



Conversation with Christian Grillitsch and Anna Dorofeeva

Anna Dorofeeva: Christian, I am excited to start our discussion of your particularly impressive series of works “velodrawings”, which I personally admire. Your technique of drawing on wooden plates by manipulating the brakes of the bicycle wheels is just a completely innovative and stunning approach. It is an amazing experience to watch you do it as well! And at the end of the day, as with working in any medium, what is important is not just the medium but what one can say with it. This world of lines you create with skilful velodrawing movements is deeply moving.

However before we start speaking about the works, could you please tell us a bit about your background and how you came up with this idea of velodrawings?

Christian Grillitsch: I have always been interested in inventing new things. My first artistic impulses began with the intention to study electro technique in Technical University in Vienna. For me the concept of invention felt like wizardry.

What a magical concept...

However, after one year of studying, I decided to leave the university as I found greater fulfillment through the study of Art. I entered the University of Applied Arts in Vienna in 2003 and completed my diploma in 2009 under Erwin Wurm.

My journey to find my own artistic language was not an easy path. I found it only after several years of studying. One day, riding my bicycle in Vienna, I eventually found my way in art through an accident. It so happened that I was about to knock down the pedestrian with my bicycle. To avert it I had to brake harshly. Looking down to the brake mark under the wheel of the bicycle I was stunned as I immediately knew that this is it, I found my artistic language. Since that moment “Velodrawing” was what I intended to do!

Indeed... this strange correlation between accidents and our progress through life. So what happened then, you started to practice hard?

I became obsessed with experimenting with my bicycle – using the brakes, drawing with the rubber of its wheels on the concrete of the streets. I spent plenty of time riding my bicycle over the city, searching for a type of concrete where the brake marks are better seen and making velodrawings. After half a year I moved from velodrawing on the streets to white primed wooden plates, lying on the floor.

Actually, at first, I just wanted to make a film about the process of velodrawing using bicycle brakes, but then I realized that I am much more attracted to the physical nature of the skid mark.

Can you specify maybe what attracts you the most to the aesthetic qualities of the skid mark?

What fascinates me is how the material of the tyre transforms into the colour.

I noticed your works are always monochrome. Do you agree that the aesthetics of your works are beyond pictorial, and that colour would not add any further dimension to them? Almost as if you are speaking about something where colour does not exist?

The contrast between the white background and the black or dark grey skid marks is important to keep it minimalistic and stay focused. Colour would divert the viewers' attention too much. Yes, colour is not really important for the meaning and concept.

What is your relationship with your tool – the bicycle?

It is some kind of a love story. It gives me freedom, and I hope to transmit this free feeling into my drawings.

But still, in this love relationship you are the dominant? You are the one who is in control, or how does it work?

Yes, I am «abusing» the bike for my ideals... But in turn this forces the bicycle to attain its maximum potential. So it is an effective and nurturing relationship. We work well together.

Would you say that your bicycle is a co-creator?

No (smiling). Just as much as a pencil is an artist's co-creator when producing a drawing.

Are you totally aware, in advance, of what kind of drawing you are going to make and how you would manipulate the bicycle for that? Which is stronger the element of control or the element of spontaneity and passivity, when you are velodrawing?

I start the drawings with a basic idea, a picture I have in mind, but this basic idea is just the starting point. I am open to the influence of instinct and spontaneity. The final drawing is continuously developed throughout the whole process.

Controlling my bike in the sliding state requires a lot of practice, as the drawing itself is happening during slippery, friction-less moments I have to move my body from side to side and turn the handlebars in order to skid the marks, without crashing to the floor.

So the element of control is about extending my possibilities in terms of skill and technique. And the actual drawing becomes instinctive.

Let me ask you this, then. If you think about the notion of control, let's imagine a horse rider – sometimes he reins the horse in, sometimes he reins it out. While controlling the horse, the rider is active and passive in equal measures. It's curious, if a rider perceived being in control as being always dominant, reining in all the time, then the horse would just stand without any further movement. The way you show your control over the process of velodrawing is a bit similar?

Ha ha ha

I see.

Hmm.

Let's move on to another subject... Sometimes I see landscapes, jungles or plants in your works. It's fascinating how with a "mechanical" tool you can create such organic motifs.

It's still me who is riding a bike; It's still a person who is doing it. Maybe my presence is transferring living energy into the drawings.

Would you say that during the process of velodrawing both your intellectual and physical energies intercross? Can you describe to us, what is it like for you, keeping these two processes happening simultaneously?

