

## Artspan

The words come as if from one who lives beyond the living. They come as if from one who lives on posthumously with the dead or who, living posthumously, returns toward the origin from which all are born. In what they say, they affirm art's capacity to extend life beyond the living, to open communication with the unborn and the dead. For they are the words of the artist, words attesting that in and through his art he lives beyond the here and now, not only posthumously, but already in his life as an artist, already in the here and now. As artist he will always have lived beyond the living.

Now, after his death, the words are inscribed on his gravestone:

I cannot be grasped in the here and now  
For I live just as well with the dead  
As with the unborn  
Somewhat closer to creation than usual  
But not nearly close enough. (*T*, §427)<sup>1</sup>

The I who thus addresses us at this site is one who is inseparable from his art, one who lives on in the artwork that bears his name and in the words that, like these, come to supplement his art.

These words declare that his art is not confined to the here and now, that it does not lie simply on the side of the living, that it is not

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1. This text first appeared in connection with the large retrospective of Klee's work held at Galerie Goltz in Munich in 1920. In the catalogue for the exhibition, which was a special edition of Goltz's magazine *Der Ararat*, Klee's handwritten text was reproduced. See Christine Hopfengart and Michael Baumgartner, *Paul Klee: Life and Work* (Bern: Zentrum Paul Klee, 2012), 100–102.

*diesseitig*; rather, that it reaches out to domains that lie on the yonder side (*jenseitig*). One is the domain of the unborn, of those who, still anterior to life, are bound to a birth still to come. To reach artistically to the unborn requires living close to the origin, close to what Klee calls creation. The other domain, that of the dead, lies absolutely beyond life; and yet, art reaches it, discloses it in its very withdrawal from all living presence. In Klee's words, "Art plays unknowingly with ultimate things [*mit dem letzten Dingen*], and yet it reaches them!" (KL, 66). In particular it reaches what, for the living, is most ultimate, most final, death; and it does so in ways that stop short of bringing it itself into view, in ways that forgo the vain attempt to make it present, which, were it possible, would violate the very character of death as utterly withdrawn.

The words inscribed on Klee's gravestone thus declare that his art bears both on the genesis of life and on life's absolute limit, death. Klee's art is stretched between these extremes; spanning the abysmal difference, it extends beyond the living. There on the yonder side of mere life, Klee's art lives on.

There is no pretense of synthesis. Klee's art does not draw the extremes together so as to reduce the difference. The dead are not turned into the unborn, not conveyed to a rebirth, to a renewed life that would cancel the alterity of death. The same refusal is operative with regard to the other extremes that Klee's art spans. The difference that, in its bearing on human life, sets the heaven apart from the earth is not eliminated; the human bond to the earth does not cease to interrupt or limit the aspiration to soar to the heights. Even in the age of flight, humans return to the earth, sometimes at the risk of death; it is known that while serving at an air training base during the First World War, Klee observed with keen, detached interest the

crash of aircraft, and indeed in his pictures he repeatedly depicted bird-like creatures plummeting downward toward their demise. In some cases everything depends on balance. When the tightrope walker—or dancer, *Seiltänzer*—maintains his balance on the high wire, this art does not efface the difference between the above and the below; rather, his skill consists precisely in his ability to persist within the space of this difference, which at the same time leaves him suspended between life and death, between survival and self-absolution (*fig. 1*). Like the tightrope walker that it portrays, Klee's art is operative in the between, in the in-between; it is operative in such a way as to let the space of the in-between become manifest in its bearing on those situated there. Yet art can disclose this space only because it extends beyond to the extremes that delimit it.

And yet, the heterogeneity of Klee's art is so thoroughgoing that it cannot simply be subsumed under a single concept, nor even under a plurality of coordinated concepts. The multiplicity of styles, ranging, for instance, from near-representational to non-figurative, entirely abstract works, resists classification; as does the diversity of materials (canvas, paper, glass, burlap, etc.) and of media (painting, drawing, etching, lithograph, etc.). If, as Klee grants, a distinction is drawn between form and content, then it must be said that the content of his works—that is, what they let be seen—is hardly less diverse than the various elements of form. Yet the content is no sheer diversity but rather displays a certain coherence. While it cannot be brought under a ruling concept (such as spirit), there are schemata that run through Klee's works and give to their content a certain coherence. These schemata do not define the content of each and every work but rather constitute ordering drafts that organize the various contents in somewhat the

