



Travelogue as Allegory, 2011, exhibition view, Royal Institute of Art. Photographer Björn Bengtsson

Travelogue as Allegory. A spreading exhibition

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Paul Klee – the Swiss German artist, teacher at the Bauhaus, and embodiment of the first generation of the modernist avantgarde – published his artist's diary with large sections written in the mode of a travelogue in the early 1920s. The publication includes the famous phrase that describes him "becoming an artist" after encountering what he understood to be bliss in Tunisia.

... Thursday, April 16 1914. Been painting early in the morning outside of town, dispersed light, gentle and bright at the same time. ... roaming through the streets towards the evening. We loot through buying. Finally ending up in a street cafe. An evening of gentle and defined colours alike. ... I let work be for now. It flows through me so deeply and softly, I feel it and become assured of it, effortlessly. Colour has taken possession of me; no longer do I have to chase after it. I know that it has hold of me forever... Colour and I are one. I am a painter.¹

Noted with an observer's tone, it reads casually, but nevertheless it is known that a careful reworking was carried out before Klee finally published the selected diary entries². In fact reporting one's experience of travelling abroad had represented a topos of the formation of European artists, primarily transmitted by a broad variety of (visual) travelogues.

The starting point for the exhibition *Travelogue as Allegory* was a workshop with students at The Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm held in winter 2010/11. The specific framework of the workshop aimed to approach artists' books or related printed matter by subjective pre-selections – filtered through discussion, selection and grouping – in order to finally display them. Each of us, tutor or student, contributed a selection of titles more or less related to the narrative of travel, and these contributions were subsequently shaped and accentuated by the Swedish context. Specifically, publications not necessarily described as artists' books, but rather those introduced in relation to the participants' memories such as historical explorer's accounts or children's stories (with a shared meaning for a Swedish reading audience) made the dynamics between publishing and travelling explicit³.

Exhibitions made with and about books have been realised regularly in the field of contemporary art and design in the last few years⁴. Most of these exhibitions have focused on the structural aspects of the book as an object or the book as reference material. We took these aspects as given and began to develop an exhibition concept that focused on narrative structures and their repercussions. Scanning the material, the central position that travelogues occupy in artistic narratives became evident, effectively travelogues – and their format as a book – operate as a canonical topos of the formation of the European artist since the Renaissance. Understood both as a culmination of their education as well as a means to gain knowledge about the Greco-Roman

past, travellers and artists from northern European countries have been undertaking journeys to the South, mostly Italy, - known as the *Grand Tour* -, consecutively reporting their journeys. One of the earliest accounts conveyed is by Albrecht Dürer, from the *Grand Tour*'s 18th century heydays, painters and engravers such as Richard Wilson, Anton Raphael Mengs, or Jacques Rigaud are also known. The growing importance of travelling and scientifically exploring the globe which occurred around 1800 coincided with the phase of the increasing autonomy of the European arts. Intense romantic travelogues and images became influential, such as those of Lord Byron, William Turner, or Eugène Delacroix⁵. This may be understood as a foundation of the modern artistic praxis and identity on filling the vacuum of rejecting the commissions of the church or patron with the search for an other⁶, be it nature⁷, the gothic⁸, the orient⁹, or even the unconscious¹⁰. In short, one could argue that a narration of an encounter with, and the transformation of the other, into artistic expression denotes a determining stepping-stone into artistic maturity. In this light Klee's travelogue demonstrates that despite his 20th century avantgardism, he related deeply to a particularly traditional and established pattern.

A decade after the publication of Klee's account, and on another continent, Ansel Adams began to travel to the most spectacular landmarks of the North American West, taking technically precise photographs. The photos became iconic through successful publishing and distribution, and paradigmatic for the representation of specific 'untouched' landscapes. These publications, now classics within this genre, produced desire for these mostly remote sites¹¹. Inspired by photo-journalists¹², the street photographers of the postwar generation connected travelling and the creation of desire by publishing their stories of roaming through cities in the format of a picture book. These books connected strongly to a particular peer-group, who could relate to and share their way of looking while travelling. Representative of this approach is *The Americans*, by Robert Frank, a travel notebook that became a very successful publication, and has been republished numerous times since its first appearance¹³.

