

Transdisciplinary Excursions

Trip Report: Excursion to the Zentrum Paul Klee

Bern, 28. October 2017

The Exhibits:

Paul Klee. Poet and Thinker

“Should all be known? oh, I think not’ – Those were the words Paul Klee inscribed on one of his very last – never completed – works. The exhibition takes a fresh look at Klee, the painter who was also a poet, word acrobat, philosopher – and much more besides.”

10 Americans. After Paul Klee

“The exhibition *10 Americans* is the very first substantial show to illustrate the impact of Paul Klee’s work on mid-twentieth-century U.S. art. Ten selected American artists, including notables such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Mark Tobey, will bear eloquent and impressive testimony to the extent to which these artists were inspired by Klee’s artistic concepts and practices.”

We met at the Zentrum Paul Klee to learn about the Swiss artist and his international legacy, as well as to experience the museum building, built by the Italian architect Renzo Piano in 2005. I was fascinated by the building, which consists of three “hills,” raised areas with space for the above-ground galleries (much of the museum is below-ground). It works together with the landscape in the background and the lawn in the front more like a geographical formation than like architecture.

That the museum building is integrated into the surrounding nature made sense after having visited the exhibition *Paul Klee. Poet and Thinker*, which featured writings by Klee about the indispensable role of nature in his personal and artistic life. The exhibit included many of Klee’s drafts and sketches, as well as finished paintings. The centerpiece of the exhibit, however, was Klee’s personal library: his notated books, poetry and philosophy in three languages, on display. We spent quite a bit of time sitting in the reading area, browsing through copies of books that Klee had owned and loved, and reading poems and essays that Klee himself had written. A small corner of the exhibit was also dedicated to Klee’s influence on the contemporary philosophers Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin (both famously loved Klee’s art and Benjamin later owned the *Angelus Novus*, one of Klee’s most famous works). I left the exhibit





with an impression of Klee as a voracious reader, a lover of nature, and an artist particularly curious about shapes and symbols and perpetually at play with his materials.

In the second exhibit, *10 Americans*, we saw paintings by American artists who claimed to have been influenced by Klee's art. Sometimes Klee's influence was readily visible, sometimes less so, but it was interesting to see the role that this one Swiss artist played in the imaginations of young American painters in the 1950s and 60s. It was also interesting to see how the art world at the time was operating. That Klee's dealer moved to New York City to avoid the war is perhaps what established his name for the ages. Who knows how well-known Klee's work would be today had so much of his art not been taken to New York City before the outbreak of World War II?

Following our visit to the exhibits we stood in a circle outside the building and shared notes about our favorite works. We had each photographed one piece of art while in the exhibits and written a few sentences about what we thought about and around it. I had chosen a quote from one of Klee's essays written while he was working at the Bauhaus about the role of intuition in research. I think the elements of play and surprise that are so readily visible in Klee's art could be of use not just to other painters, but also to researchers like us. If we follow our impulses more often and pay closer attention to what other choices we could make, maybe meaningful discovery will happen more frequently.

Carolyn Kerchof