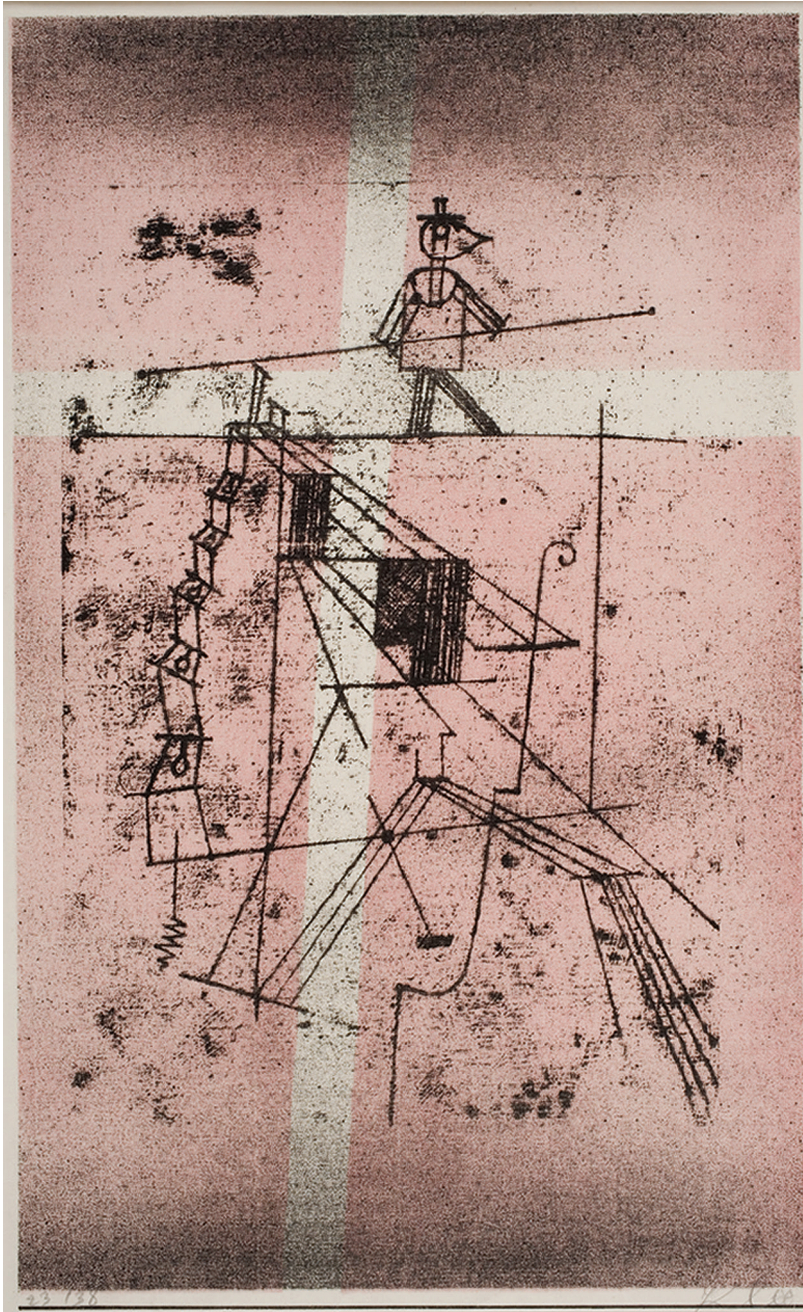


FIGURE 1. Paul Klee, *Tightrope Walker (Seiltänzer)*, 1923, 138.  
Lithograph, 44 x 26.8 cm.

Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA. Museum purchase with funds provided by Wellesley College Friends of Art

same way that the heavy black lines used by Klee in many of his late works often serve—as in *Insula Dulcamara* and *A Children's Game*—to organize the pictures without obliterating the diversity of content.

The schema of the in-between is the prototype from which various concrete schemata come to be elaborated in the production of the works themselves. Then it assumes the guise of the span of life between birth and death or of the space delimited by the earth, on the one side, and the sky, opening on the cosmos, on the other. Or, again, it assumes as its guise the differentiation between the animals and the gods, thus portraying the human as situated in this in-between. Yet it is imperative to stress the way in which such schemata are operative. It is not such that every work can, as regards its content, be shown to embody such schemata. Just as the heavy black lines in the later works orient and organize the pictures without simply determining every element, so the manifold schemata orient and give coherence to the content of Klee's work without simply determining the content of every work. Not every work simply displays an in-between; but every work has some bearing on—some reference, however remote, to—some in-between. The richness and irreducibility of the content of Klee's work is a result of its being only remotely bounded by a set of schemata that is itself open and indefinite in extent.

