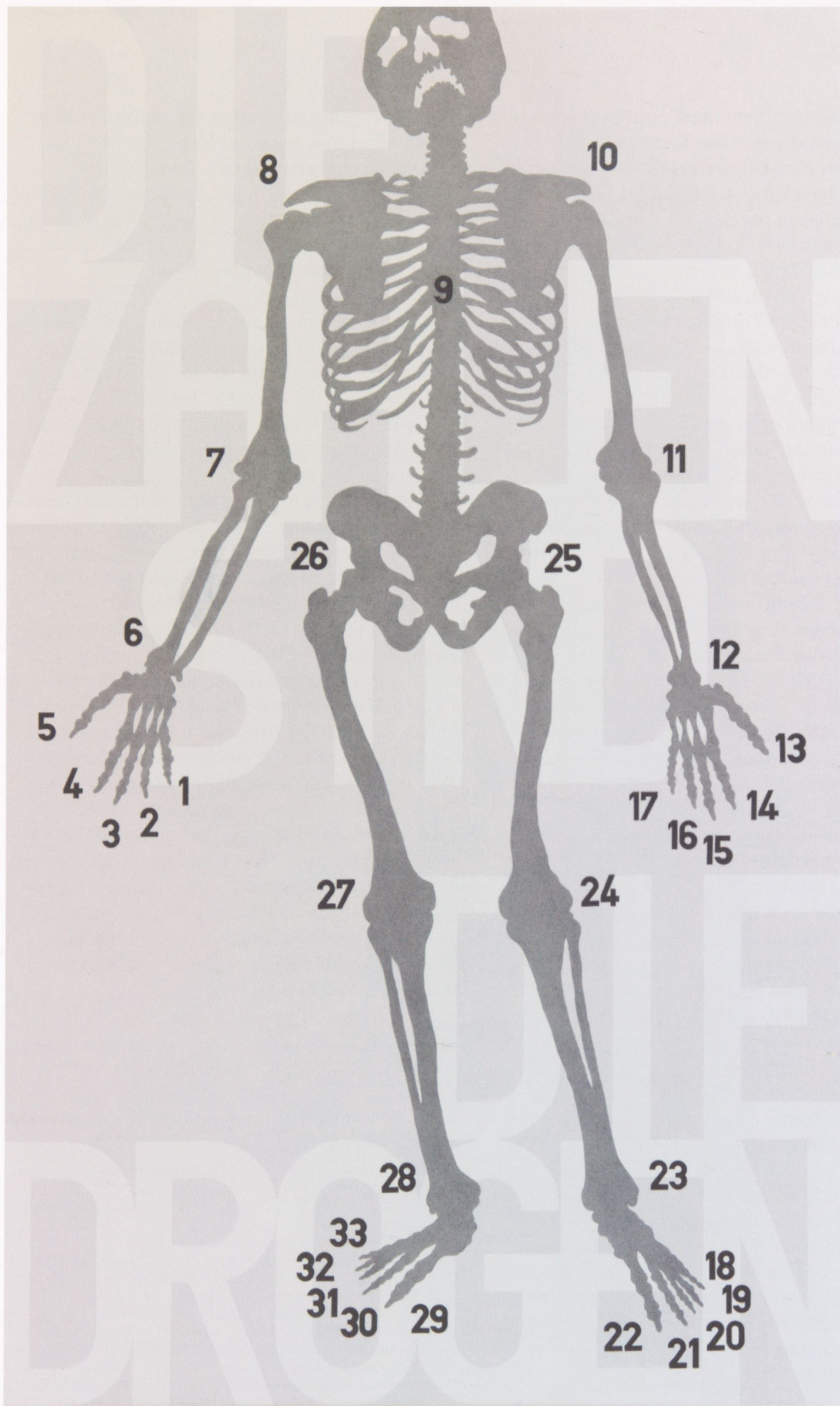


A Fascination with Numbers On the Series of Works "Novalis folgend" (Following Novalis) by Rune Miels

He is considered to be one of the most important representatives of Early German Romanticism: Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, known under his pen-name Novalis, who was born at Oberwiederstedt Palace in Saxony-Anhalt in 1772, and died at Weissenfels in 1801 at the age of only 28. In addition to his lyrical and epic works – and despite the short length of his life – he left behind an amazingly extensive legacy of theoretic writings and fragments dealing with philosophy and religion, history and politics, poetry and language, art and literature, and the natural sciences and medicine. His writings of 1799 and 1800 also include the Mathematical Fragments. And these contain the observation "Die Zahlen sind die Drogen" (Numbers are the drugs).

