



# KÜNSTLER

KRITISCHES LEXIKON DER  
GEGENWARTSKUNST

Erscheint viermal jährlich mit insgesamt  
28 Künstlermonografien auf über 500 Text-  
und Bild-Seiten und kostet im Jahresabonnement  
einschl. Sammelordner und Schubert € 148,-,  
im Ausland € 158,-, frei Haus.  
[www.weltkunst.de](http://www.weltkunst.de)

## Postanschrift für Verlag und Redaktion

ZEIT Kunstverlag GmbH & Co. KG  
Balanstraße 73, Gebäude 8  
D-81541 München  
Tel. 0 89/12 69 90-0 / Fax 0 89/12 69 90-11  
Bankkonto: Commerzbank Stuttgart  
Konto-Nr. 525 55 34, BLZ 600 400 71

## Gründungsherausgeber

Dr. Detlef Bluemler  
Prof. Lothar Romain †

## Redaktion

Hans-Joachim Müller

## Geschäftsführer

Gerhard Feigl  
Matthias Weidling

## Grafik

Michael Müller

## Gestaltungskonzept

Bureau Mirko Borsche

## Abonnement und Leserservice

ZEITKUNSTVERLAG GmbH & Co. KG  
Balanstraße 73, Gebäude 8  
D-81541 München / Tel. 0 89/12 69 90-0  
»Künstler« ist auch über den  
Buchhandel erhältlich

## Prepress

Franzis print & media GmbH, München

## Druck

F&W Mediacenter GmbH, Kienberg

Die Publikation und alle in ihr enthaltenen  
Beiträge und Abbildungen sind urheberrechtlich  
geschützt. Jede Verwertung, die nicht ausdrücklich  
vom Urheberrechtsgesetz zugelassen ist, bedarf  
der vorherigen Zustimmung des Verlages. Dies gilt  
insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Bearbeitungen,  
Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspei-  
cherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systeme-  
men.

© ZEIT Kunstverlag GmbH & Co. KG, München 2010

ISSN 0934-1730

French and English supplements in collaboration with Galerie Jaeger Bucher, Paris.

"Most recently I have been impelled to explore the genesis of living matter, the spontaneous emergence of structures, movements, folds, the natural dynamics of the birth of land forms. With my brush as my companion, the flow of matter becomes a landscape, the canvas a physical map, a kind of geography of the spirit which brings us to perceive the hidden framework of the world."

"Most recently I have been impelled to explore the genesis of living matter, the spontaneous emergence of structures, movements, folds, the natural dynamics of the birth of land forms. With my brush as my companion, the flow of matter becomes a landscape, the canvas a physical map, a kind of geography of the spirit which brings us to perceive the hidden framework of the world."



# Everything is a wave, an undulating wave, and fluidity

FABIENNE VERDIER AND DORIS VON DRATHEN  
IN CONVERSATION

I met Fabienne Verdier in her refuge, both house and studio, a zen monastery perhaps one could say, to the north-west of Paris. Anyone coming here from the city first needs time to slow down. Time written with a capital T, time that is respected, even gifted, by hosts Fabienne and her husband Ghislain. After more than an hour, we go down into the studio area that Fabienne calls the 'pit' with its 11-metre-high ceiling. We're surrounded by gigantic paintbrushes, all made, designed and reinvented on the Chinese model. They require the horsehair from thirty-five horse tails; they're as big as theatre characters, looking out at us, motionless, at rest. The smell of paint from them fills my nostrils. And even if only traces of paint can be seen here and there, my eyes still plunge into a gleaming red, and, cautiously seeking my way through this inhabited universe so as not to disturb it, my shoes still adhere in places to the great grey tarpaulins spread over the floor. A moment of silence, hesitation, we're both moved by this first encounter in the heart of the studio, then *sotto voce* words begin to take shape, move into action, flow with enthusiastic dynamism, a dialogue releasing a flood of questions and explanations. We are standing. We remain so. We forget the interview situation, although at one point, right in the middle of Fabienne talking, I ask her if I can turn my recorder on.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *You were saying that the main idea of painting for you would be ...*