In works that are more abstract, the content becomes less separable from the form, and the schemata are, accordingly, concretized as governing certain elements that are primarily formal. For example, in the works that consist of checkerboard patterns of colored squares or rectangles, the primary movement that the work displays is a progression from one shade or color to another; in some cases there is an interwoven progression through various shapes, either through shapes of different sizes or

through various slightly differentiated, minutely distorted shapes, which in both cases serves to impede any tendency to rest with a static overview. The chromatic progression may run through shades of a single color, from darkest to lightest. Or it may occur as passage “through the segments of the color circle,” running across the disc, though not through its entirely gray center, thus in such a way that, for example, red shades away toward gray and eventuates in progressively more intense yellows. Or, again, passage may occur “along the periphery of the circle, from yellow via orange to red, or from red via violet to blue, or on a broad expanse, over the entire scope of the disc,” producing “a richly flowing symphony of color!” (see *fig. 2*). Each type of progression is governed by differences and occurs in between the terms of these differences. The various shades or colors blend like musical notes, yet without dissolving the differences, without synthesis; rather, their blending depends precisely on the differences.<sup>2</sup> All these movements occur, finally, within a larger compass; all are “ultimately bound up with the scale from black to white” (*KL*, 80f.), with the difference between darkness and light, which defines the primary in-between operative in such works. Yet even short of color and chiaroscuro, the schema remains in place: even in relatively simple linear drawings, the line traces the movement of a point over a certain span, across a certain in-between.

The schema of in-between is intrinsically spatial: to be in-between is to be situated in a certain space, and to span the difference that defines the in-between is to engage in a spacing. The sense of the space and of the spacing may be metaphorized or in some other way transformed, but in every case there

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2. See Hajo Düchting, *Paul Klee: Painting and Music* (Munich/New York: Prestel, 1997), 57.