Observations become intensified through recording them in written and visual form¹⁴, the two-dimensional space of book pages, choreographed by the user's logic of turning them has emerged as especially suitable to retrace three-dimensional realities and temporarily structured events. Personal experience or fictional journeys become articulated through the form of publication. Publishing in relation to travelling can be understood as a means of sharing the experience, but this sharing also includes the inscription of oneself into a broader discussion and tradition of relating to notions of desire.

At the core of the constellation of the exhibited material, relating to the narratives of travelling, were artists' books, publications and printed matter from



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the 19th century until today (available to us via private and public collections and book retailers) in the various forms of photo books, journals, guide books, explorer's accounts, and sci-fi novels. A particular constellation was created through laying out these printed matter allowing for synopsis and visual vicinities, similarities, and continuities. This enabling a reflection on the affinity between travelling and artistic impulses of publishing, and exposing the similarities, overlaps, differences and points of convergence of a field that is constituted by the tension between representations of otherness and the context of culturally shared and confirmed meaning. To shape the field displayed for the Swedish reading audience meant to make it palpable.

While the largest site of the show – the art school's off campus exhibition space in the centre of Stockholm – functioned in the mode of a conventional art exhibition, objects on view within a skylit white cube, the four other venues of *Travelling as Allegory*, spread throughout the city of Stockholm, activated alternative patterns of use, an integral concept of the exhibition. Publications selected from the stock could be leafed through at the specialised libraries and read at one's own pace, those on view in the windows of the bookshops could be purchased. These viewing conditions performed the reality in which book covers, distribution and various forms of accessibility have become important factors in the production of desire.

The exhibits' display structure was specifically designed and built out of a cardboard material by the workshop participants with the content, structure, and potential constellation of the printed matter in mind. The exhibition design, consisting of irregular triangular shapes at waist level, influenced the visitors' flow and concretely addressed the issue of the freely circulating, 'travelling' medium of the book as well as its potentiality for use.

The bibliography, which was at hand for visitors at the Royal Institute's exhibition space was the only place where all the titles selected to be part of the exhibition were accessible at the same time. While the alphabetically-organised list of publications was evidence of what had been brought together (and what was considered meaningful in order to intensify the allegory), the various venues, each hosting a different part of the exhibits (including, in some cases, a double presence), proposed an arbitrary approach to the material. Every single one of the five different displays could be experienced as overviews, as constellations with allusions to an atlas, rather than being an archive with an index¹⁵.

The concept of an allegory, with its supposition of a second, decipherable meaning, within a shared cultural context therefore productively stimulates a circumlocution of the contemporary dynamics of travelling and publishing¹⁶. While 'Italy' might have functioned as the allegorical meaning for desire previously¹⁷, the more generalised idea of travelling and

of printed matter published in relation to travelling serve as an allegory for desire in our contemporary situation, building on tourism as an important economical factor. The allegory for desire, it could be said, is no longer specifically located, rather it becomes applicable to different places according to different desires.

Surprisingly the exhibition revealed that many artists from the 1960s and 70s in fact created varieties of travelogues in direct succession to the post-Renaissance canonical narrative of the observing, documenting, and poetic traveller¹⁸. The majority of these artists' books – even recent examples – follow such patterns of the encounter with the other.

Robert Smithson, who with his artistic fascination in entropy was nostalgic for modern ruins, was one of these habitual travellers. He travelled to places where his contemporaries had rarely been, encountering both the real and the imaginary. He became famous to some extent due to his journalistic travelogues on the 'not yet seen' (or considered) by his contemporaries¹⁹. They created a connection between documentation and fiction and introduced the topos of the terrain vague, the non-site, amongst others – designating natural, geological time and pre-history as the grand other of the contemporary, a modern urban desire.

