

Reto Sorg

—
“Pictures have to be put somewhere or other.”
Robert Walser and the Visual Arts

The only form of reality that I recognise or accept
is that which comes to exist within language.

Paul Nizon

Art in Prose

Robert Walser is considered a master of indirect expression; the ironic complexity that he was able to create is legendary: “I think he has to come down this hollow-way. If I think about it properly, there’s no other way to get to Küßnacht.” (SW 3, 36; “Tell in Prosa”)¹ The reflections that accompany the narrative aren’t secondary but an expression of Walser’s modernity – the result of his very own “theory of relativity”. If we were to discuss the prosaic complexities of narration – the narrator’s deliberations, the conditions of writing and language – then the narration itself would become the subject. In the mouth of the modern narrator the hero becomes a character always standing at the ready. Or to put it in Walser’s words, the hero is a “Tell in prose”.

Even when Robert Walser is writing about visual art, it’s not the works alone that interest him. For him, standing in front of pictures (*Vor Bildern*²) means developing an awareness for the basic conditions under which works of art appear. Sometimes the main subject almost gets short-changed – “Yet when will I begin discussing the art works themselves?” (SW 18, 247; “Belgische Kunstausstellung”). Or a need for further explanation results: “I have of course, incidentally, the greatest possible respect for visual art, which I worship monumentally.” (SW 20, 195; “Ernestine”) For Walser a picture can only be viewed under specific circumstances. It makes a difference whether one is looking at an authentic painting or a reproduction, whether one is moving through a private house or museum. For Walser a work ex-

¹ Walser’s works are directly cited in the text itself. The citations refer to *Sämtliche Werke in Einzelausgaben*, Jochen Greven (ed.), Zürich/Frankfurt 1985/1986, which is abbreviated SW and followed by the corresponding volume and page number as well as, when necessary, the individual title.

² See Robert Walser, *Vor Bildern. Geschichten und Gedichte*, edited and with an afterword by Bernhard Echte, Frankfurt/Leipzig 2006 (it; 1282). The volume brings together the most important texts by Walser about individual painters and paintings. See also Tamara S. Evans (ed.), *Robert Walser and the Visual Arts*, New York 1996 (Pro Helvetia Swiss Lectureship; 9).

ists not in absolute dimensions but as something perceived situationally, subjectively communicated and experienced – in other words: as “art in prose”.

As a youth Walser studied the laws of the effects of a picture in *statu nascendi* when he “could stand and watch for hours behind his brother Karl, as the latter worked on a composition, adding colours and details”.³ From his role model and older brother he experienced that “painting seems almost more about painting behind than in the presence of nature.” (SW 6, 14; “Brief eines Malers an einen Dichter”) Walser never understood visual art as an illusionistic doubling of reality. From early on – for example in the prose piece from 1902, “Ein Maler” – he describes art as a form of expression *sui generis*, directed by the powers of the imagination. “Above all this: my intellect has nothing, or extremely little, to do with my painting. I allow my sensitivity, my instinct, my taste, my senses, to paint.” And he continues: “What I can and must do is to permit a second nature – as similar as possible to the first and only – to come to life: a nature for my pictures. This is what the act of fantasising consists of for me. I fantasise as a self-evident slave of nature, if not as nature itself. My entire current and future collection of paintings exists in my head. Mountain cliffs, canyons, valleys, views of valleys, shining lakes, rivers, twirling fog, the posture of the pine trees, everything that I have ever witnessed in nature, that which I so utterly, so pensively love, gleams, foams, is stored and stretches forth again in my fantasy.” (SW 1, 72)

Just how powerful Walser believed painting to be is suggested in the essay from the year 1916 “Leben eines Malers”, which was intended as a literary portrait of his brother. A painting is mentioned in the text, the effect of which borders on magic: “as if not so much the object but rather its very soul had been painted, that is the impression or the poetic, narrative element, as if beyond the picture something of great import were taking place or as if the painted object led a completely independent, intellectual, emotional, eventful life within the picture. Painted objects can in fact dream, smile inwardly, speak for themselves or mourn.” (SW 7, 19)

³ Bernhard Echte, afterword, in: Robert Walser, *Vor Bildern. Geschichten und Gedichte*, *ibid.*, p. 103. See also *Die Brüder Karl und Robert Walser. Maler und Dichter*, edited by Bernhard Echte/Andreas Meier, Stäfa 1990, especially pp. 150–203.