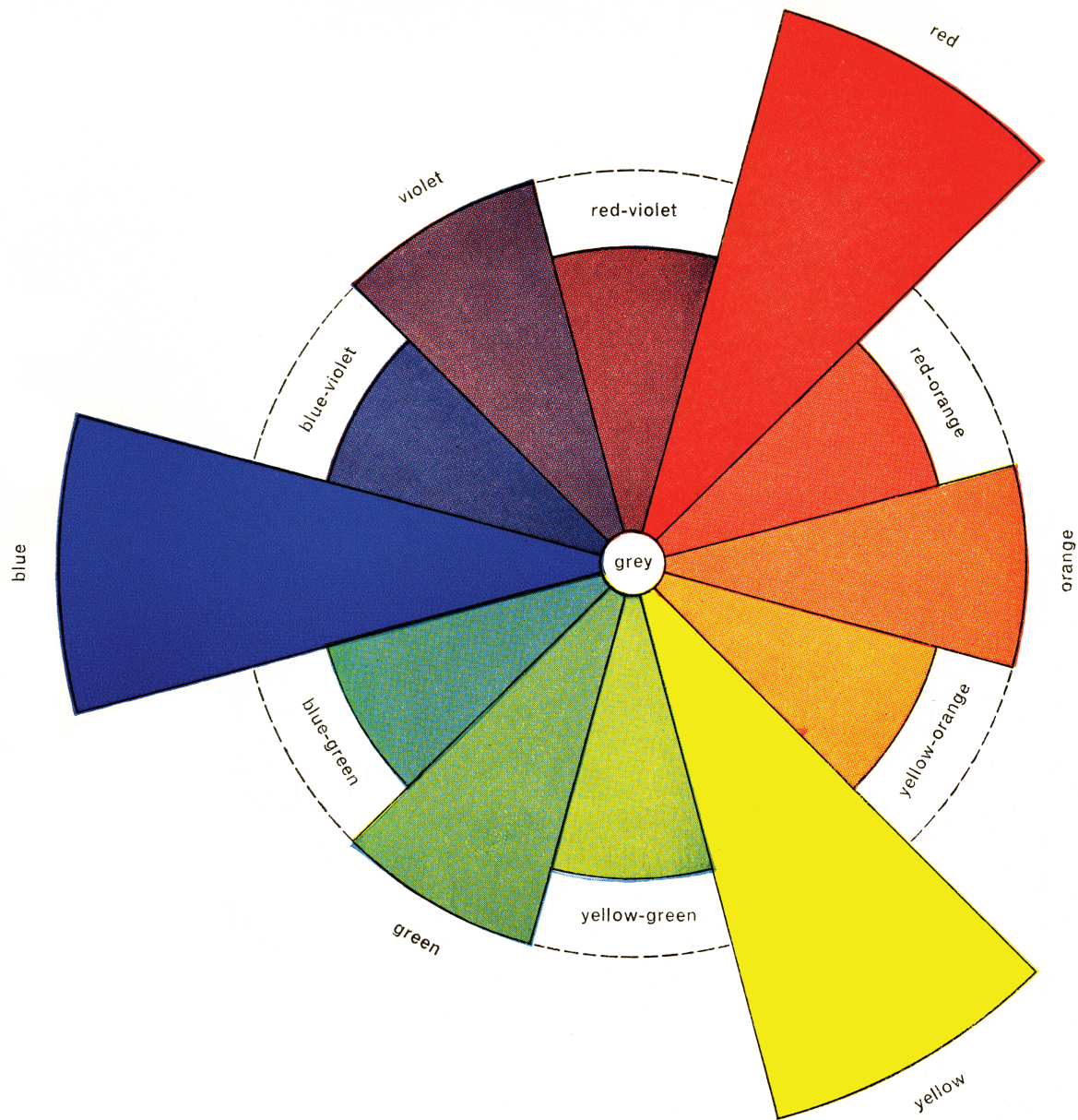


FIGURE 2. The Color Circle. From: Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye*.  
London: Lund Humphries, 1961 (Bauhaus Lectures).

is reference back to the concrete sense. Whatever the difference spanned, the operation that takes place is a spacing, and as such it involves not only space but also time and movement. It is a spacing that, in its mobile sense, compounds space, time, and movement.

Klee's theoretical reflections on space, time, and movement pertain not only to content but also to form. Rejecting the distinction between spatial and temporal art, he declares that "space is a temporal concept." He adds: "Only the dead point is timeless," whereas "when a point becomes movement and line, that requires time. It is the same when a line is displaced to form a plane. Likewise with the movement of planes into spaces." Not only on the formal side but "likewise in the world as a whole [*im Weltall*], movement is the given" (*KL*, 62f.). Rest is only an accidental impeding of movement, and to take it as primary is pure deception. Klee stresses that the work of art, in particular, is a matter of movement, of genesis. He explains: in the artist a fire flares up and is conducted through the hand to the picture, from which the spark there ignited returns to the eye, closing the circle; it is likewise with the beholder, whose eyes must traverse the paths laid out across the surface of the work.

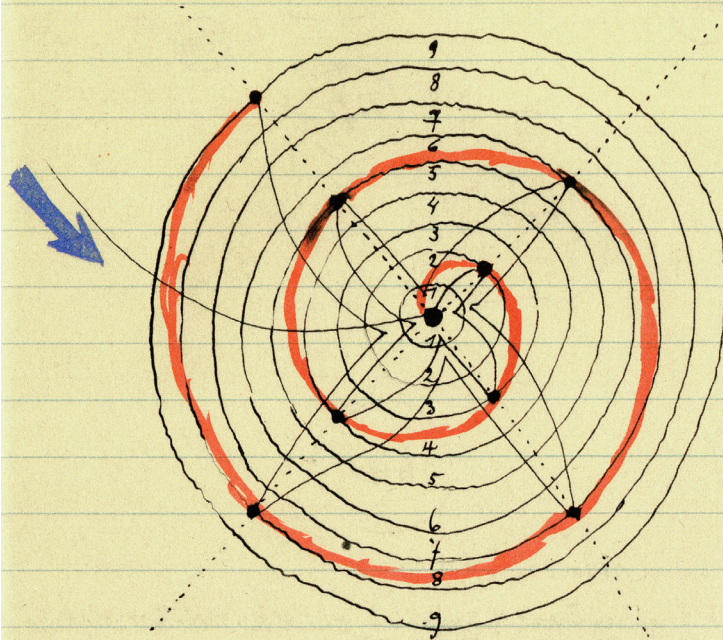
In his Bauhaus lectures Klee discusses in detail the temporality or temporal function of a picture. At the outset he explains: "The function of a picture is the way in which the temporally motive structure of the picture communicates with the eye and the way in which the movement inherent in the picture is forced upon the eye and the receptive power behind it. . . . Every work, even the most succinct, moves in time, not only as it comes into being (productively), but also as it is apprehended (receptively). Our eye is so constituted that it must take time to explore what it perceives" (*F*, 105).

