her drawings from the age of four. In addition, the childlike play of these early years with masks and dress-up led to alienation in the images of Betha Sarasin's later creative process, an area that, with the aid of computers, has recently expanded almost infinitely. Among the many impressive examples are the *Lion in the Scirocco*; *Am Rhein*, 1976 + 1997; and *Turbani* 2001.

Similar in concept but different in technical execution are the figurative representations of the artist in which she painted over, modified, daubed and stickered earlier works and, in more recent times, also sprayed them. In this context, the alienation acquires the characteristic style of a confrontation with one's own creative origins, the communication with earlier pictorial emphases and the possible correction of an artistic self-image changed in retrospect.

However, the decisive turning point in her life came in 1957 when she met architect Teff Sarasin, the man with whom she was to enter into an increasingly intensive artistic symbiosis. Her marriage in 1961 laid the foundation for a collaboration that continues to this day; it allowed her to step back from her previous activities in design and advertising and opened up completely new horizons. At the outset, Peter A. Sarasin-Christ, her husband's father and business partner, offered her new and interesting projects, especially in interior design. For her husband she subsequently designed windows for the church in Laufen (CH), followed by windows for four other churches (among other places in Basle, Oberwil and Reinach) between 1970 and 1995. Her works can be found in banks, galleries and buildings for whose architectural conception Teff Sarasin is responsible; many of them were created in close collaboration with him and through a combination of their respective arts, not least some large installations in castle grounds in France, such as *Les verres gardes*, Château de Grammont, Villersexel (2001), or, in Germany, *Der Wächter auf dem Dach* in Vogelbach (2001), *Der Wächter im Schloss Biengen* (2001) and others.

Betha Sarasin's first trip to Venice in 1936 laid the foundations for a strong affinity with the City of the Lagoon which, ever since her youth, she never let go of; for more than forty-five years, she lived and worked with her husband "in morbid Venice, housed and trapped in the palaces of our friends", as she describes it today.

In 1958 she began to explore glass as a material in Murano, a material that continues to fascinate Betha Sarasin and that has been a central element in her work ever since. The glasses that she and Teff designed for Venini-Salviati in Murano can be found today in the great museums of the world; and in Murano itself, works by the artist have found their rightful place in the Museo del Vetro/Palazzo Giustinian, which gives an overview of 2000 years of the history of blown glass and shows highlights of glass work.

Glass represents many elements of her inner concerns. Through its transparency, it permits a view of what lies behind, reveals the hidden, creates clarity. Parallel to this cognitive process, however, the distance necessary for viewers for deeper insights is subtly preserved; the glass panes separate and they create transparent spaces, forcing viewers to define their own location on one side and the other. In Betha Sarasin's work, this immense symbolic power is most strikingly expressed in her church windows. The sphere of the transcendent connects harmoniously with the immanent, the world of reality, through the large glazed, diaphanous walls. The view to the outside is open and free, leaving space for individual thinking and spiritual contemplation. A meditation place with a fountain has been designed in this style for the "Hofmatt" retirement home in Münchenstein near Basle. With and for her husband, Betha Sarasin designs glass objects and lighting structures: in 1962 the compatible glass element *Tube Triangolare*, which was awarded the *Premio Bevilacqua la Masa* and, the following year, the lighting fixture *Dodecaedra* which found buyers worldwide. In 1968, the glass element *Ganci* followed – it, too, was combined into a large lighting fixture popular worldwide. Together the two built ships and container vessels; 1966 was the year that saw the world's first plastic watch designed: Trackmaster Heuer. It would go too far to list Betha Sarasin's solo exhibitions at home and abroad (including Paolo Barozzi Venezia/Milano, AAA New York, Galerie d'art moderne Basle, Denise René Paris, Miklos von Bartha Basel, Galerie Brigitte Haasner Wiesbaden) which have followed at short intervals since 1963.

The decisive component and constitutive element of Betha Sarasin's sculptures is the cube – the highest form of perfection, characterised by six smooth sides; sublime and of inviolable beauty. Interventions and processing of this form require sensitivity and a consideration of the balance of the form. The cube is interesting both as a unique individual piece and in combination, whereby the basic form can be conceived of in numerous formations – as a series, in a grouping, arranged in a row, stacked, in a square: numerous varieties which always show new impulses and spatial design possibilities. Designing and varying as such lead to seeing, they evoke a sharpened perception and provoke, 'NO the original perfection shows a flaw, where edges are bevelled, corners are missing. The attraction for the viewer lies in analysing the disturbance. Again, one is confronted with the major topic of the mental penetration of underlying geometric laws and, based on them, the reconstruction of an ideal initial state. A similar claim is made by drawings with irregular lines which viewers themselves have to structure and analytically put together.

My Flag

The cube is my flag It is unwieldy Unloved and useless It cannot flutter It cannot be the pride of the nation for it has six sides.

Betha Sarasin

A second core theme is Betha Sarasin's concern with transposing and depicting temporal sequences artistically, the change from one state to another, ultimately to represent the concept of infinity. From the very beginning, computers were an indispensable tool in this respect and as early as 1978, Betha Sarasin turned to the Fraunhofer Institute for Mechanics of Materials in Freiburg im Breisgau because no suitable commercial software systems existed at that time. The collaboration resulted in the three-dimensional realisation of two-dimensional *trompe-l'œil* drawings, sculptures of nested tetrahedra and the construction of a cubic spiral.