FABIENNE VERDIER: It would be to attempt to embody the experience of a Presence on a modest square of linen or cotton canvas. That's the most difficult thing. How to let that precise moment be 'contemplated' or 'experienced'. A painting only lives through someone connecting with it. If I were to represent reality figuratively, it would be a complete illusion, unembodied and very pretentious. My intuition tells me that everything is movement, and impermanence. I think that the essence of life is movement. I move through the canvas space with a brush trying to give it a dynamic; the dynamic comes from respect for and interplay with the fundamental forces that surround us, that give us life and shape us. Suddenly, this body of vital energy that comes from nothing, gradually inhabiting the canvas begins to interact with the person contemplating it, reconnecting with a dynamic of the origins.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *People then are no longer spectators in front of your paintings ? They re-experience, relive a moment that has already been experienced. The well-known German term "nacherleben" comes to mind.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: That is what I dream of: the viewer being enlivened or instinctively revitalized, even without knowing how, through this dynamic. You may have noticed that my stroke is increasingly moving beyond the border of the canvas. For a long while I was a good obedient student doing what traditional painting expected of me, staying within the bounds of the canvas, until the point when my painting became the focus of a sudden, unique instant, the total experience of "here and now" in the canvas space. I'm trying to inscribe my work within an experimental process. The canvas is much more than a painting in fact, it's the result of my experiences on the floor. I like to think that anyone contemplating it might be swept off in the same movement of origins. Since I've actually been working on the canvas itself, I've shifted beyond the frame. I'm no longer outside the painting trying to 'represent' beauty dynamically. Since I started living on the canvas, I've needed to go within it and come back out of it. The canvas is just the starting-point for a journey and a reconnection with the breath of life.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Anyone who has seen and experienced your paintings will confirm their poignant vitality. The spectators in effect move out of a contemplative role to enter into an existential experience, leading to an acknowledgment of their genuine essence.*



FABIENNE VERDIER: And they will immediately have the feeling, I hope, that they perceive reality differently, that they're no longer an entity cut off from this reality, but an element that is part of the whole. And maybe on leaving the exhibition, they'll find themselves enjoying, exulting, feeling attuned to a gust of wind in the autumn, or sap rising in plants in spring. They'll see a river running through a familiar landscape with fresh eyes, feel the blood flowing through their veins, circulating in their bodies and will understand that everything is circulation, flow, energy, and will experience what it means to a part of this whole, to be inscribed, caught up within the world's breath of life.

Canvas-Space

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *You use the word "inscribe" in its broadest sense to indicate something that is contained in a whole or in the movement of the whole. At this point, I'd like to highlight the meanings of the words "writing" (écrire) and "inscribing" (inscrire) so we can move beyond an aspect of your research which has altogether been over-emphasized. Although Chinese culture and calligraphy were undoubtedly an important starting-point in your work, now, I feel that the only aspect your painting has retained is an attitude to life, one of rigorousness. I'm keen to know about the other side however, for instance when you met astrophysicist Trinh Xuan Thuan.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: I met Trinh Xuan Thuan a short while after my last big show with the gallery, run by Véronique Jaeger. When I was preparing for this exhibition, I cut the handles off some of my big paintbrushes. This was a relatively recent revolution for me. And one that empowered me to inhabit the poetry of the breath of life in an abstract landscape, just as I had dreamed of doing, at speed. I'd been working with huge masses of paint that were immensely heavy, heavier than me, to the extent that on occasion I was carried off by the matter and couldn't see where I was going. I was no longer the one who breathed life into the form, who brought it into the world, it was the paint preceding me. I therefore took a revolutionary decision, one that I knew would horrify everyone in Asia—I cut the handle off a Chinese paintbrush at its base. It must be said that when I did that, I had thirty years experiencing the verticality that enabled the visions and intuitions

to flow through me and be transmitted to the paintbrush. My attitude was one of being firmly rooted within the stroke. Had I not been so sure of my technique, having practised it over so many years, a lifetime as it were, I could never have made my revolution of working without the handle, even though, in my mind, I'd been working without one for a long while. I must explain how it happened. It was a huge decision, do you understand? So, one evening, feeling hopeless that I'd ever be able to paint the big polyptychs I saw in my mind's eye, with the help of my husband Ghislain, I did it: I had a few drinks then cut the handle off one paintbrush and fixed my bicycle handlebars on to the wooden framework that holds the thirty-five horse tails together. The paintbrush was attached to the ceiling as before but by using a lashed system of flexible ropes, I could move at a speed I'd previously only imagined possible. Now, I could move through space as I wanted, I could guide the matter and be attuned to it, I was once more really dialoguing with it. The speed really opened up new spaces to me. Trinh Xuan Thuan explained that in terms of fundamental physics, I'd invented an instrument to conquer the large canvases' "entire space" without being swept away by the mass of the paintbrush and the ink. At last I was able to freely explore space.