Klee's lectures include a number of diagrams to illustrate how the temporality of pictures operates. The three shown here (*figs.* 3–5) represent three different kinds of paths that the eye might follow in apprehending a picture. The first (*fig.* 3) illustrates the case in which the points that attract the eye take the form of a spiral around a white center. In fact, this is not just one case among others, for the spiral—or, less formally, the snail shape—was highly significant for Klee and appears in many of his works. Elsewhere in the Bauhaus lectures he describes various kinds of movement as enacted in drawing; among these is "movement from the inside out or from the outside in." To this description, which is accompanied by a figure of a spiral, he adds: "The whole is in movement, tending toward total fulfillment" (*B1*, 245). In still another passage he sets up the opposition between spiral movement away from the center and spiral movement toward the center (*fig.* 6); then he declares that the question posed by way of this opposition "is a matter of nothing less than life or death. And the decision about this is made by the little arrow" (*F*, 121). In this simple form, when it is set in motion, the extreme limits are adumbrated, the limits in between which life takes place.

In the second of the diagrams illustrating the temporality of pictures (*fig.* 4), the figure is that of a more erratic ordering of the points that attract the eye. As Klee puts it fancifully, "the former pastoral of the grazing cow has become the territory of the prowling beast of prey" (*F*, 112). The third diagram (*fig.* 5) shows a more complex temporality, one in which the path that the eye follows is generated by combination of the two patterns shown above it in the diagram.

One of the primary ways in which Klee's artistic work discloses the schema of the in-between is

der Weg,  
 Auf diese Weise ordnet sich über die einzelnen Reizpunkte spiralförmig um das centrale Weiss. Die Reizpunkte <sup>werden</sup> unter Umhalten der Beziehungen zur Central immer mehr von ihr ab.



rote  
 Spirale!

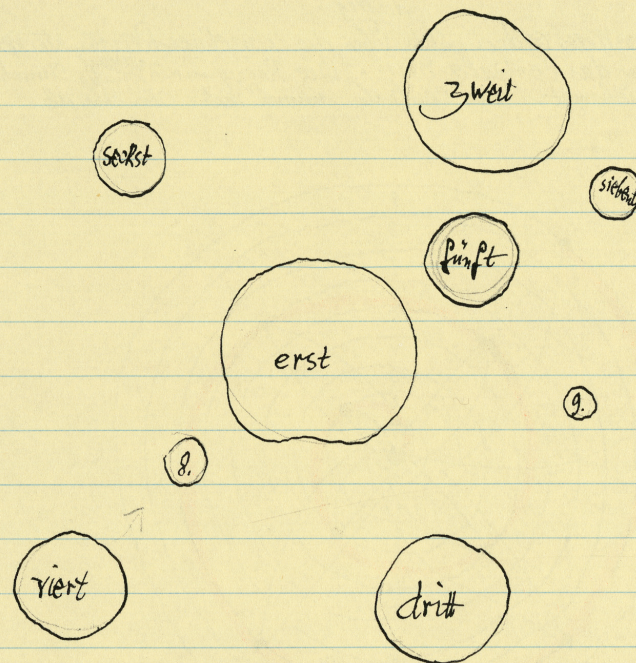
fig. 7 Recept (zu Product figt.)

Das Product (fig. 4) bestand aus fiedlich fester und ruhigen Formen, sein Recept, die Funktion jenes festgeformten Gebildes, ist denkbar reinste Bewegungsform; ist Spirale.

Und so werden wie bei jedem weiteren Versuch, die Funktionen eines Balanmerkes darzustellen, immer wieder Bewegungsformen erhalten, je weiter wie zum Contract der Funktion vordringen: auf desto reinere Bewegungsformen.

FIGURE 3. The Temporality of Pictures 1.

From: Paul Klee, *Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formlehre*. Basel: Schwabe, 1999 (Bauhaus Lectures).



