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Experiential essence:
Image schemata and force dynamics as mediating structures in artworks and their gestural enactments

Confronting static works of art and dynamic gestural action, this talk explores the role of embodied conceptual structures as cognitive semiotic principles guiding the formation and interpretation of visual and bodily signs. The main underlying assumption is that despite their metonymic "spareness", abstracted depictions in paintings and "descriptive gestures, those forerunners of line drawing" (Arnheim 1969: 117; Müller 1998; Mittelberg 2011; Mittelberg & Waugh 2014) enable interpreters to relate to the actions represented/performed in front of them through internalized patterns of cognitive, physical and cultural experience (e.g., Bredekamp 2010; Krois et al. 2007; Sonesson 1992).

More specifically, it will be argued that the "structure of the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 216) as exhibited in selected paintings by Paul Klee and their gestural enactments may be said to be, to some degree, motivated by image schemata and force dynamics (Johnson 1987; Lakoff & Johnson 1999; Talmy 1983). As gesture research has shown, communicative kinetic action and posture may reflect mimetic schemata (Zlatev 2005) as well as basic image schemata such as BALANCE, PATH, OBJECT, CONTAINER, CENTER-PERIPHERY and SUPPORT (Cienki 2005; Mittelberg 2010). Such mediating structures, which from a Peircean view may be understood as iconic symbols (Danaher 1998; Peirce 1960), seem to not only underpin processes of experiencing and interpreting the world, but also drive gestural instances of 'exbodiment', evoking habituated facets of experiential essence but also engendering new ideas and connections (Mittelberg 2008; 2013a; Mittelberg & Gerner in prep.).

Building on these insights, the results of image-schema analyses of three artworks by Paul Klee will first 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 seemingly being exposed to different kinds of physical forces. In view of these balancing acts, special attention is drawn to mechanisms of pictorial composition and to the ways in which image-schematic structures and balance patterns (Arnheim 1974; Johnson 1987; see fig. 3 & 4) may not only be said to underlie such static images, but also enable the beholder to experience them as "transmodal phenomena" (Krois 2011: 2018).

Then a comparison is made to video and kinetic 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 and reenact their perceptual experience of formal and semantic qualities of the artworks previously presented on a large screen in front of them (Mittelberg 2013b). As will be pointed out, they tend to switch from observer to character viewpoint when attending to the physical characteristics of the figures portrayed in the images and imitating their actions in a dynamic fashion.

This presentation aims to offer glimpses at "felt qualities" of experience and meaning (Johnson 2005: 31) and what Klee (1968: 185) himself referred to as 'the essential character of the accidental'. The overall intent is to shed light on people's subjective understanding of artworks which may be seen as "exemplary cases of embodied, immanent meaning" (Johnson 2007: 234; see also Brandt 2006; Sonesson 2007; Turner 2006).

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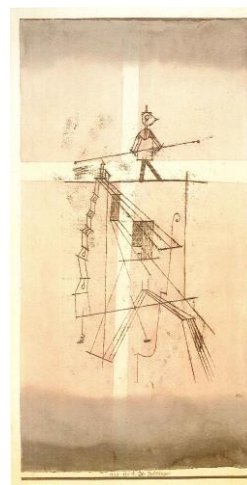Fig. 1: Paul Klee, Angelus Novus (1920)

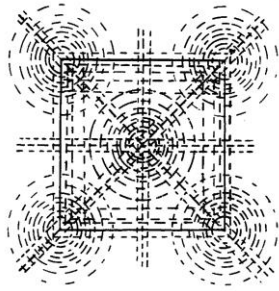Fig. 2: Paul Klee, The tightrope walker (1923)

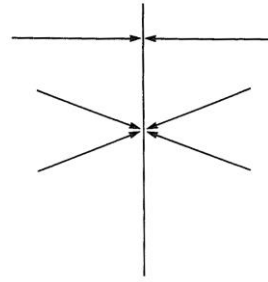Fig. 3. Balance pattern (Arnheim 1954: 13)   Fig. 4. Axis balance (Johnson 1987: 86)

(see paper on 'Balancing Acts', Mittelberg 2013b)