During my last conversation with Trinh Xuan Thuan, it was fascinating to see that my intuitions could be confirmed scientifically. I knew intuitively that I was playing with the force of gravity, I could feel intuitively the electromagnetic forces that are emitted by matter, and, obviously from the paint, the flow, the brushstroke that is so fascinating to me, this energy-matter. And when astrophysicist Trinh Xuan Thuan was trying to understand what was going on in the act of painting vertically—here in the studio that I built with architect Denis Valode based on the mental and physical concept of being connected to fundamental forces—he smiled at me and said: "You can explore anything you want in this studio. There was only one dimension lacking for you to be in complete command of space, and to play with the four fundamental forces that shape reality, and that was speed". I was very moved to hear him say that.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *What I find enthralling is that your work isn't about an idea, imagined space, but space itself. Your studio, with the stretcher placed on the floor, is a real, physical space. The speed of your brush, and therefore your stroke, don't represent anything: they are a physical force. Aby Warburg said that an antelope's force came from the fact that when it runs, it is only running. Being and doing are equated. Now I can better understand the impact felt in front of your paintings—I ought to say 'within' them because we're within space itself, not facing a pictorial space.*



FABIENNE VERDIER: Exactly. In fact, I built this studio right over a water source, which is a very strong line of energy. You can hear the bubbling song of the spring all the time.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Even on entering your house, there's a welcoming murmur of water that has a calming effect on the spirit.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, that's true. I'm frequently astounded by how serene and limpid it is. But just as important for me is the life force contained in the spring. It's a telluric space. When I paint, I can feel the force, I include it in my movements, I try to grasp its energy and embody it in my paintings. And when I grasp the energy, I can feel it passing through my body, I can feel it circulate—that's the movement I transmit to my paintbrush. It's the same when I feel the air in the leaves on the trees, and the clouds moving. It's vital to be connected to all these elements' movements.

Energy-Painting

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *An almost miraculous mystery is the power that emanates from your concentration. I feel that given your rigorous attitude to living connected with the centre of the earth, and I should add, the centre of your being, everything that you do and say, everything that surrounds you contributes to the same logic of meaning. Like the paintbrush—whose construction seems to be an ideal metaphor for a human being with its central mass of horsehair—which might be compared to a spinal column. And the "sacred reservoir" or "sacred tip", the place where the horse hairs are cut shorter inside the brush to act as ink reservoirs that will 'breathe' over a long time, are reminiscent of lungs, in the spiritual sense—a reservoir of spiritual energy. In Greek mythology, the aïon, the universe's vertical axis, was thought of as a space-time force that linked everything together. And in ancient Greek medicine, the aïon was also the term for the human spinal column. That is what your paintbrushes make me think of. In that respect, you and your paintbrush could be seen as a space-time axis, don't you think?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: You've hit on something essential to my work: what links things—*religere*—a verb that is at the root of the word 'religion'. Without