Product (Fig. 1)

Dies neue Product zeigt im Gegensatz zu früher jetzt eine mehr sprunghafte Anordnung der Werte. Das vorangehende Pastorale des wirkenden Viehs ist zum Revier des jagenden Raubtiers geworden, wie es sich in der zugehörigen Funktionsform deutlich zeigen wird.

Als festes Schema zur Darstellung dieser Funktion wähle ich zunächst ein mehr episches von links nach rechts zu benutzendes System und ordnere darauf die Werte, den Wertsprünge des Productes angemessen, nicht in der Rangfolge, sondern von unten nach oben in der Reihenfolge drit, viert, acht, neun, erst, fünf, siebent, sechst, zweit, wobei die besondere Lage der Eins auf mittlerer Höhe im Auge zu behalten ist. Rang- und Reihenfolge sind nicht identisch

FIGURE 4. The Temporality of Pictures 2.

From: Paul Klee, *Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formlehre* (Bauhaus Lectures).



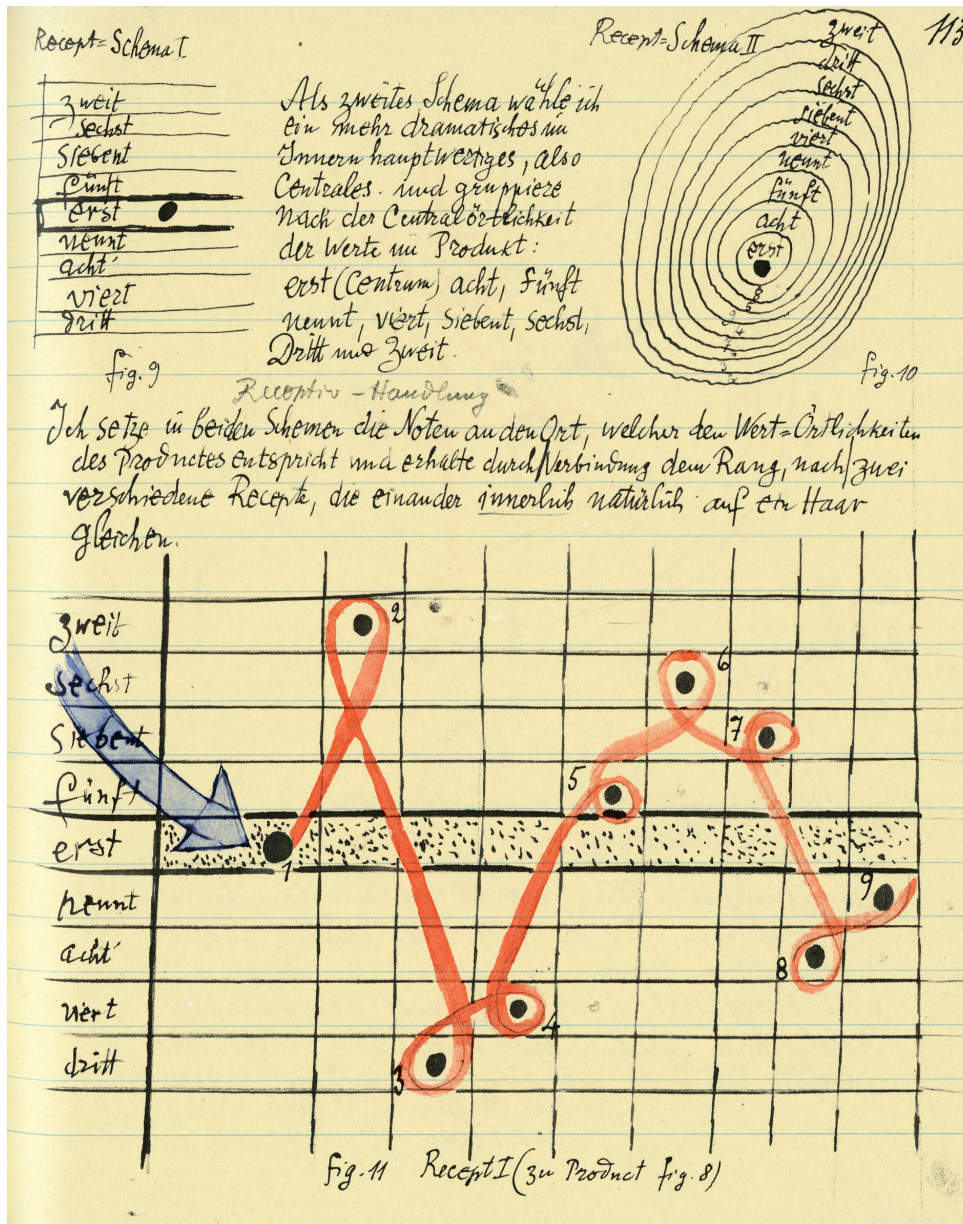
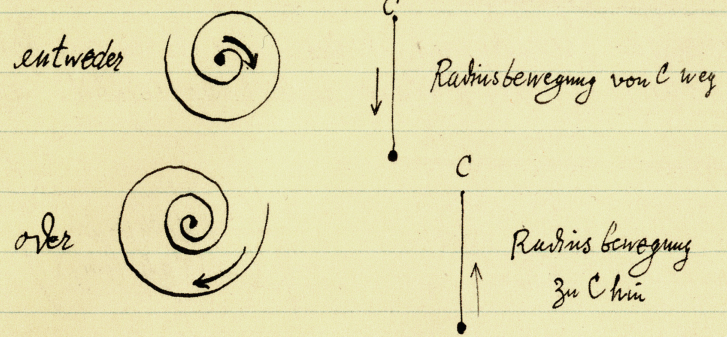