Secretary for the Secession

A sensibility for art this emphatic would increasingly contrast with Walser’s experience that modern painting was – even as it nurses its “romantic essence” (SW 7, 29) – a fixed part of the ever expanding urban “business of art”. Walser followed his brother Karl to Berlin in 1903, sharing with him his studio flat. Karl Walser had been a member of the Berlin Secession since 1902. In 1907 Robert Walser served as the innovative group’s secretary during its summer exhibition. The duties of the secretary involved corresponding, providing information, guiding interested individuals through the exhibition and handling sales.⁴ Walser was hired by Paul Cassirer. The gallery operator, who was a member of the Secession’s executive board, was one of the most important art dealers at the time and successfully introduced the French Impressionists Cézanne and van Gogh to German audiences.⁵ He was also the cousin and former business partner of Bruno Cassirer – Robert Walser’s editor in Berlin, who published his first novel in 1907. For his part Karl Walser, who designed the cover of *Geschwister Tanner*, had been the main graphic designer for the Cassirer Verlag since 1905.

Nowhere else could Walser have had such insight into the cultural industry of the time. The exhibition that he worked on included over 311 works by such prominent artists as Ernst Barlach, Max Beckmann, Lovis Corinth, Vincent van Gogh, Max Klinger, Georg Kolbe, Max Liebermann, Edvard Munch, Emil Nolde, Auguste Rodin, Max Slevogt, Hans Thoma, Emil Rudolf Weiß and Heinrich Zille. The text that Walser published in 1917 in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* under the title “Der Sekretär” (The Secretary) was based on his recollections: “I don’t know whether I really demonstrated all these qualities. What I do know is that half the population of the capital city came through my office. Individuals of every imaginable character, every possible rank and status, forced their way into the Ministry – I mean headquarters – with greater or lesser violence: society’s most lofty representatives, elegant agents, poor migrants, cunning gypsies, wild poets, frightfully posh ladies, irritable princes, spectacularly handsome young officers, writers, actresses, sculp-

⁴ See Secession 1907. Katalog der dreizehnten Ausstellung der Berliner Secession, Berlin 1907, p. 6.

⁵ See Bernhard Echte/Walter Feilchenfeldt (eds.), *Kunstsalon Cassirer*, 4 volumes (to date), Wädenswil 2011ff. (Quellenstudien zur Kunst).

tors, diplomats, politicians, critics, editors, theatre directors, virtuosos, celebrated scholars, publishers and financial geniuses. Those who had long since arrived at the top of the social pyramid, those who groped around at the bottom and those striving to climb higher – they all came and went: the brilliant and shining as well as the dark and grimy. Like a bizarre parade of masks they strode through the doors: young and old, poor and rich, robust and weak, high and low, cheerful and sullen, happy and unhappy, mischievous and shy, merry and sad, pretty and ugly, polite and impolite, utterly shining and shabby, respected and defeated, proud and pathetic, famous and unknown, faces, gestures and figures of all imaginable kinds.”

(SW 16, 273; “Der Sekretär”)

Walser precisely describes not just the consumers of art but also his own function: “As is well known, the purpose of art exhibitions is to present works of art in a favourable light and to attract purchasers. The secretary plays the role of negotiator or facilitator between the artists and the broad art-loving public. He must ensure that a great number of sales are made, that pictures are swiftly moved into other hands. Potential buyers come and sadly vanish just as quickly from view, maybe never to be seen again. The secretary must always be attentive, as the most inconspicuous looking man might turn out to be a connoisseur and buyer.” (SW 16, 273f.)

As far as one knows, Walser’s work for the Secession wasn’t exactly overwhelmingly successful. His own assessment is, in any case, quite sobering: “Shortly thereafter a handsome successor demoted me to predecessor and prompted me to surrender my office, to abandon my post, to delicately remove myself and find gainful occupation elsewhere. To rage and rant because he had dared to see gifts in me that I had failed to reveal or to look down upon me – this could not have been further from my patron’s mind. To demonstrate that he had every intention of maintaining his friendly disposition towards me, he invited me with polite and cheerful words to a meal.”