wishing to sound esoteric, painting is a sacred ritual for me. When I climb on to the canvas on the floor, I move into a distinct space and begin a ritual. And when I'm attuned to the "sacred tip", it means that much has already been accomplished because intelligence and thought have been forgotten, a state of the soul is being achieved in order to open up to the senses, to really listen. This kind of knowledge and access to such painting can only be achieved intuitively, not intellectually. It takes a long time to reach a really open state of intuition which does not interfere with the inner voice of what is felt, the real force of living experience, the energy flow that surrounds us and is absolutely everywhere. Everything is a wave, an undulating wave, and fluidity. You can go insane if you really think about the flux of which we are all part.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Is there a state of the soul before, during and after painting? A distinction to be made between a spiritual and a daily approach?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: To my mind there is no difference between spiritual and everyday life. For over thirty years, no matter how hard I've tried to explore different areas, different subjects—the mystery of plant-life, landscape, minerals—in the end, what completely defeats me whenever I'm here with my paintbrush is that all of a sudden in the act of painting, the almost lightning grasp of reality, a form gradually emerges based on points that are common, and yet apparently so far apart, to the entire living universe. Painting has this marvellous faculty of making you journey outside yourself while remaining immobile. If I mentally prepare myself to paint the idea of plant-life for instance, my brush will seek out the expression of a branch through sap rising within the bark. And in the form that flows out on to the canvas, I see both the flow of a river and the veins in certain stones. Then, my brush withholds matter for a few fragments of a second more, and a "flying white" is inscribed, transporting me to glaciers high up in the mountains even though I'm still painting the structure of a branch on a tree! So, no matter how hard I've endeavoured to choose different subjects, painting teaches me that as soon as energy-matter is set in movement, it reflects like a mirror the spirit of all the structures in reality. I always come back to the breath of life.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Thus to essence*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, of course. It's the breath of life that shapes everything, it's the interconnection between intuition, the ink matter and the surrounding forces, because we're never the same. I never dictate form. My mind has an intuition, then



suddenly, on that particular day, with the gravity present at that particular moment, the influence of the stars, the humidity in the air, the substance of the environment, a stroke will come into being in one way rather than another. It's a very humbling experience.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *You would go that far?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Of course. Everything depends on the first impact of the brush and the ink on the canvas, together with the fundamental laws of viscosity. According to the degree of humidity in the air, the temperature, when the ink hits the canvas—shlack!—, it doesn't react in the same way at all. In fact, all I have to do as a painter is be attuned to the living matter on that day. When it's cold, as matter dries, it becomes solid in a certain way: the borders are much crisper and more serene than when it's 30°C. My mind plays with matter in different ways, because the way it spreads through space on the canvas is different. When it's hot, the heat gets mixed in and matter is much more vigorous, explosive, vehement. And the borders of the painting are more incisive, more aggressive. Obviously, according to circumstances, the final movement, once dry, is not the same. It's not the same life breath that goes through space. The force of viscosity therefore plays a major part.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *So you work with the awareness—maybe later we can come back to this subject and give a rough idea of its cultural context—that your painting is part of the physical forces that constitute it. These are obviously selected and guided by your knowledge and experience of painting, but also by what you term your 'attitude', which, if I understand correctly, involves an immense amount of inner work.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, we might talk about this in great detail, but for the moment, let's just say this: there's a dialogue between the fundamental forces that shape, and my mind playing with them. It was for this reason that I wanted to replace small-format work by larger format. A major challenge. Faced with a canvas seven metres long, the mental vision of what I want to do must be very clear. When I release one hundred litres of ink in one go, I have to react immediately. There's no going back—there's just an immense splodge and it's all over. For thirty years I worked on relatively small formats. When I went over to large formats, I had to devise a new way of working. How could I catch up with matter, run with it, hold it back? How could I sculpt it and conserve its initial energy? It's an intrinsic experience, between me and matter. It's half-way between painting and

sculpting, the matter is so dense and substantial. I've devised a whole system that's half-way between doing and not doing, keeping up and holding back, letting things happen and acting directly. Yes, it's a real ritual.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *When you say you connect with the movement in all things, with the dynamic of fundamental forces, when you place yourself within the circulation of energy that most of us are oblivious of in order to seize the moment between 'not yet' and 'now no longer', an instant that usually escapes our observation, aren't you in fact trying to catch hold of something that is ultimately elusive, to get round the boundaries of the impossible?*

”  
My intuition tells me that everything  
is movement, and impermanence.  
I think that the essence of life is  
movement  
“

FABIENNE VERDIER: Maybe. At any rate, that is the moment I try to capture. In life, everything is spontaneous, the great mystery of living things is their spontaneity. The faculty of reacting immediately, in a fragment of a second, can be so decisive. I think that in seizing immediacy, I'm approaching truth.