FIGURE 5. The Temporality of Pictures 3.

From: Paul Klee, *Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formlehre* (Bauhaus Lectures).

Bewegungen von einem Centrum *immer* mehr gebunden, bis es mich  
schliesslich ganz verschlingt?



Die Frage heisst nichts geringeres als <sup>Leben</sup> ~~Freiheit~~ <sup>Leben</sup> oder ~~zum~~ <sup>zum</sup> Tod. Und die Entscheidung hierüber hat ~~zu~~ <sup>zu</sup> der kleine Pfeil.  
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FIGURE 6. Spiral Movement.  
From: Paul Klee, *Beiträge zur bildnerischen Formlehre* (Bauhaus Lectures).

by depicting movement as it occurs within—and thereby outlines—the space of the in-between. There are works such as *From Gliding to Rising* (fig. 7) that present pure movement. Aside from a vaguely bird-like figure and an arrow slanting upward, the forms that are gliding, rising, or transitioning from gliding to rising are left entirely indeterminate. Thus, the painting depicts the movements themselves without regard to the objects undergoing the movement. It presents pure movement virtually detached from any determinate things that would move; it presents pure movement within the space-time of the in-between.

Humans are not the only creatures who are situated by nature in the in-between. Animals, too, have their defining space, not merely in the sense of being located there but also in the sense that—like humans, though in their own distinctive ways—their bearing displays a certain resonance with the expanse of this space. In this connection Klee's depictions of fish serve especially to display the pervasiveness of movement. Even when a fish is stationary, slight movements of the fins and tail are required in order to maintain equilibrium. What appears as rest, as immobility, is shown to be only the result of various movements.

In declaring that space is a temporal concept, Klee's intent is to stress the melding of space and time both in art and in the world at large. Among

the many works that bear on this melding, one of the most explicit is *Suicide on the Bridge* (fig. 8). As in *Tightrope Walker*, the figure is perched at a dangerously high level above the surface. He stands in between the open sky above (with its shining sun) and the watery surface below; perched on the bridge, he also stands in between the opposite banks of the river. Both his posture and, still more decisively, the title of the drawing indicate that he will fall to his death, not accidentally, as might happen to the tightrope walker, but deliberately, through carrying out the intention already operative at the moment we see him. Indeed the very spot to which he will fall is marked by a kind of asterisk—or splash—in the picture. In this way Klee has incorporated a temporal spread within the space of the picture, presenting at once the moment just before the man leaps from the bridge and the moment when he has just disappeared beneath the surface of the water. Klee underscores the spacing of time in the picture by including the face of a clock just below the human figure. Even the sun is drawn in such a way that it resembles the face of a clock; it is indeed the most originary clock, and its inclusion, while marking the region above, also serves to heighten the force with which the drawing lets the melding of space and time shine forth there in the in-between of life and death.



