

Drawing with Krištof Kintera

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I admit that when Krištof Kintera first mentioned his drawings in our conversations about his exhibition at Ikon, I wasn't sure what he meant. He'd often mention them in passing – "oh yes, and the *drawings*" – as if their fact was evident. This despite publications of his work containing no visible traces of what the majority of people would describe as drawings. No ink on paper, pencilled lines or sketchbooks; mainly photographs and details of his kinetic sculptures and installations. These are the works for which Kintera is widely known: animatronic trees shaking their way across gallery floors (*Nervous Trees*, 2013); hooded mannequins repeatedly bashing their heads against walls (*Revolution*, 2005); sprawling networks of electrical boards and wires (*Postnaturalia*, 2016 – 17); and stacks of abandoned washing machines rebooted as live sculptures (*We All Want to be Cleaned*, 2017). Complex and at times staggeringly large, these works take up to several months for the artist and his collaborators to complete, absorbing all manner of materials and labour. Little wonder, I thought, that he would have the time for the relatively solitary practice of drawing.

Yet there his drawings were – notionally, at least – marked by Kintera on a drawing of Ikon's galleries. Stacks upon stacks of sketched, boxy rectangles. They were so numerous that he had devoted an entire gallery to them. Some of the boxes enclosed vague shapes, including one with two dots; signs of eyes on a crude face. The approximation reminded me of works that I had seen in an index of Kintera's oeuvre published in 2018, *Fatal Banal*, featuring solidified pools of expanding foam studded with plastic beads and eyes. Excepting their materials, these works are mostly flat and allude to the two-dimensional plane of drawing. The effervescent quality of the foam and the objects which the artist attaches to them create the impression of figures raring to break away from their backgrounds. This anarchic sense of movement is pushed further in the declarations written in their empty spaces. Emphasising the muteness of the figures, these texts also paradoxically give them a voice, as if they were contesting the inertness of their materials.

In a later conversation, Kintera clarifies that these works are his drawings. Intrigued, I ask him why he doesn't consider them to be what, in a material sense, they are – that is, three-dimensional reliefs:

It's true that most people don't believe me when I say that these works are drawings. They see their physical elements and think of them more as collages or reliefs. But to me they are drawings because of the way I make them. They are spontaneous and quick. Arranging the objects is like the process of drawing. I have never considered them as anything other than drawings.¹

The speed to which Kintera refers is certainly true. Analysis of his drawings' materials and marks reveals paint and objects hastily applied, as if from fear that they might run away. Expanding foam is barely given the chance to settle before its development is interrupted by the insertion of an object. While selecting the materials for his drawings takes longer, their attachment is, more often than not, swift. The vitality and wit of the images and texts in his drawings seem dependent on such speed: without it, both of these qualities would arguably be lost.

The deft quality of the drawings is enhanced by their few elements. Much less complex than his sculptures and installations, their compositions are straightforward and favour concise juxtapositions over intricate arrangements. This economy of means increases the communicative punch of their visual messages, which take shape through everyday materials. One common pairing in Kintera's drawings is the upturned broom with glasses, an incarnation – like his faces of expanding foam – of the talking head. Another trope is the worn, found object, barely manipulated yet exploited for its naturally self-deprecating features. In two drawings, one with the title *I Doubt my Contribution to Evolution*, and the other, *Do Not Overestimate Your Own Existence* (both 2020), a striped orange and a cream cushion take turns as alter egos respectively. Shabby and stained, both objects-cum-egos are brought down to size by the doubts and warning written in the texts beneath them.

Universal metaphors like these make Kintera's drawings ideal for public display and distribution. Their archetypes speak widely, across cultures, and their texts – written in the first and second person – directly address viewers. Similar to his modified versions of crowd control barriers (*Paradise Now*, 2009) and streetlamps (*Miracle*, 2008; *Of One's Own Volition*, 2009 – 11), the playful messages in his drawings blend easily with gimmicks of advertising and public spaces. For the ninth edition of the Quebec City Biennial, Kintera created a series of drawings with the collective title "*Suis-je aussi responsable?*" (Am I also responsible?) (2019), which he then photographed and printed as posters. Pasted on public lampposts, hoardings and walls around the city, the series addressed onlookers with questions and reprimands about the issue of climate change. But if the texts in these drawings criticise the involvement of viewers in the latter's causes, their recycling of the didacticism prevalent in environmental campaigns could also be read as ironic. Viewed in such public contexts, the irreverent potential of his drawings becomes apparent. Their painted texts, for example, evoke the rebellious graffiti tags common in street art in Québec and numerous urban cities.