*Doris von Drathen: You laugh as you say that, as if such a great moment required great delicacy. But isn't it the elusively infra-thin that conveys an idea of the breath of life?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, and at the same time matter continues its movement. I'm beginning to know how to influence it in some places so that it will carry on extending, forming inner landscapes, aerial cartographies, great winding rivers. I can hold the flow back for an instant, so the canvas is barely touched, and the energy from the stroke creates torn forms that look like rocky coastlines, imaginary geographies. While the painting dries, I remain attuned to it in order to pursue the dynamic of my initial movement. But what matter itself is able to paint during the drying process, when it cracks and fissures, that is quite beyond me.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *One word keeps coming back in what you're saying. It's 'play', a far-ranging notion. Wasn't it Schiller who saw a type of ideal action in play, whereby people are inscribed in a cosmic harmony, an action which goes beyond opposing forces, and in durable time.*





1  
PEINTURE DU 16 AOÛT 2010  
Flying White (In homage to Mark Tobey)



2  
PEINTURE DU 23 AOÛT 2010  
Flying White (In homage to Mark Tobey)

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, this attitude is a question of survival for me: with all the substance of my being, moving towards an activity that goes beyond all value judgment but that gives me joy, makes me exult. Like a bird that sings in the morning ... what ever for? That faculty is really our most wonderful.

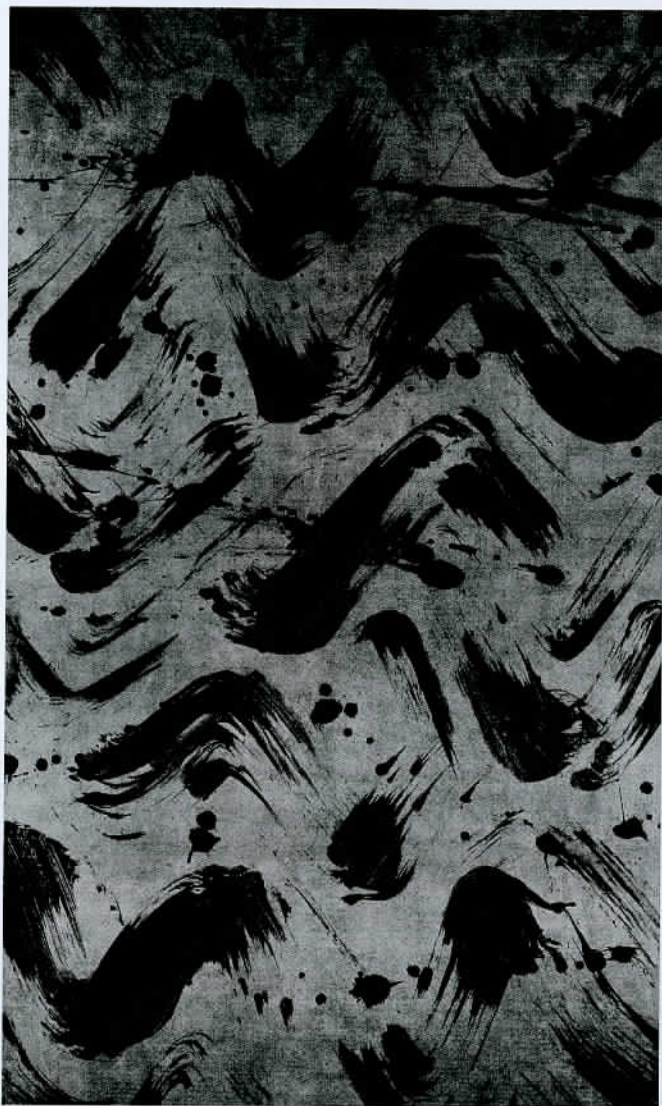
DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Leaving struggle behind and achieving an ideal state of equilibrium.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, dynamic contemplation is my life choice. It's a paradox: leaving the idea of internal struggle behind to battle with matter, to move with it, to be inside the movement of the fundamental forces that I play with. Maybe for some people, it means that I become a little inhuman ... because I would like to be free of all feelings, of what the ego in our consciences would like to cast judgment on or divide into good and bad, and be free of all the boundaries that have been invented. I'd like to go back to a raw, primal state of nature. Philosophers

have said that to achieve such wisdom our hearts would need to turn to ashes [laughter]. It also reminds me of those lovely stories about a wise man who was no longer visible in nature because he completely fused with it. He became the tree, the rock. I would like to experience living phenomenology without making any value judgment. I hope that one day, people will understand. Sometimes I hear that my painting is extraordinarily violent and that I have a black view of life because I use black paint. I say: if you see a waterfall crashing down a mountain-side, it seems violent ... but it's not up to us to say whether it's violent or not, it just is. Lightning in the sky just is, it's a physical reality. And when you're right in the middle of all these forces, these elements, these energies, it's bound to make you feel dizzy, it's part and parcel of life.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *That's a nice coincidence: when I was preparing our conversation, I noted 'event in space'.*