(SW 16, 274)

Where do the pictures belong?

In the course of his time in Berlin, Robert Walser directly experienced the great break in modern painting. One major artist was Vincent van Gogh, whose works were shown in Cassirer's art salon from 1901 onwards.⁶ Walser too appears to have been impressed by his "coarse palette", (SW 13, 143; "Van Gogh") for example in his essay "Zu der Arlesierin von van Gogh", which appeared in Bruno Cassirer's journal *Kunst und Künstler*, he observes: "So brilliant, so simple: the portrait of the woman from Arles is as gripping as it is silent, as modest as it is captivatingly beautiful." (SW 15, 66f.) What fascinated Walser about the picture that he saw in autumn 1910 in Cassirer's art salon⁷ was the way in which the "mysterious, powerful brush strokes and curves" were able to portray a person "remarkably realistically". In addition to the style he was captivated by the unconventionality of the motif, as it is "nothing but the picture of a common woman." (SW 15, 67)

In 1918 Walser wrote another essay about the same picture that shifted focus towards non-aesthetic considerations. Here he poses "the absolutely not unjustified question as to whether in our society there is even an appropriate place for pictures like this *L'Arlesienne*". (SW 16, 345; "Das Van Gogh-Bild") Since "no one has ever commissioned such paintings" and the artist has instead assigned "himself the task", there is a danger that something will be painted "that perhaps no one would like to see portrayed". At the climax of the war, written with a consciousness that the world was mired in a "heavy, cheerless age", the profanity of the work seems problematic, as it lacks any cathartic function. That the "circumstances" are "almost oppressive", as Walser put it emphatically, places modern painting – which had renounced "external beauty" – in a new quandary. Walser does not argue for a renaissance of the spectacular beauties that "Titian, Rubens and Lukas Cranach had painted", he does, however, pose the naïve question: "Who would have any interest in hanging such everyday pictures in a room?" (SW 16, 345). Modern art, of which van Gogh is the most prominent representative, appears no longer to be at home in the circumstances that it reflects.

⁶ See Bernhard Echte/Walter Feilchenfeldt (eds.), *Kunstsalon Cassirer. Die Ausstellungen 1905–1908*, volume 3, Wädenswil 2013 (Quellenstudien zur Kunst; 7), pp. 22ff.

⁷ At the Berlin Secession exhibition of spring 1912 the two versions of the picture that had been painted up to that point in time were shown together. (Grateful thanks to Bernhard Echte for this information.)

“The picture is strange,” Walser wrote in 1915 about a work of his brother’s, “for in his transformation of beautiful daring the painter has transgressed conventional boundaries and penetrated through a one-sided rigidity to freedom.” (SW 16, 339f.; “Damenbildnis”) Thereafter the question as to where modern art belongs would not cease to preoccupy Walser. In regards to van Gogh’s *L’Arlésienne* he dares answer the question as to whether he himself “would like to own the picture [...]” (SW 16, 344) neither affirmatively nor negatively. And a later essay describes how the narrator sees Ferdinand Hodler’s painting *Der Buchenwald* in the servants’ room of a mansion and laconically remarks: “Well, pictures have to be put somewhere or other.” (SW 17, 187f.) The narrator does not rule out the possibility that he too would hang the profane, sobering work in some inconspicuous corner: “Maybe I would bring the picture, were I to own it, up to an attic room as well, as this is no picture for the salon.” (SW 17, 189)

Conveying far away

In his early years Walser attributed to painting a direct power. Pictures seemed as stunning to him as “miracles” and he states that “colours and lines tell sweeter stories” (SW 1, 86; “Ein Maler”) than words. For Walser there was a connection between the effect a picture had and an artist’s own meditations. According to Walser, a painter looks “for a long time” (SW 18, 252; “Cézannegedanken”) at that which he portrays and the opposite is also true: “that which he has shaped, peers at him [...] and continues to look at us in this same manner.” (SW 18, 256) How Walser’s emphatic point of view changed over time is revealed in a prose piece that he recorded micrographically in 1928 in Bern and that was first published posthumously.