Next to the prevailing observer's (and explorer's) narrative merely two alternative narratives were added by artists in the 20th century. That of roaming the urban, everyday²⁰, briefly referred to above, and a more radical reflecting on history, a narrative detecting and dismantling the postcolonial condition. Artists considering the 'colonial gaze' in their travels only enter the scene in the 1970s, and slowly transform the poetics of various forms of the other into critical visual deconstructions. Lothar Baumgarten's highly refined artists' books from the 1980s are a result of such a change of perspective.

CMYK/RGB (2001) by Simon Starling, *Art of the Eighties and Seventies* (2006) by Michael Stevenson, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (2007) by Marjolijn Dijkman, *The Invention of Turkey* (2006) by Katja Eydel as well as the more recent printed matter relating to the 'travelling' festival *Eternal Tour* are artists' publications that deconstruct travelling into two types of reflection and making meaning. One group of publications focuses on regional and global production processes of objects, the other on the respective flow and consumption of information in their contemporary locatedness and abstraction. Lately an additional voice is appearing in artists' travelogues: the once defined position of the observer merges with that of the storyteller. This junction of observation and imagination touches upon the territory of writers and their powerful travels in mental territories: fiction.

And like a character in a fiction, it is at this point that allegory enters the scene and as such allegory needs to be received and understood. In this context it becomes



Travelogue as Allegory, 2011, exhibition view, Photography Library of Moderna Museet. Photographer Björn Bengtsson



Travelogue as Allegory, 2011, exhibition view, Rönnells Antikvariat. Photographer Björn Bengtsson

an arbitrarily created concept of expressing something through something else, but at the same time it is a form that needs materialisation, it is a statement to be disseminated. Must we view travelogues as a modern form of the production of desire?

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Notes

1. *Tagebücher von Paul Klee*, 1898 – 1918, ed. Klee, F. (1957/79), DuMont, Cologne, p. 307f. (Quote translated by the authors.)
2. Around 1920 Paul Klee handed over edited excerpts of his diaries to several authors for the purpose of being published, amongst them to the author of the first monograph on him. Cf. *Journal intime oder Autobiographie?*, Geelhaar, C. in: *Paul Klee. Das Frühwerk 1883 – 1922*, edited by Zweite, A. (1979), Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, p. 252. See also: *Paul Klee und der Mythos vom Orient*, Baumgartner, M. in: *Auf der Suche nach dem Orient. Paul Klee. Teppich der Erinnerung*, edited by Baumgartner, M. a.o. (2009), Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern / Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2009, p. 133f.
3. For example *Caroli Linnæi Systema Naturae*, Linné, C. von, (1907), Regia Academia Scientiarum Svecica, Stockholm (first published by Johan Wilhelm de Groot, Leiden, 1735); *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift, J., (2003), Penguin Books, London, (first published in 1726); *Nils Holgersson's Underbara Resa Genom Sverige*, Lagerlöf, S. (1906/1975) Bonniers Juniorförlag, Stockholm; *The Book about Moomin, Mymble and Little My*, Jansson, T. (2001), Drawns and Quarterly, Montréal, (the original Swedish version *Hur gick det sen?* was first published by EA, Helsinki, 1952), a.o.
4. Amongst many other examples: *Kiosk – Modes of Multiplication*, publisher Christoph Keller's travelling archive on independent publishing within the art world, 2001-2009; *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books*, annually premiered by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and presented in various exhibition venues or *Schönste Bücher aus aller Welt / Best Designed Books From All Over the World* hosted by the German Book Art Foundation. As well as: *is a show, is a shop, is a book*, Lativan Center for Contemporary Art, Riga, 2009; *The Malady of Writing*, an exhibition on artists' texts at the study center of Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009/10; *Publications on (not only) art: Cultural, social and political uses*, a seminar at Universidad Internacional de Andalucía, Sevilla, 2011.
5. In 1832 Delacroix travelled to Algeria and Morocco, which had an enormous impact on his oeuvre. However, he never pursued the publishing of his travel notebooks during his lifetime. Due to the paradigmatic character of these sketches we chose to represent them in the exhibition through a publication on his work containing reproductions of some of them. *Delacroix. Peintre, Graveur, Écrivain, 1832-48, II*, Escholier, R. (1927), H. Floury, Paris.
6. The Other as philosophical term was already discussed by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.
7. Nature represented a central focus within Romantic concepts, cf. William Turner or Caspar David Friedrich.