The idea of the spiral, a central element in the artist's thinking and work, simultaneously represents her creative process which, in the cognitive penetration of spatial and temporal laws, ascends, rather like a perpetuum mobile, into ever new spheres; or, as she herself once put it: "In dreams, I was able to move in the structures and spirals at breakneck speed." The cooperation with the Fraunhofer Institute resulted in the "Instrumentenskulptur", which was intended to make audible the fourth – the temporal – dimension. Instrument sculptures were created for the world premiere of the *Erdenklang-Symphony* at the *Ars Electronica* in Linz in 1982, the year in which Betha Sarasin began an extremely fruitful collaboration with journalist Markus Ganz. Further compositions followed, among them the CDs *Fragmente* in 1993/94, *Pigmente* in 1994, *Instrumente* in 1995, and, in 2001, *Bidon 5*.

Together with Markus Ganz, she created texts and pictures for a book entitled *Spirale – Wunder dieser Welt* in 1985 and, in 1988, for the multilayered multimedia book *The Trip To The Lakes* (in German, English and Chinese, with a CD) in which the major themes of her work were expanded and developed in poetic images and fantastical metaphors.

Betha Sarasin's literary ambition is also reflected in numerous smaller poems that illuminate aspects of her particular life situation in a very personal, direct way and that

flow along in free association. Among other things, she addresses the helplessness she felt in the face of the regularity and uniform flow of time. “I’ve been bored for as long as I can remember. Drawing has remained a tried and tested method against it to this day. As soon as I hold a pen in my hand and an empty sheet of paper, the need to be constantly amused fades away and I begin to draw.” That’s how she describes her feelings today.

Die lange Weile Vedendo la noia Delpassato Sapendo della noia Delfuturo Provo di battere il tempo Con il mio lavoro Sperando ehe piacerebbe A qualcuno Nel futuro qui passera
Betha Sarasin

The latest fruits of this creative escape from tristesse and the sometimes paralysing worries of everyday life are the *15 Colour Drawings against Boredom*, created in April and May 2005, which will be exhibited for the first time at the Bernd-Spiessl-Symposium for Innovative and Visionary Technologies (June 17–18, 2005) in the rooms of the High-Tech Research Centre for Maxillofacial Surgery (University Hospital Basle), together with seven sprayed pictures from the series *Faces to Restore* and the installation *Frozen Years*.

In addition to works on the trio of artists Munch, Klee and Jawlensky or the Lagoon of Venice, the drawings revolve mainly around the “3 Bethen” complex of themes. Behind this lies the ancient mythological archetype of three holy women, a female trinity from matriarchal times. These are known by many different names, but they are often referred to as Ambeth (Anabeth), Borbeth and Wilbeth. In the Christian tradition, the triad is better known as Barbara, Catherine and Margaret, in the area surrounding Basle as Magdalena (St. Margarethen), Odilie (St. Ottilie on the Tüllinger hill) and Clara (St. Chrischona). From today’s point of view, the old pre-Christian myths of origin often appear irrational. They are difficult to understand and the individual mother deities seem to be highly ambivalent beings – while, on the one hand, they bring forth life, their essence often includes a destructive aspect as, in the next breath, they devour their creation. In Betha Sarasin’s drawings, these dark, mysterious elements can be discovered in various shades; in addition to the use of dark, often light-absorbing colours and the three Bethen heads shown, mouths, eyes and whole faces repeatedly appear, sometimes hidden – the viewer has multiple possibilities to engage with the depiction and constantly discover new beings. The “face(s)” theme runs through all of Betha Sarasin’s work. The human being, the person, becomes manifest through the face as the most important characteristic of our identity, in the respective facial expression, in the changed facial expressions, in the personality behind it. Malfunction and injuries to the face lead to changes in personality which can result in serious psychological illnesses despite the ever progressing possibilities of reconstructive surgery.

In the spirit of the etymological derivation of the concept of persona – the mask of the theatre actor in Greek theatre which defines the actor in his role and makes him recognisable in his human nature –, Betha Sarasin aims to unmask the person, to depict her or him in every shade, to uncover the face behind the many faces that a person has: in his or her affects and emotions, individual character, the roles played and the constricting roles to which she or he is sometimes subjected. The *Faces to Restore*, seven large-format pictures which were all sprayed quickly, are part of this overall context. Though in the artist’s view they could be subjected to further processing, they are conscious snapshots – aggressiveness in the piercing gaze of *Untiefen*, cheeky curiosity in *La Vicina*, the

explorative gaze on the totality of a personality through the eye as a *Mirror of the soul*, and so on.

Partly open, partly mysterious faces are created in this way, often, as in mood swings, repeatedly laid on top of each other, challenging viewers to communicate and sending them on a search for deeper truths, ultimately for the truth of the face. If one engages with this impulse, a further epistemological approach opens up through the equivalence of the concepts of truth and “face” in the biblical context. The Christian God has no form, is spirit and truth, and the revelation, the knowledge of his face, according to which man is created, ultimately means the knowledge of truth and access to deeper self-knowledge.

Against this background, the exhibited drawings represent very explicitly the concern of this symposium to thematise the human face as a multidisciplinary “field of work”, since the connection between face and identity can only be satisfactorily worked out in an interdisciplinary overall view. In artistic terms, Betha Sarasin’s work provides an equally interesting and extravagant impulse that underscores Ivo Andric’s statement (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature 1961): “You can never tire of looking at the starry sky and the human face.”