Rhythm – A Gift of the Gods?

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Rhythm is it! *is the title of a documentary film that records a project by the Berlin Philharmonic to perform Igor Stravinsky's* The Rite of Spring *with a group of schoolchildren.*[1] *The intense and extremely challenging rehearsal of the classical score by professional musicians and young laypeople is touching. Crucial to the process is a grasp of rhythm; it is the indispensable common ground for such a heterogeneous group of interpreters. The choice of title for our exhibition takes its inspiration from the film: distinguished only by the exchange of a single letter, it indicates a decisive shift in content.*

Rhythm is in *the things on view here, incorporated in the works of art as a kind of inner scaffolding. How the scaffold is manifested, how it functions and what it means are the principal questions underlying our research for this exhibition. Two works that lie at opposite ends of the temporal and art historical spectrum of the selected works will be discussed here by way of illustration. In addition, inquiry into the highly relevant factors of 'time' and 'nature' will offer further insights into the theme of the exhibition.*

There is rhythm in it – from Ferdinand Hodler to Katja Strunz

Among the 60 works selected for the exhibition Rhythm in it, *the focus lies on contemporary art in juxtaposition with exemplary works from the early and mid-20th century. Art today cannot be understood in isolation from early modernism; the dialogue across artistic generations signifies substantial added value in reflecting on current practitioners and assessing historical developments. Rhythm, the subject matter of our inquiry, is eminently suited to such an approach because it can be traced back to the very origins of the fine arts. Etymologically, the term 'rhythm' originally referred to temporal arts, specifically music and dance. Derived from the Greek* rhythmos *(flow), the word designates the regular repetition of the same elements and already referred to aesthetic phenomena in antiquity, for instance, to the classical order of columns. It stood for a satisfying order and Plato (c. 428–347 BC) even considered a sense of rhythm to be a gift of the gods.*[2]

Our exhibition has no encyclopaedic pretensions and does not, of course, go back to antiquity but instead spans slightly more than a century, from Ferdinand Hodler's Genfersee mit Jura (Landschaftlicher Formenrhythmus) *(Lake Geneva with Jura [Landscape Rhythm of Forms]), c. 1908 (p. 118) to* Crack Initiation Testing *(2012; p. 201), by Katja Strunz. In his lake panorama, Ferdinand Holder (1853–1918) adapted the organic diversity of nature to a horizontal and vertical structure. He abstracted and simplified the real landscape, subordinating its topography to the rhythm of the composition.*[3] *However, in contrast to Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), he never entirely abandoned painting after nature. In his book,* Concerning the Spiritual in Art, *published in 1911 shortly after Hodler*

had painted his picture of Lake Geneva,[4] the Russian artist and theoretician explicitly refers to Hodler and his rhythmical compositions and, interestingly, does not treat the structure of nature and of art as opposites. On the contrary, "Just as every construction has a rhythm of its own in music, just as there is always a rhythm in the entirely 'accidental' distribution of things in nature, so also in painting."[5] In other words, for Kandinsky, nature and painting, like music, were quite inconceivable without rhythm.

Hodler makes use of rhythm to formal and aesthetic effect and, as he says explicitly in his title, he is interested in the rhythm of forms. Not so artist Katja Strunz (b. 1970) from Berlin: in her kinetic wall installation she works with four old wall clocks that are repeatedly jolted. In Crack Initiation Testing, *she does what her title says: she tests the durability of her materials. Excessive use curtails the natural aging process by fast forwarding the life rhythm of objects. Strunz subjects instruments that measure time to the semblance of a laboratory experiment. Choosing to use dilapidated pendulum clocks of the 19th century, whose condition in itself strikingly embodies the ravages of time, she accentuates the metaphorical implications of her sculptural setting: she is putting pressure on those old clocks and accelerating their 'natural' decline. By extension, they are an image of the acceleration of life rhythms and the abbreviation of sell-by dates and, as such, they might be seen as mirror images of the processes that prevail in today's fast-paced civilisation.*

The Factor of Time

Rhythm is necessarily related to time, a self-evident observation when manifested in a medium inseparable from time, such as music and language, movement and dance, or film. Rhythm structures, interrupts and anatomises temporal sequences, as strikingly illustrated by several works in our exhibition. In Dara Friedman's (b. 1968) film Dancer *(2011; p. 89), people are seen dancing their way through Miami, performing in a variety of styles from break dance to tango and salsa. The rhythm of the dancing overlaps with other rhythms, like the breathing of the dancers or the urban backdrop of the city. In their film, the Portuguese artist duo*

Su-Mei Tse
Swing, *2007*
White neon tubes, transformer, motorised system, 265 × 42 × 21 cm