3  
PEINTURE DU 9 SEPTEMBRE 2010  
Flying White (In homage to Mark Tobey)



4  
PEINTURE DU 27 AOÛT 2010  
Flying White (In homage to Mark Tobey)

FABIENNE VERDIER: That's exactly what it is.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *So first you create a space and then you cause movement to happen. And if you explore, as you did in your large frescoes, Giotto's blue, we are not in a pictorial space but simply in space.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: It was practically as a homage to Giotto that I chose his blue, he spent so long reflecting on our relationship with the sky. I spent months giving structure to nothingness. The sky is immeasurably substantive! Doesn't a soul prefer what it can't embrace? For the large frescoes in the Palazzo Torlonia in Rome, I therefore tried to invent a sky that had an aspect of infinity—I think that such distance is favourable to humanity. It was Gaston Bachelard, I think, who said: "First there is nothingness; then deep nothingness; then blue depth". My research for these frescoes involved finding out how I could make our inner immensity vibrate in an utter effusion of blue pigment.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *A space for which our words still fail.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: An artist seeks to seize the inner beauty of the whole of the mystery of life. And how can you grasp at the mystery of life if it's not in the heart of chaos? You have to plunge into the initial genesis. You have to throw yourself into it, into the alchemical soup and see what happens.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *And this is why, when you seize this instant, the fault line between one moment and another, your shapes are so often like flashes of lightning—atmospheric events for which words always come too late. People always say: "I saw a lightning flash" never "I can see a lightning flash".*

FABIENNE VERDIER: True. But for me it's different again, my contemplation not being external. I take my brush and attempt to 'flash' the form into life. At that moment, I can almost say: "I am lightning".



DORIS VON DRATHEN: *The velocity you spoke of also seems to be inscribed in one of the main tools you use, horse-hair. It's like a haiku for me, imagining you crossing space transported by thirty-five horse's tails. Why this choice?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Horse-hair is the most spirited and vigorous. But I finish my paintings with cat's whiskers [much laughter]. Look, I only have to put my hand nearby for them to start vibrating. Cat's whiskers are extremely sensitive. They have a lot of springiness, they're strong and full of life, very expressive. That's important to transmit energy. There are all sorts of paintbrushes, right up to tiger whiskers. I've worked with boar's bristle brushes that also have this force of expression. But to achieve a stroke of those dimensions, you need the length of a horse tail. That's why I chose it for the large format work.

Painting-discipline

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *All that has been said about your force as a painter—becoming 'one' with the fundamental forces, grasping the instant of the breath of life—all this goes beyond the calligraphy of your early work, yet, if not a starting-point, at least it was a basis from which to move elsewhere.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: To start with, calligraphy taught me discipline. It's an apprenticeship that cannot be passed over. As you say, it was the basis for my initial thinking. The most important thing I learnt is the discipline, preparing my inner being before taking up the paintbrush: creating a void within, seeking one's unity. But more than this, what the master calligraphers taught me, thirty years ago now, was to connect with the universal dynamism that can be found in curves, in the spontaneous expression of nature, in the sudden understanding that a stroke must have the same dynamic, the same essence as a river or a gust of wind; understanding that, in painting, the stroke bears the spirit of life. And understanding this in abstract terms. That is the main thing the masters taught me: an abstract form to read nature in order to perceive this universal dynamic. For instance, I used to work on an ideogram that is written using twenty-four strokes, and which could be thought of as a mathematical formula. It's a real construction in space. The problem was to know how to suggest the meaning and the form's

