

BALANCING ACTS:
FELT QUALITIES OF MEANING IN DESCRIPTIVE GESTURES AND ARTWORKS BY PAUL KLEE

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Based on a comparative semiotic analysis of static abstract works of art and dynamic gestural images, this paper explores the role of embodied conceptual structures as driving forces in the constitution and interpretation of visual signs. One of the underlying assumptions is that despite their metonymic “spareness”, abstract depictions in paintings and “descriptive gestures, those forerunners of line drawing” (Arnheim 1969: 117; cf. Müller 1998) enable interpreters to relate to the actions represented or performed in front of them based on internalized patterns of cognitive, physical and cultural experiences (cf. Bredekamp 2010; Krois et al. 2007).

It will be argued that the “structure of the world“ (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 216) as exhibited in selected paintings by Paul Klee and coverbal gestures may be said to be motivated, to a certain degree, by image and force schemata (Johnson 1987; Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Oakley 2007; Sweetser 1998; Talmy 1983). As gesture research has shown, communicative body motion and posture may reflect schemata such as PATH, OBJECT, CONTAINER, CENTER-PERIPHERY, BALANCE, COMPULSION, etc. (Cienki 2005; Mittelberg 2010; Williams 2008). These dynamic patterns seem to guide not only processes of experiencing and interpreting the world, but also gestural instances of “exbodiment” (Mittelberg 2008: 149) of inner images and inclinations.

Building on these insights, the results of image schema analyses of artworks by Paul Klee will be presented. In the selected images, two of which are shown in figures 1 and 2 below, human figures take center stage, trying to stay balanced in one way or another, while being exposed to different kinds of physical forces. Furthermore, attention will be drawn to mechanisms of pictorial composition and to the ways in which image-schematic structures may be said to underlie such static images. In the artworks analyzed for the purpose of this study, the schemata BALANCE, COMPULSION, PATH, CENTER/PERIPHERY, LEFT/RIGHT, UP/DOWN, etc. were the most prominent.

Finally, a comparison will be made with video and motion data recordings of three native speakers of American English describing their encounter with the same artworks inside a motion capture lab. The speakers, building the center of their personal gesture space, use their full bodies – through shifting weight from side to side, inclinations of the torso, as well as head, arm and hand movements – to describe their perceptual experience of formal and semantic qualities of the artworks presented on a large screen in front of them. Analyses of the video and motion capture data brought to light underlying image schemas and metaphorical projections. An example of a freeze of the trajectories constituted by a speaker’s hand motions is shown in fig. 3.

This paper aims to offer glimpses at “felt qualities” of experience and meaning (Johnson 2005: 31), hoping to shed light on some physical dimensions of people’s subjective understanding of artworks, which may be seen as “exemplary cases of embodied, immanent meaning” (Johnson 2007: 234; cf. also Brandt 2006; Sullivan 2009; Turner 2006).



Fig. 1: Paul Klee, Angelus Novus (1920)

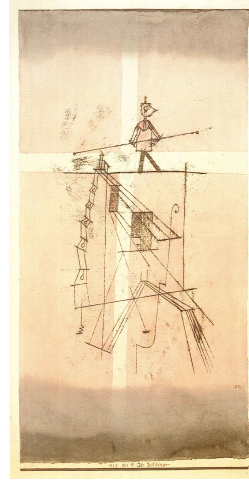


Fig. 2: Paul Klee, The tightrope walker (1923)

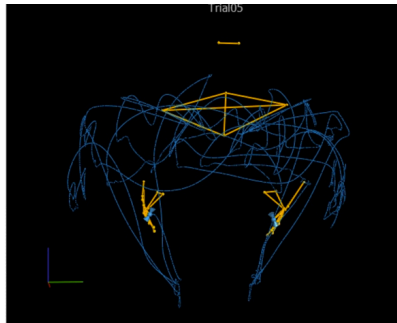


Fig. 3: Motion capture data trajectory freeze (©Natural Media Lab)

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