

Art, a means of deepening our understanding of vital social and political processes

I will show that on the bases of the process I lived through working on the literature of the Polish-Jewish writer and graphic artist Bruno Schulz.

I am a painter and graphic artist. I write in German, my mother tongue. I live in the Netherlands.

Two volumes of prose, a couple of letters, some drawings and some fragments of a mural painting are all that remained of Bruno Schulz. ‘The Messiah’, he started on writing at the beginning of World War II, is lost.

Schulz was born in Drohobycz, the former Polish Galicia, in July 1892, subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He tasted the great changes of his era, the promises, the equal rights of his people granted by decree. He reported of the struggle of a marginal figure in an outcast community willing to leave the ghetto that officially belonged to the past.

In November 1942 he was shot dead by the Nazi-officer Günter when leaving the Judenrat downtown Drohobycz with a loaf of bread.

Taking Schulz’ volumes from my father’s bookcase in April 1971 initiated a rigorous process. On the second page I knew for certain that I would draw this world and that I would need the etching and its print to penetrate the material.

Reading and rereading the world Schulz had painted in sultry, balled up sentences, again and again, word by word, it finally streamed through my veins.

At the end of 1977 I set about drawing the first integral run. Three months later about 250 scenes were covering my table.

Before working on the etchings - etchings are merciless, what is etched in, is etched in - I wanted to know whether what I had found breathed Schulz or was nothing more than my appearance on his stage. To the Polish writer Marian Pankowski those drawings were breathing Schulz. Pankowski, who had survived Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen, lived in Brussels. He introduced me to people in Poland, and one of those drawings got published there.

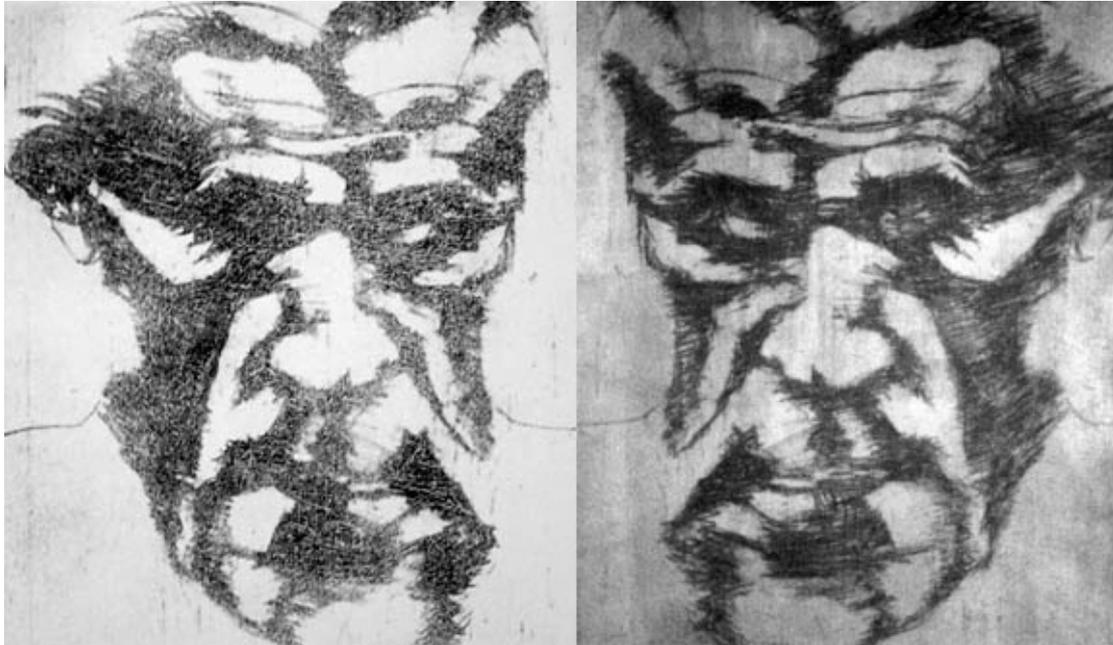
In August 1979 I went there, to taste the atmosphere, listen to the melody of Schulz’ language, see people move. In Warsaw I met Olga Axer, who had known him personally, a peculiar uncle, she said, and I met others who knew about him.