complexity through just one stroke—the art of suggestion. It's a long process. A complex structure of twenty-four strokes which is no less than an ideogram that encompasses a philosophical idea. The strokes are written in space from right to left and top to bottom. So how can the philosophical idea and the structure in space be summed up? How can the mind travel along this path and suggest a complex ideogram with a single brushstroke? It's a subtle game whereby the spirit seeks out a pattern that inclines to pure essence, the most minimal expression conceivable, so that scholars intuitively understand the abstract interpretation of the philosophical idea hinted at by the brush in the empty space on the paper. It's a process I've been practising in my own way for thirty years, but after studying it in China for ten years.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Calligraphy was a tool, a bridge for you to invent a form of painting that goes beyond abstraction to the essence.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Writing signs is secondary for a calligrapher, the main thing is the moral attitude that emerges from the stroke. I remember once I was in Greece in the mountains, after those ten years studying in China. I was gazing at the petrified trees, the rocks, the storms, the waves—all these living elements—and I realized what I'd learnt. It came almost as a shock. I really could perceive the essential dynamism that gives everything life. It was very liberating for me, and I told myself: "I don't need to look for great philosophical ideas, I just have to transcribe this essence".

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *How then did you arrive at the Flemish Primitives?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Dialoguing with masterpieces by early Flemish masters, interacting with pieces from the collection in the Groninge museum in Bruges, means that I am moving into a much more complex context than previously. This task is much more demanding, and the discipline I learnt in China will be no more than a memory as it's no longer a question of encapsulating the complexity of a movement in space into a single line, but understanding the universe of a multi-faceted reality—the spiritual, religious, metaphysical aspect, but also the emotion as, for example, in Hugo van der Goes' *Death of the Virgin*, all the compassion for the dying Virgin before she ascends to heaven. There's a collective presence, all these hands seeking to carry her, an extraordinary composition between real and metaphysical space. Can you see that blue? It's what I will have to work on—a lapis lazuli that is unimaginably difficult to achieve. There's also a play



between a 'here-and-there presence' and a suprapresence. I'm going to study the form and the content, and attempt to transcribe this suprapresence into space. With my stroke, I'll attempt to evoke the way the levitating Virgin inhabits the space in this painting and seize the spirit of life that is expressed. It also undoubtedly means I will be thinking about the religious feeling, and that too I find fascinating.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *You use the term suprapresence, are we still talking about energy here?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, quite right, I want to carry on using the themes that the Flemish painters used, working in a minimalist vein with the idea of contemplative intimacy that one could be tempted to think is just concerned with narrative. I will attempt to attune myself to what is beyond the narrative and the religious aspects in order to capture that other energy and to try and transcribe the breath of the spirit.

*Painting-cosmogony*

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Your experience of painting must have changed dramatically on your trip to Norway, when the situation was reversed and you found yourself observing a coastline from a boat.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: It was a shock. Especially as, since China, I'd broken with the Western tradition of working outside, of sketching a subject, painting from nature. The Chinese masters' idea, and one that I had embraced, is to let yourself be permeated by the spirit of a place and later transcribe the emotion felt at the time. In Norway I was on board a coaster for over ten days. It wasn't about contemplating place. The coaster was sailing right up the whole Norway coast. The fact of moving incessantly, having a moving structure in front of me, constantly revealing yet other peaks and outlines in the distance, is a far more profound perception revealing a far more intensely complex boundary to reality. Normally, between contemplation and the pared back expression of a search for composition in a painting, many long stages have to be accomplished. But in this case, the maturation occurred in an instant, and, as the boat continued its course, the vision was already

there in my mind, and I spontaneously transcribed it as essential force lines. A moving geography came into being with great clarity on each blank page of my notebook despite the wind and the sea spray.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *With regard to the brush or matter as they move, the essential forces are linked to the force of gravitation and other laws that govern our planet's physical stability. But regarding the structure of the coastline, what do you call the essential forces?*

”  
When I climb on to the canvas on  
the floor, I move into a distinct space  
and begin a ritual.  
“

