

Large Text

The exhaustive thought

Curated by Xenia Benivolski

Works by Zanis Waldheims

October 28–November 21, 2020

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University of Toronto Art Centre

Art
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This exhibition is produced as part of the requirements for the MVS degree in Curatorial Studies at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design, University of Toronto.

We gratefully acknowledge operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, with additional project support from TD Insurance and Manulife, and the Reesa Greenberg Curatorial Studies Award and International Travel Fund.

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Exhibition Essay

The exhaustive thought presents a selection of drawings and writings from the work of Zanis Waldheims, a Latvian artist who lived and worked in Montreal.

Waldheims was born near Riga, Latvia, in 1909, where he was trained and practiced as a lawyer. He lived through both world wars. At the height of tensions between Eastern and Western Europe, Waldheims, like many people living on the edge of the Soviet empire at the time, craved access to the open intellectual dialogue of the West.

By 1945 he found himself stationed in United Nations rehabilitation camps for refugees in Bamberg, Germany, making his way to Paris and, soon after, Montreal, where he lived in relative isolation from 1952 until his death in 1993.

Though he was consistently interested in art, Waldheims did not participate in Montreal art circles, nor did he play a role in his cultural community; rather, he became an autodidact, engrossed in exploring Western rational and empirical philosophers, historians, and linguists. Over 40 years, Waldheims created a world of diagrams: a series of over 600 meticulously rendered pencil drawings illustrating a “map for human orientation.” The works consist of intensive geometrical compositions in which each feature—each line and shade—is assigned an existential value. These values are detailed in the artist’s annotations, which fill his many sprawling sketchbooks. Conceived as graphs, they illustrate how different systems of knowledge are relative to each other.

Through drawing, Waldheims grappled with the very idea of what it means to be making art as an outsider. In his first set of notebooks, he wrote, “It is art that tries to symbolically represent metaphysical conceptions, as transformed into conceptions of a particular geometrization, able to present the totality of an explicit content on a surface that by constitutive degrees is completely used up.”¹ Psychology, phenomenology,

mathematics, physics, and linguistics laterally collide and intersect in Waldheims's work to create an "exhaustive" set of diagrams presenting disparate sciences and humanities as facets of one massive intellectual prism. Distant from the contemporary art context, Waldheims understood his art to be an exploration of colours and geometry and a way of reflecting on all possible conceptual structures.

In Western Europe from the 1930s on, the emergence of geometric abstraction, promulgated by the groups *Cercle et Carré* (1930) and later *Abstraction-Création* (1932), was part of a rejection and an evolution of the flowery narratives of expressionism. While Waldheims's work may be considered in relation to that history, he was not actively part of the conversation. In Eastern Europe and Russia, the history of the avant-garde was interrupted. The Soviet regime forbade people from openly expressing certain ideas that were thought to be radical. Therefore, metaphor became a necessary tool to communicate political truths: as is common in poetry, one learns to read between the lines. Soviet fiction produced at that time is notoriously untranslatable due to double entendres in the text. In translation, the language wilts and flattens.

Understanding this, Waldheims focused on the role of language in constructing truths, offsetting it through the complexity of drawing. In 1969 he wrote, “All our verbal ‘truths’ are only the truths of degrees of a totality. They are never other than in successive order, and it is only the drawing that is susceptible to giving the simultaneous meaning of the truths of a totality. Thus, one more time, ‘we must draw more and write less!’”² Frustrated by the “hardened” ability of words to obstruct, rather than reveal, meaning, Waldheims’s drawings represent a visual language, an art outside of the art world.

Like many post-Soviet migrants, Waldheims never returned to Latvia or saw his family again. While he idealized the European classics, his own life followed a different script. Homer’s *Odyssey*, a cornerstone of the European literary canon, glorifies the idea of return: an impossibility for the exiled. The homecoming hero is revered, the deserted and exiled are forgotten. But Edward Said wrote that the exiled feel “an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives. . . . [T]herefore, much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world.” For Said, “the exile’s new world, logically enough, is unnatural, and its unreality resembles fiction.”³

Fiction is what separates the exiled from migrants and settlers. For Waldheims as a person in exile who had lost his trust in words, art became the main vehicle to express his new world. In the Odyssey there is no other world—only the call of the homeland—but the transcendental determination of the exiled proves that infinite other worlds may exist. In the spaces between translation and understanding, and in the small gaps between rational and irrational systems of inclusion and exclusion, art can provide a view into them.

—Xenia Benivolski

¹ Zanis Waldheims (loose notes, courtesy of Yves Jeanson, Montreal, 1959).

² Waldheims, loose notes.

³ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 61–62.

Curator's Acknowledgements

With thanks to Yves Jeanson for the generous loan of Waldheims's works and notes, his support of this exhibition, and his faith in Waldheims's work. To Barbara Fischer for her guidance, commitment, and willingness to dig deep into this work, and to the team at the Art Museum. To Raymond Guy and Louise Gervais, and to Jonathan Adjemian for his lucid thoughts and poetic vision. Thanks to Robert Steenkammer for helping, supporting, and recording our conversations with Yves, to Inga Lāce for introducing me to this artist, and to my classmates and colleagues for invaluable input and presence. And to Zanis—"Now once again, we must write less and draw more!"

Visiting the Art Museum

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