FIGURE 7. Paul Klee, *From Gliding to Rising (Von Gleiten zu Steigen)*, 1923, 89.  
Oil transfer and watercolor on paper, mounted on card, 35.6 x 51.7 cm.  
Harvard Art Museums / Busch-Reisinger Museum, Bequest of Virginia H. Deknatel in memory  
of Wilhelm Koehler, 2009.3. Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

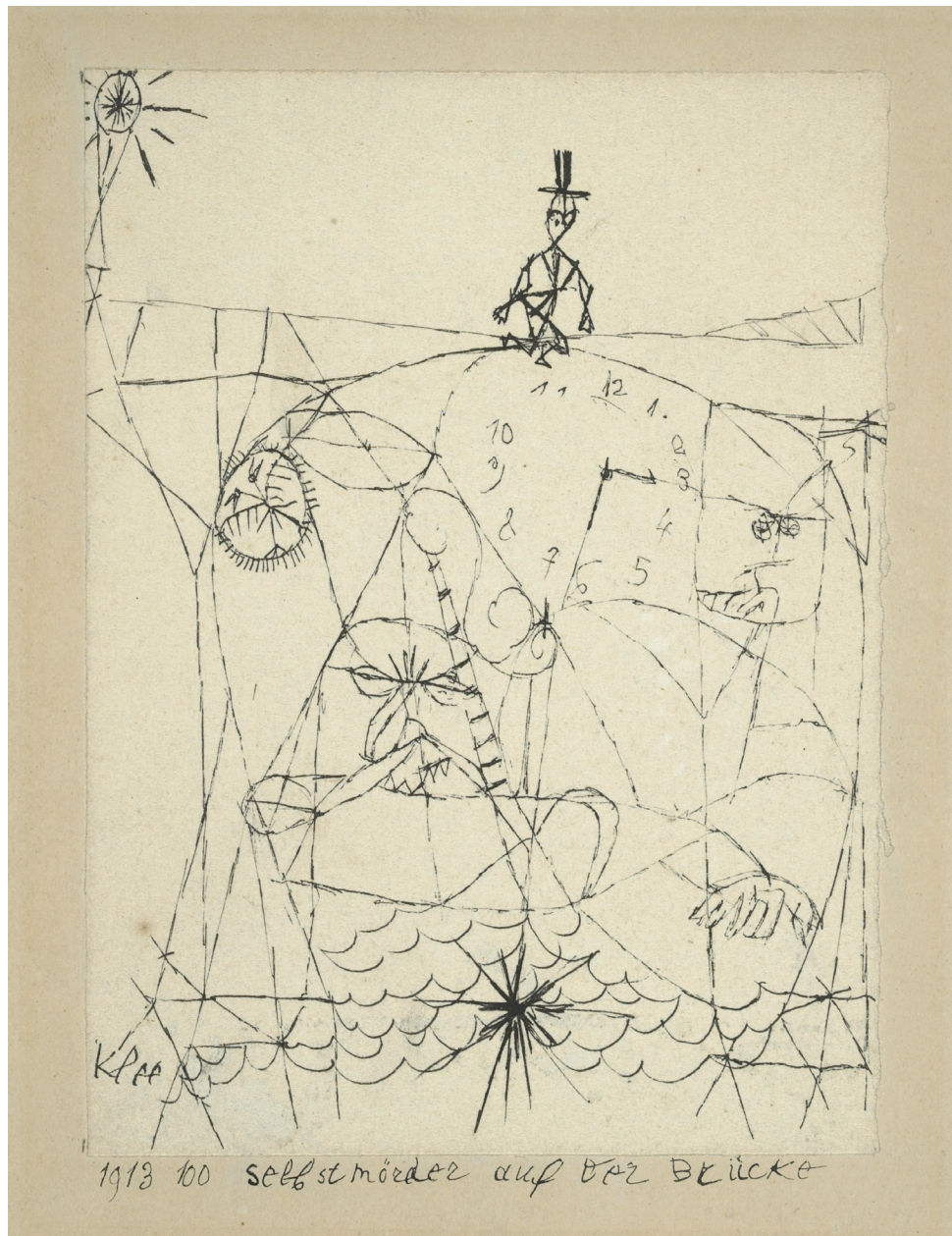


FIGURE 8. Paul Klee, *Suicide on the Bridge* (*Selbstmörder auf der Brücke*), 1913, 100. Black ink on off-white, modern laid paper, mounted on cream card, 15.8 x 11.5 cm. Harvard Art Museums / Busch-Reisinger Museum, Bequest of Betty Bartlett McAndrew, 1986.468. Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