Well, realizing any one thought requires energy to action, which in my case is velodrawing. I have been riding bicycles since childhood; it feels like an extension of my body, a replanted extremity. For that reason I feel as though the intellectual and physical energies are completely synchronized. They start melting together as I am finding my lines in a, let's say, meditative way.

In which way does velodrawing reflect life?

The skid marks found on the streets are a temporary sign that something happened in the past. These remains are telling stories of events encompassing many different emotions. With the passing of time these marks began disappearing just as everyday life does. So there are past, present and future states, meaning the skidding moment, the visible time and the phase of disappearing until the marks are invisible.

So how many skid marks have been there before, or how many will follow?
The ephemeral status of these skid marks is something deeply connected with life.

Do you think this transience is sad in it's nature?

No. It is like life itself.

It may be transient, but it's what we live for... (smiling)

I see velodrawing as showing what is absent, rather than representing something that is present. However what is a trace – a trace is something that remains, but could be also gone, so it has past, present and future. It is the state in between one absence and another absence, but is present in that moment.

Exactly. The imprint left by the bicycle remains as a fact of it's own existence.

For me velodrawings are full of some kind of mystery, perhaps the mystery stems from the transient nature of traces, which in turn become the drawing's language.

I find the poetry of life within it and I hope there is a correlation between this poetical content and velodrawing's aesthetic language.

I also like to reveal something that is around us, but usually we would not look at. And I like the

idea of using these hidden from our eyes elements such as traces to create a bit of a surrealistic hypertrophied reality, to represent them in an unusual way.

Interestingly, in velodrawings the mark from the tires becomes the colouring material, as usually marks from tires are something we know of, but don't pay particular attention to. I explore my area with open eyes and search for ideas. To make art is to be with my eyes wide open. There is always some kind of potential around us.

I want us to see and recognise the potential of free, everyday and everywhere available elements and the possibility to transform them into other goods.

For instance, before velodrawing I worked on a project called "Re-Cycling". I created a Google maps account on which I mapped where in the city it was possible to find parts of old bicycles so that people could find them, and so that these parts will be in use again, cycle again. These old used parts could become parts for building up real street bikes.

Yes, I remember also when you started to collect bicycle's tyres on the street to transform them into the Rubber Creatures... in the shape of many different kinds of animals...

Art is somehow the possibility to make things, that are surrounding us, but we are not noticing them, visible.

And another good example of this is your recent project called "Street Sleepers", if I am right?

My attention was captured by mattresses that are lying like waste on the streets of Berlin. I saw mattresses as canvases of the streets and was inspired to paint sleeping people on them. The spray can is always with me. After painting on the mattresses, I leave them, where they are, in order for people to notice them and instead of seeing them as ugly rubbish they now appear beautiful.

Why did you move to Berlin? Was your intention on moving there to find a positive influence on your artwork? Does the place where you are living influence your work?

I have always felt a close connection to other people, which is expressed through my necessity to create art for them, to do something for them and to add positivity to the world around. In Berlin I found many more possibilities for work with the streets, therefore linking me with my audience. I think one of the most perfect opportunities for exhibiting art is 'the street'.

Also the reaction of people is particularly important for me. I would like as many people as possible to be able to touch my art and to be able to understand my art. A great sign and motivation for me was the fact that, during one of the last exhibitions at the university, one child sincerely liked my artwork. (smiling). The biggest pleasure was when the CD, with the video art work that I and a fellow artist Phillip Hohenwarter made together on it, was stolen by one of the viewers from the exhibition. I was fascinated by the fact that this person wanted our work so much that took the risk of stealing it.

It is interesting what you mentioned about the necessity to improve the world by adding positivity to it... Could you speak a little bit more about it?

Well, in a way, perhaps the only positive impact that I have is through using my artwork to

persuade people to notice and appreciate positive events in daily life and therefore find a chance to be happy by just looking around them. Aren't these things that we sometime take for granted, already the result of someone's efforts?

I am convinced that it is easier to be negative than positive.

Absolutely. And the negative energy is also much stronger than positive. My father always told me that it would take several days for a cut on the finger, that happened in a few seconds, to heal over. It would take years for a tree to grow again, after being cut in a few minutes. It could take a lifetime to forget a word.

I remember once you said that velodrawing is something that made you feel free?

It gives me a good feeling. It is this moment when you are actually sliding, but still not touching the ground. It allows me to experience the powers of nature existing through me. At this moment I am in-between up and down, and I am enjoying it.

Well, let's say then, that your experience proves once again that there is a freedom to choose whether we are up or down.

Christian, thank you very much for the insightful answers! Shall we go now to Tony's gallery and see your installation with a fresh perspective?

Good idea. Let's go by bike...