This capacity for multiple meanings and registers is what makes Kintera's drawings so playful: they are what they are and more. Their images never quite transcend their composite construction yet are coherent all the same. In them, the creation of particular figures rarely evolves beyond a certain point: the fundamental character of their found objects is always maintained. This fidelity to original materials allows viewers to witness their transformation into signs and – contrary to the directness of his drawings' texts – resist instant interpretation. Within this scope of interpretation

are also the dual qualities of their materials: plastic flowers that are as fake as they are pretty; tree branches that look as harmful as they look supportive to the foam heads which they embed. In one drawing, *I'm Not Here, Sorry* (2020), a small light bulb pokes out from a mass of synthetic red fibres. The undeniable presence of the red fibres simultaneously reinforces and contradicts the drawing's gesture of concealment, their strands shielding the bulb while framing it.

In Kintera's drawings, tragedy and comedy often go hand-in-hand: like peas in a doomed pod. Morality in his drawings is thus rarely black-and-white. It is instead a spectrum of positives and negatives, which are as interchangeable as they are grey. This wide moral range particularly surfaces in the drawings made during the lockdown in response to events throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. In one from June, a broom whose bristles reflect the colours of the German flag references the dispute between teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg and the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, over Merkel's use of a photo opportunity with Thunberg to make herself "look good".² Its title – *I Like Angela and Germany, and I Also Like Greta, and Also Denisa* (2020) – seems neutral, but actually asserts the positive qualities of both women. Kintera's introduction of a third party – his girlfriend Denisa – sounds like a jibe, yet also complicates what would otherwise be a binary debate about political virtue. In another drawing from March, a fusion of electrical cables, a walking pole and a tree branch form a device "against racists and xenophobes". The tool is clearly a rejoinder to the racist and anti-foreign sentiments of far-right political parties in Kintera's native Czech Republic and around the world. But it is also – as he jokes – an imaginary weapon against coronavirus,³ whose spread only seems to increase the insistence of these political parties on anti-immigration policies and the strengthening of national borders.

The electrical equipment and tree branches in drawings like *Device Against: Racists and Xenophobes* (2020) recall Kintera's sculptures made of similar materials, such as *Postnaturalia* and *Praying Wood* (2014). In this sense, it would be easy to see his drawings as prototypes for his sculptures, their physical arrangements serving as testing grounds for upscaled versions. This, however, isn't true – his drawings are in fact works in their own right. The robust structure of their backs, which are made from boards of composite wood, supports their independent status: they could stand on their own. One metre tall, their height is just over half of that of the average human body: a scale that feels appropriate, given the purposes for which the majority of the objects in his drawings were made. Crucially, this scale also triggers a sense of empathy in viewers through its relationship to their own bodies.

Looking at the white backgrounds of the drawings, I notice several unintentional marks. Accumulated over time and through handling, these marks evidence the materiality of his drawings as objects in the world exposed to outside elements. It's an identity that the artist is keen for them to have, reflecting his desire for his art to evolve with circumstances. This porous quality of his drawings makes me think of Czech curator and art historian Tomáš Pospiszył's observations about Kintera's works and their relationship to art galleries. Messy by nature, such labyrinthine,

kinetic works cannot help but mark the spaces in which they are presented. To quote Pospiszyl, “the art on display gets the gallery dirty, puts it at risk”.⁴ At the same time, Kintera’s works also benefit from this discordant relationship, because of their contrast with the generally neutral aesthetics of art galleries. As Pospiszyl highlights, “this type of art needs a background” – without it, “... the artist’s intention would not be discernible”.⁵

It’s a provocative statement that could equally apply to Krištof Kintera’s drawings. Their unruly idioms and white backgrounds are like allegories of avant-garde art rebelling against the so-called “objectivity” of the white cube gallery. Ever since encountering Kintera’s drawings, I’ve often thought of them in this way: collaged ruses whose energetic forms give the impression of jumping off their pages. Fixed down for now, they are what the artist has always intended for them to be – drawings.

¹ Krištof Kintera, unpublished conversation with the author, 15 June 2020.

² PA Media, ‘Greta Thunberg hits out at leaders who use her fame to “look good”’, *The Guardian*, 27 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jun/27/greta-thunberg-hits-out-at-leaders-who-use-her-fame-to-look-good>.

³ Krištof Kintera, ‘hope it works also against fcking covid micro shit!’, Facebook, 26 March 2020.

⁴ Tomáš Pospiszyl, ‘Exhibition’, *Krištof Kintera: Nervous Trees*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague 2017, p. 55.

⁵ Ibid.