Every day I drew. They had wanted to publish some drawings of that stay of mine. However, what I could show was considered not to be happy enough to be published; my Schulz-drawings were possible, Schulz was regarded past time.

In October 1980, having terminated the first volume, I went again. In those troubled days - Solidarnosc had emerged in August - I talked with Otto Axer. More than thirty years after having survived the holocaust he had started to draw scenes from his memory without lifting his pen, not of the Warsaw ghetto he had lived in, but from before. Those are dances, I said. Sabine, he answered, you know that I cannot dance anymore. Would I dance, as I should, I would constantly find myself back in the ghetto. I survived because I was a coward. You have to.

In 1981 my Warsaw friends asked me to write about my experiences working on Schulz. Later on I would write about the consequences.

In April 1983 I danced out of Schulz. Those first drawings, some 300 etchings, several drawn and painted portraits of him and several accounts telling of my encounters, the regions I had passed, the process I had lived through in art and in life.



Bruno Schulz - print of the etching

Bruno Schulz - etching

S. Vess 1983

After half a year's tour of eighty of my Schulz-etchings through Poland in 1983/84, organized by the Studio Theater in Warsaw, they had wanted to develop theater based on my prose and graphic work together with me in Warsaw, which turned out not to be possible.

From 1986 to 1993 I could work on that theater at the Institute for Theater Research in Amsterdam; and I played it myself, for the last time in 1993 in Berlin, where I was born in 1940.

My working on Schulz never had anything to do with him being a Jew and my having been born in Berlin. From the very beginning I felt his words, tasted them on my tongue. The drawing hand does not know about categories.

Drawing to me means perceiving with my whole being, sensing the other without reserves. Pushing movements and features to their utmost frontiers, the drawing hand witnesses the personal history of physical and mental strength and weakness of both the other and myself. No face, no gesture, no form can really disguise the tensions that play underneath.

I realized the influence the incessantly mutating correlations in life exercise on images.

- Everything we experience forms us and hence our actions, words and appearance.

- With all we do or allow, advocate or reject, with every gesture, every word - even every thought - we affect the way of the other and ourselves and create preconditions for coming forms in which life further develops.
- Constantly we find ourselves being witness, initiated, accomplice.
- No system, no religion, no past, no future can release us from making our own decisions nor warrant our actions.

I experienced and realized the capital importance of one's own rhythm and melody in art and in life.

- Art is dance, is the no-blood shedding twin brother of war.
- Art is shaping knowledge.
- Art is a presentient, alerting system.
- Nothing can be proved by art - even though later on lots of interpretations may rise.

In 1991 I suspended my theater. The shock of the fall of the Berlin wall not only had affected the political picture in central Europe and the structure underneath - beyond recall; people's expressions and movements had changed, in East and in West.

I wanted to draw those faces before up-coming powers with their dominating directions would nestle and proliferate in the open wounds and people's faces would close again.

I went to Poland, to Russia - in those days still the Soviet Union - the former German Democratic Republic, to Berlin and some places in the former German Federal Republic related to my childhood and adolescence and, after a break of two and a half months, to Israel. In Moscow I was granted permission to travel to Lvov and could visit Drohobycz and walk the streets Schulz had walked.

I spent a month in Israel, traveled around, met artists, actors, writers - survivors and those who had been born in Israel.

In Tel Aviv I met the psychologist Erika Landau. Erika had survived, had studied psychology in Israel and Munich. She and her husband set up an institute for highly intelligent children. Talking about the in a way similar responsibility artists, scientists and medical doctors bear, Erika emphasized:

- That with regard to impeccability art has to be examined far more mercilessly than medicine or exact sciences.
- That the responsibility artists bear, is weighing far more heavily.
- That art interferes far more fundamentally.

O.K.

Three more sentences.

Dancing an image you leave all that behind, you just dance.

Going to war for an image - I don't know - anyway you accept that you may kill.

I advocate that we show our kids, all kids, that dance is a more effective means of solving matters, than the use of force.

Zaltbommel, January 2012

Sabine Vess