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WHO IS TAKING WHO FOR A WALK?

Foreword to the catalogue *Taking a Line for a Walk*, Bern, Zentrum Paul Klee; Cologne, Snoeck 2014

A year after his appointment at the Bauhaus, Paul Klee was teaching pictorial composition as part of the foundation course. Following a brief introduction, he immediately got to the heart of the matter: “ I’m starting precisely there, where pictorial form begins, with the point that is set in motion.” He introduced his now famous dictum concerning “free and unbound” lines, as early as his first lecture on November 14, 1921: “It is a kind of walk for its own sake. Without a destination.”¹ In a poetic-metaphorical manner Klee had laid out a plausible working method for drawing: the artist/designer takes a line for a walk. Much has been, and is still being written about what this implies, including in this book. In using the topos “walking” in connection with a conscious, productive act (which in principal is what an artistic creative process is), Klee had generated a tension between chance and intention. Nevertheless Klee was also completely aware that drawing was subject to other things than just the playful path of the walk; in this context he spoke of “limited” lines, contrasting the “leisurely walk” with a new metaphor, the “business walk,”² this one distinguished by a clear destination.

Such tension becomes even more apparent when the line is an element of a written character, whose original purpose was primarily that of fulfilling a function, namely to be recognizable and decipherable, and, in its syntactic use, to denote something as unequivocally as possible. If generated by handwriting, the written sign obtains an additional, individual, possibly gestural expressivity, one emphasizing the discrepancy between the function and the aesthetics of its form.

The exhibition *Taking a Line for a Walk* focuses on the significance of handwriting, writing, and also of scriptive signs in artistic practice. Departing from Paul Klee’s interest in handwriting and calligraphy, the properties of writing are examined more closely. This involves the aforementioned dichotomies “convention” versus “individuality,” and

“concept” versus “chance.” In this respect, handwriting can serve as an exemplary model for the artistic process. The artists selected for the exhibition do not only employ writing as pictorial element, but have also located their artistic approach between the two poles of spontaneity and the conceptual. In statements concerning their practices they have repeatedly emphasized the prevalence of process and movement. Historically encompassing almost a century, the exhibition ranges from Paul Klee, Henri Michaux, Mark Tobey, Cy Twombly, and Brice Marden’s gestural scripting, to Jonathan Lasker and Olav Christopher Jensen’s conceptual painting, and Christopher Wool’s word paintings.

It neither solely addresses the semantic content, nor the abstract graphic form or individual expressivity, but rather the tension inherent to writing between these components. The purely gestural *écriture automatique*, as manual expression of the artist genius, came to an end with *Art Informel*, whilst a focus on the semantic aspects of writing ultimately lead to depersonalized Conceptual Art. We are less interested here in *Art Informel* or Conceptual Art as such, text as a relict of reality as familiar from the pictorial languages of Dada and Cubism (even if we will re-encounter similar relics – however with other functions – in Twombly), or apparently pictographic signs, possibly referring to primal forms of written language.

From today’s perspective, with the hindsight of Poststructuralism, the fascination of the freely written gesture (*écriture*) lies more in its fundamentally open-ended, non-authoritarian stance.³ Whilst Klee’s dictum of “taking a line for a walk” focused more on the production process, today we ask ourselves: “Who is taking who for a walk?” Is it not rather the line that is taking us, the viewers, for a walk? The artist gives it free rein, enabling it to lure us into unknown territory or to fool us by, for example, not providing an Ariadne thread to assist in our hermeneutic attempts. To a certain extent Klee, in some of his work, may be considered a forerunner of the later artists in this exhibition, almost a *Twombly avant-la-lettre*. Rosalind Krauss brilliantly demonstrated in her deconstruction of texts on Twombly, the spell-binding, blurred, and above all misleading trails the artist has laid out for us and, concurring with Roland Barthes, locates his genius in a subversive attitude towards established conventions of interpretation, or even a conscious undermining of our humanist tradition.⁴ Such a discourse remains controversial until today, a fact that we now consider to be evidence of the force and power of a free, “intention-less” pictorial composition.

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Taking a Line for a Walk* attempts to describe the various strategies of the artists participating in the exhibition. I would like to thank Régine Bonnefoit, Martina Dobbe, and Fabienne Eggelhöfer for their enlightening contributions, Wigiel for the meticulous design of the book, and the publishers, Snoeck-Verlag, for its production and distribution. I would especially like to thank the participating artists. With the exception of those no longer amongst us, they have all welcomed and supported the project. Further thanks go to the lenders to the exhibition. The encounter with these extraordinary works of art in the original, enabling unique experiences and insights, has only been made possible thanks to their generosity. We are also indebted to our partner Axa Art Insurance for their financial support of the exhibition. Finally I would like to thank Fabienne Eggelhöfer, Curator at Zentrum Paul Klee, for her concept for, and management of, this exhibition and catalogue project. It once again conveys a notion of the inexhaustible richness of Paul Klee's universe. I would like to conclude by thanking all the members of the wonderful team working at Zentrum Paul Klee.

The walk is now open. I hope it will lead to great inspiration and discoveries!

¹ Klee, *Beiträge zur Bildnerischen Formlehre*, BF/11, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern (see www.kleegestaltungslehre.zpk.org)

² Ibid. BF/12.

³ For the complex significance of the handwritten gesture in post-war art, see my contribution "Abstraction, Gesture, Ecriture. An Introduction," in: Fischer 1999, pp. 11–21.

⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "Cy was here; Cy's up," in: *Artforum*, September 1994, pp. 72–74 and 118.