This statement constitutes at once the motto and literally, the background for a series of drawings and images created by Rune Miels in 2015 and 2016, in which she systematically traces different number systems and phenomena. With "Following Novalis: The Primary Numbers" (fig. p. 4), for example, the words "Numbers are the drugs" are left blank in the light-gray ground. Above this, arranged in eleven horizontal rosters, are the primary numbers in black from 1 to 97, whereby the numerals 1, 2 and 3 have been placed in the upper left corner and the numeral 97 in the lower right corner. The blank spaces between the primary numbers represent the numbers that lie between them, their distances being thus precisely calculated. In "Following Novalis: Jupiter's Magic Square" (fig. p. 5) a magic square, such as we know from Albrecht Durer's famous masterwork engraving "Melencolia I" (1514) has been placed diagonally into the picture field – the numbers having been arranged in a manner that the sum of the individual rows, columns and diagonals is equal (namely 34). And here a last example: "Following Novalis: The Torres Numbers" (fig. p. 13). In this case as well, numbers in black are placed above the aforementioned Novalis quote, but a third picture element is added here: a skeleton. The numbers correspond to certain parts of the body. The background information for this is that some aborigines, who have no words for numbers, use gestures that fulfill the same function. On this subject, Rune Miels quotes from Stanislas Dehaene's study "Der Zahlensinn oder Warum wir rechnen können (The Number Sense – How



Novalis folgend: **Die Torreszahlen**, 2015
Acrylfarbe auf Leinen, 150 x 90 cm

the Mind creates Mathematics)", published in 1997/99: "The natives of the Torres Strait islands [between New Guinea and the Australian peninsula of Cape York], for example, count by pointing to different parts of their body in a fixed order." Other works from the "Following Novalis" series deal with Mayan numbers, the Venerable Bede's counting system using fingers, the Fibonacci series, Pascal's Triangle and other phenomena pertaining to digits and numbers. Common to all works are the blanked spaces, i.e., as it were, the negative portrayal, of the Novalis quote in the background, even though the arrangement of the words on the picture surface varies from drawing to drawing, or from picture to picture. The fascination with numbers and their systems goes back a long way in Rune Miels's oeuvre. As early as the beginning of the 1970s, she created her first series dealing with primary numbers. Over the next decades numbers, specifically primary numbers, developed into a leitmotif in her art. ("Sieb des Eratosthenes IV [The Sieve of Eratosthenes IV]", 1977/92, "Die Drogen [The Drugs] [Novalis] – Primary Numbers", 2011). In 1986, for example, the artist began researching the numbers in the Apocalypse of St. John. Her meticulous research culminated in three cycles of works in 1993 – working in series is typical for the artist – called "Apocalyptic Numbers". To be mentioned in particular here is also the four-part work she created from 1992 to 1998, "Magic Square of Order 3 (Number Systems)" about the number systems that exist throughout the world and the way they are written – Rune Miels had compiled 96 of them from the specialist literature. Considering this emphasis in her art, it is no wonder that the artist is represented with no less than three illustrations of her work in Lynn Gamwell's comprehensive volume on the subject "mathematics + art – A Cultural History", published in Princeton in 2016.

A quote by Rune Miels from 1978 provides an apt description of her systematically conceptual approach, which we might designate as being cultural-anthropological: "The major portion of my work consists of research and the analysis of and with systems and structures; more precisely, it uses logical systems that yield visual structures or might yield them. Rational, old and new systems that already exist but have not been

developed by me, but rather taken from reality, though often they have not been examined for their visual character. Today, some of these systems are no longer necessarily regarded as being rational, but rather as magical or mythical, but these, too, have their origins in the human reason and man's desire to know."

As a matter of fact, in her art Rune Miels analyzes classification systems, models, structures and signs that people throughout the world have developed over the course of history in order to appropriate the world, understand it, and grasp it, i.e. alphabets and number systems, symbols and ornaments, creation myths and rites, texts and images. Thus it seems natural that the artist has an exceptionally close relationship to mathematics and science, but also to music, history and art history. Her strictly rational and methodical approach that strives for objectivization corresponds to a systematic, each time conceptually-based, execution of the works. For the artist, painting is a form of knowledge: Her concern is to make visible what is not visible. But even though Rune Miels proceeds in a strictly logical manner like a scientist, nevertheless she is an artist through and through, for whom the aesthetic result, the convincing pictorial realization of an idea and the formal conciseness of the result is vitally important – and her concentration on the non-colors of black and white as well as gray and dispensing with any sort of "signature" effect must also be viewed in this connection. Ultimately, Rune Miels is concerned with the image, no more and no less.

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