João Gusmão and Pedro Paiva (b. 1979/b. 1977) also engage in a dialogue between movement and urban setting. In Wheels *(2011), three different wheels revolve in the air without getting anywhere (p. 103). The passage of time is structured by the breathtaking pace of revolving wheels in three separate film sequences. A technical device has enabled the artists to make the camera itself revolve as well, so that the entire surroundings begin circling along with the wheel. Su-Mei Tse's (b. 1973) installation also consists of a moving object, a swing, moving back and forth in a fixed rhythm. Like the pendulum of a clock,* Swing *(2007) breaks the course of time down into smaller units. In this work, rhythm is no longer a pattern of accents imposed on a basic pulse; instead pulse and accent have become identical and congruent.*

The factor of time is also relevant when rhythm is manifested in a visual, static medium which, narrowly speaking, is unrelated to time. Take, for instance, Niele Toroni's (b. 1937) paintings: The artist structures his pictorial surface with the exact same imprints of the paintbrush at regular intervals (p. 209). The concept of his compositions never wavers regardless of whether his support is an entire wall or simply a sheet of paper. Thus radically reduced, the painting process is made transparent and attention is drawn to the temporal component of the work. We are inevitably tempted to

Rodney Graham
Inverted Drip Painting #41, *2008*
Acrylic on linen, 116.7 × 96.5 cm

trace the rhythmic act of painting the "empreintes", as the artist calls them, and to draw conclusions about their making from the painted result. Toroni's paintbrushes are like the rhythmical beat of a conductor's baton or a drumstick on a support. Thus, rhythm in the Swiss painter's art not only plays a formal role; it also marks the act of making the work and the time it takes.

For Rodney Graham (b. 1949), it is the act of painting itself that is the subject matter of his work and in The Gifted Amateur, Nov 10th, 1962 *(2007), he ironically centrestages himself as a hobby artist (p. 98). Wearing silk pyjamas, he stands in the middle of his stylish, modernist living room working on a drip painting in the style of Morris Louis (1912–1962). In the photograph, he is just about to empty yellow paint on a propped up canvas, in imitation of Louis's 'easy' method, which earned him posthumous notoriety. The rhythmic pouring of the paint underscores the temporal aspect of painting and Rodney Graham has hung the evidence, one of the resulting canvases, right next to the photograph in the exhibition.*

It is interesting to see how the two works Untitled *(1964) by Robert Morris (b. 1931) and* Untitled (Nu descendant un escalier; *2005–06) by Bethan Huws (b. 1961) establish a link between depending and not depending on time. The American minimal artist does this in a lead wall relief (p. 163); the English conceptual artist in her use of lettering (p. 129). Huws translates the rhythmic movement of descending the stairs by rendering it as text. The typography of the letters, as the subject matter of her picture, is analogous to the rhythm of the body, descending the stairs step by step. Robert Morris in turn visualises the impact made on a liquid by a solid object, a tin can. Concentric circles appear on the surface. He has created a static work of art that embodies the rhythm of movement. The presence of the agitated surface mounted vertically on the wall and the tin can, hanging suspended from the ceiling directly in front of it, is disconcerting. Could the circles possibly be a visualisation of the invisible acoustic frequencies generated by the impact? This ambiguity cannot be resolved and probably isn't meant to be. Morris' New York dealer, the legendary Leo Castelli, tellingly observed that Morris did not just create the minimalist art for which he is so widely known but also had a surprising penchant for surrealism. This is of particular interest in our case since the lead relief on view here ingeniously links the two art historical poles mentioned by Castelli.*[6]

The Rhythm of Nature

Rhythm is not only inseparably bound up with the factor of time; it is also closely related to nature, beginning with our own perception of rhythm. We do not simply perceive rhythm with our eyes and our ears; it is above all a humanly innate sense of movement and vitality. Three variations on the natural rhythm that is fundamental to our being are emphasised here: the rhythm of day and night, the rhythm of life and – the last and largest unit – the rhythm of ages and eras following one upon the other.

David Clearbout's (b. 1969) video Sunrise, *(2009) concludes with just that: a sunrise (p. 65). Prior to the final moment, we watch a maid for about 20 minutes, who has risen hours ago so that when her employers rise for the beginning of* their *day, they will find everything in perfect order: the house has been cleaned, coffee made, fresh towels laid out in the bath. We see the maid riding off on her bicycle and, at that very moment, the first rays of the sun make an almost liberating,*

rewarding appearance. The fact that the maid did her job in semidarkness, making do with the dim light of dawn, gives food for thought. She subordinates herself to the natural rhythm of light and dark, effectively discounted ever since the advent of artificial light. Her employers apparently live by the rhythm of natural light as well, but in reverse: they rest when it is dark and get up at daybreak. The rhythm of day and night separates the lives of the social classes. Sunrise *can therefore be interpreted as experimental inquiry into the political and social aspects of the rhythm of people's daily lives.*