8. Ruins, tales and imagery from the Gothic period represented a further focus within Romantic artistic practice, cf. Gustav Doré or William Blake.
9. Cf. *Orientalism*, Said, E. (1978), Vintage Books, New York.
10. The Freudian term of the *Unconscious* functioned as a central reference for a.o. the group of Surrealist artists and writers around André Breton in Paris in the 1920s and 30s.
11. See a.o. *The Four Seasons in Yosemite Park*, Adams, A. (1936) Times Mirror Printing and Binding House, Los Angeles and *North of the Danube*, Bourke-White, M. (1939) The Viking Press, New York.
12. Such as Henri Cartier-Bresson a.o.
13. First published as *Les Américains*, Frank, R. (1958), Robert Delpire, Paris. One year later it was published as *The Americans*, Frank, R. (with an introduction by Beat Generation writer Kerouac, J. (1959), Grove Press, New York.
14. Cf. Michael Taussig's thoughts on the connection between travelling, notebooks and publishing in: *Fieldwork Notebooks, No. 001 of 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts*, Taussig, M. (2011) published by dOCUMENTA (13), Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz, p. 8ff.
15. See the interview by Antonina von Schöning with Georges-Didi Huberman in *Die tragende Rolle der Bilder* (2011) in: *Texte zur Kunst*, Berlin, vol. 21, no. 81, March, ff. 23 that discusses *Atlas. How to carry the world on one's back?*, an exhibition curated by Huberman for Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, 26.11. 2010 – 28.03. 2011, in collaboration with Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie and Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg-Harburg.
16. For a more extensive discussion of the term allegory, made paradigmatic for 20th century thought by Benjamin, see the following texts *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin, W., (1998), Verso, London. (First published as *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin, W. (1963) Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M.) or *The Arcade's Project*, Benjamin, W., MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1999. (First published as *Das Passagen-Werk*, Benjamin, W. (1982) Frankfurt a.M., 1982 as part of *Walter Benjamin, Die gesammelten Schriften*, (1972-1989) prepared by Adorno, T. W. and Scholem, G., edited by Tiedemann, R. and Schweppenhäuser, H., Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a. M.)
17. For the circle of Johan Wolfgang Goethe and the German Classicist writers (in second half of the 18th century) the desire for Italy became the allegory of travel experience. See for example *Italienssehnsucht. Kunsthistorische Aspekte eines Topos*, Wiegand, H., (2004), Deutscher Kunstbuchverlag, Munich.
18. *Roads and Paths* (1978) by Hamish Fulton; *Walking in Circles* (1991) by Richard Long; *Teufelsmoor persönlich* (1983) by Lili Fischer; *Landed Utom Sig* (1993) by Lars Tunbjörk; *Diggers and Dreamers* (2009) by Love Enqvist; *Blinthaedir East Iceland* (2010) by Silvia Bächli and Eric Hattan; *View from Mount Temple* (2010) by Andreas Rutkauskas, a.o. were all examples included in the exhibition.
19. For example Smithson, R. *Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan* (1969) in: *Artforum*, vol. 8, no. 1, September, New York. In congruence with his conceptual artist peers at the time, his practice was not attempting to create value through artists' books.
20. Did urban roaming, or the 19th century strolling, 'flâneur', which later became a central mode of perceiving the world in a.o. André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) later spill over into the politicised *dérive*? Cf. the discussion of roaming through the city in de Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), University of California Press, Berkeley. A recent artistic example in line with this are Dector/Dupuy's guidebook-type publications as post-productions to guided tours in urban environments. See *Château-Gontier*, Dector, M. / Dupuy, M. (2009), Le Carré, Châtau-Gontier.