FABIENNE VERDIER: In order to account for the modulating lines of the peaks and the fjords, I instinctively adopted a new mental construct when faced with the apparent complexity of the landscapes I was observing. It was an experience of active contemplation. But I could also talk about an essential rhythm, a living structure, a presence of energy. The problem was to know how to transcribe this presence on to a sheet of paper so that it would create a sense of escape for anyone contemplating it. It means intensifying the experience of observation and reflection into a construct of abstract lines that translate the breathing or the telluric structure of the world. It means providing keys to this adventure into observation and reflection, whilst refining simplicity to the utmost, being in a void, until a state of harmony, durational time, the breath of silent coincidences is attained. At a certain point, the force lines in the landscapes come into being, rising up behind each other. There's a kind of rhythm in space—1,2,3; 1,2; 1,2,3,5; 1,2; 1,2,3 ... And when you're faced with this powerful linear rhythm, you immediately begin to voyage, your soul circulates; you're on this earth and you imagine all sorts of things even if you translate them into only one or two lines of matter.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *So the essential force lines would be the impetus that a living presence creates in space?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Yes, that's almost it. It's not the outer aspect, the contour or the form that interest me; what I was trying to grasp in the landscapes as they moved past was an intrinsic force, a constant principle, a telluric power, the fire, the eruption and the erosion that gave this living mineral presence life.



DORIS VON DRATHEN: *With a movement of horizontal lines, you are in fact reflecting on the vertical and gravitational forces of reality?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Both horizontal and vertical, but also the intrinsic force, the energy which creates and gives this matter presence. It's an underlying principle, a spirit of life, a breathing of the world. And I think that by taking that path, the spirit of life can be suggested more than by representing form from the outside, no matter how pure the form might be.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *Does the "1,2,3" principle link with a philosophical idea? I'm thinking of Lacan's "Name-of-the-Father" system, the triangulation with the child between mother and father; and also Franz Rosenzweig's triad: the human being alone, in the world, and facing a higher principle—a utopia, a vision, maybe a divine principle.*

“  
I take my brush and attempt to ‘flash’  
the form into life. At that moment,  
I can almost say: I am lightning.  
”

FABIENNE VERDIER: For me it was Zen gardens with their philosophy of numbers that taught me to see spatial harmony in certain numbers. One for instance, Three, and also Five. There is a concentration in One: the idea containing the matrix of everything; in Three, there's an equilibrium, an expression developed from unity; and in Five, there's joy: the points of our body. In my research, I often come back to Three which for me is the rhythm of perfect harmony.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *How did you discover the "1,2,3" principle?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: Straight from nature. Even if it took me some time. It was during the process that led to the paintings and drawings in the *Mystère végétal* series. A leader branch, then another growing off to the right, and one to the left. This is the fundamental forking principle in plant growth: „1,2,3“. A process of observation, of refining, paring back which gradually led me much further to thinking about tectogenesis, oscillating waves, morphodynamics, accidents, folds, faults, modulations, the fluidity of reality—as you can see, all of these terms are subjects I research in my notebooks. As I move through these structures, I realize that they're also part of me.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *In your universe, humans and the cosmos are always equated.*

FABIENNE VERDIER: This is always the case. We are landscape. We are trees. We are morphodynamic and fragments of universe. Boundaries are an illusion.

DORIS VON DRATHEN: *What you describe as 'becoming' is therefore no more than a cosmogonic force?*

FABIENNE VERDIER: It's simply that the same dynamics that give life to the cosmos, also influence our planet's energy system, make winds blow, cause the lunar and tidal cycles, and vitalize, influence, guide us. We are matter both physically and metaphysically. For me, cosmogony is not to be found in books; it's everywhere, here as I'm talking to you, and so beyond the idea of perfection or imperfection, and always in the process of becoming. Unceasingly, every moment, each cell is reproducing a genesis moment. I find such invisible mutations that are all around us very moving. We are specks of dust in a system that I want to be in tune with, and for which I have the deepest, most sacred respect.



Foto: © Gity Dangar

#### DORIS VON DRATHEN

lebt als selbstständige Kunsthistorikerin in Paris und unterrichtet semesterweise an der Cornell University in New York. Ihre Spezialisierung sind Künstler-Monografien, mit denen sie die Ikonologie Warburgs in der zeitgenössischen Kunst weiterführt. Ihre eigene Kunsttheorie publizierte sie mit dem Buch: *Vortex of Silence: a proposition for an art criticism beyond aesthetic categories* (Charta, 2004); darauf folgten: *Rebecca Horn: Sculptures* (2005) und *Drawings* (2005, beide Cantz), *Pat Steir: Installations* (2006) und *Paintings* (2007, beide Charta), *Rui Chafes* (2008, Charta); *Rebecca Horn: Cosmic Maps* (2008, Charta)