The rhythm of life, the becoming and passing away of all living creatures, is a fundamental human concern and has always been a crucial, if not the, crucial concern of art. It plays a role in many works on view here, ranging from cryptic to clearly legible. A quiet and melancholy work on the phenomenon of the life cycle was created by Bruce Conner (1933–2008). His series of Falling Leaves *(2001; p. 70/71) responds to a concrete event: the attack on the twin towers in New York. While still listening to the devastating news on the radio, the artist already created the first drawing of falling leaves, which was to be followed by many others in the weeks after 9/11. In his variations on the motif of falling foliage, Connor creates an analogy between the rhythms of human life and those of nature, between the falling victims of terrorist attack and dead leaves fluttering down in the fall. He approaches his subject matter on an almost spiritual level or, as the art critic Holland Cotter aptly remarks, his art combines "political awareness and an impulse toward the visionary".*[7]

Bruce Conner's falling leaves are a metaphor for dying and we are tempted to read Jonathan Monk's (b. 1969) subject matter – silence – as an image of death as well (p. 159). Over time, the light bulbs that form the word 'Silent' gradually burn out. The rhythm of the extinguishing lights is determined by material fatigue: like the course of life, it cannot be predicted, influenced or anticipated. These are universal rhythms but there are also rhythms of an individual nature. What this might mean is illustrated by The Odd Couple *(2008), also by Jonathan Monk, consisting of two life-sized floor clocks (p. 158). In his installation, Monk places them facing one another, almost as if in embrace. The two clocks closely resemble each other, may even have the same movement, but their timekeeping and ticking are not synchronised. The slight shift in rhythm is like that of two people in a close relationship, although they each "tick" differently.*

Stan Douglas
Dancer I, 1950, *2010*
Digital fiber print mounted on Dibond aluminum
106.7 × 142.2 cm

From the smaller rhythmic units of day and night and lifetimes, we move on in conclusion to the larger units of generations, eras and ages. The influence of natural rhythms on our lives has steadily declined over the centuries in negative proportion to progressively advancing civilisation. In ancient history the ages were subject to the forces of nature; in recent times, cultural and political influences prevail. Especially with respect to art and history, thinking in terms of cultural periods is of great significance. Writers of history thus try, in retrospect, to identify and characterise decisive slices of time. A familiar artistic strategy in the history of art involves referring back to earlier eras and styles. Revisiting art of the past features prominently in contemporary art. Rodney Graham returns to the 1960s in The Gifted Amateur, Nov 10th, 1962, *while Stan Douglas (b. 1960) recurs to the 1950s in* Dancer I/II, 1950 *(2010). For the Canadian artist, that means "reconsidering" certain moments in history and evaluating what they mean to us today.*[8] *Douglas does this by putting himself in the role of a mid-20th century photographer,*

who takes pictures for the press and for advertising. For his journey through time, he reconstructed and used a period photo studio, as it was in those days. His subject matter includes the burgeoning, postwar entertainment industry and the figures populating the subcultures of cabaret and nightclub life. His interest is not only socio-political, but also a study in historical visual aesthetics and practices of reproduction. In his large-format pastels, the young German artist Sebastian Hammwöhner (b. 1974) also addresses the artefacts of earlier generations, specifically fabrics of the Middle East or South America (p. 108/109). The artist modifies the colourful compositions almost imperceptibly, establishing a dialogue between the design principles of past civilisations and the aesthetic premises of modernism and contemporary art – a contemporary rhythmical return to principles of design from earlier ages.

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1 Rhythm is it!, *2003, directed by Thomas Grube and Enrique Sánchez Lansch, in collaboration with Simon Rattle, and others.*

2 *Wolfhart Henckmann, in:* Lexikon der Ästhetik, *Munich, 1992, pp. 206 ff.*

3 *See Matthias Fischer's description in:* Ferdinand Hodler: Catalogue raisonné der Gemälde, *Band 1, Die Landschaften, Teilband 2, p. 328.*

4 *Wassily Kandinsky,* Über das Geistige in der Kunst: insbesondere in der Malerei, *Munich, 1912 [written in December 1911].*

5 *Wassily Kandinsky,* Über das Geistige in der Kunst, *Bern, 9th ed., 1970, p. 140.*

6 *Nena Tsouti-Schillinger,* Robert Morris and Angst, *Athens and New York, 2001, p. 27.*

7 *Holland Cotter, "Bruce Conner" in:* The New York Times, *9.9.2011, p. 26.*

8 *Scott Watson,* Stan Douglas, *London, 1998, p. 116.*