The text, which Walser did not give a title to, is about the *Mona Lisa*, which was stolen in Paris in 1911, reappeared again in 1913 and became even more famous as a result of the theft. After even Guillaume Apollinaire and Pablo Picasso had been suspected of having stolen the picture, a petty thief who was employed in the Louvre as a hand worker was convicted of the crime. Walser’s prose piece pos-

8 Robert Walser, “In einem Gemach, dessen Wände schwarz strahlten”, in: *Mikrogramme*, edited and with an afterword by Lucas Marco Gisi/Reto Sorg/Peter Stocker, Berlin 2011 (BS; 1467), p. 149. The text is reprinted on pages 153 and 154 of this catalogue.

its that this Vincenzo Peruggia “with his little quotidian moustache”⁸ (which supposedly inspired Marcel Duchamp’s provocation *L.H.O.O.Q* in 1919⁹) was in reality the medium of “the picture’s own destiny”¹⁰: “The artwork in all likelihood wanted it so. The picture drew its carrier so to speak to it, so that he might convey it to some distant place, have it vanish in some inconceivable way.”¹¹ In Walser’s story the theft is equated with the liberation of something “misunderstood”: “Not only to be endlessly studied, she wanted instead to be experienced, taken.”¹²

Reminiscent in its form of the kind of “Dialogue before the Pictures of Old Masters”¹³ that commonly appeared at the time in journals, this tale may have been inspired by the article “Mona Lisa unter Röntgenstrahlen” published on 4 January 1928 in the Bern-based daily *Der Bund*. “A world-famous Renaissance beauty, the Gioconda, Leonardo’s masterpiece, whose mysterious smile has shined for centuries, has once again been asked to reveal her secret, this time by means of the most modern technology, with x-rays, ultraviolet radiation, etc. And she has passed the test. She is in fact the real Mona Lisa, smiling at us from the picture in the Louvre. Ever since Leonardo’s work has returned to the Louvre after its sensational theft in 1913 the murmurs have not fallen silent that not the real work but a copy was brought back.”¹⁴

The classic subject of aesthetic observation had become the object of close examination. The work was brought to the “laboratory” so as to “study its pigments”. The radiation penetrates through everything, “exposes every individual layer of paint”.¹⁵ Displaced and scrutinised in this manner, the *Mona Lisa* no longer appears undauntedly as the romantic ideal of bemused rapture that Walser first attributed to pictures. The “Distant Closeness”¹⁶ is transformed into a more profane kind of presence, which Walser describes as “utterly lost and at the same time fully present”.¹⁷

If to Walser modern works of art by van Gogh and Hodler seem lost in everyday life, in the case of the *Mona Lisa* the picture itself forces its way into reality – as if it had anticipated Boris Groys’ idea that the pictures are “inwardly ready [...] to move out of the museum”.¹⁸ If the “painted objects” are to “dream” or to “smile”, as Walser



9 Fig. 1: Vincenzo Peruggia (1881–1925), who in 1911 stole the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre, was considered a folk hero in Italy, as he claimed to want to return the picture to its Italian home.



Fig. 2: Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919. Does Duchamp’s famous ready-made, first published in 1920, make reference to Vincenzo Peruggia’s beard, which Robert Walser mentions as well?
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had written, then they do this in order to disillusion. The mysterious force of attraction of pictures is not lost, but their beauty seems to have been made relative. “The more horrifying this world is (and it now seems horrible) the more abstract art becomes,” wrote Paul Klee in 1915, thus diagnosing a “cool romanticism [...] without pathos”.¹⁹ Walser, on the other hand, counters the Romantic ideal with an ironic awkwardness that allows him not only to reflect the conditions of the possibility of artistic creation but also to identify these conditions as a constituent element of his work.

Walser’s art lifts the prosaic circumstances of the writer’s existence into consciousness. His work, finally, is like a great authorial scenario: the paper and writing machine, the books read and the inspiration, the time, the room and the narrator – together they make up an “I in prose” – or, as Walser himself writes in the late 1920s, “a manifold dissected or disjointed I-book”. (SW 20, 322; “Eine Art Erzählung”) This “I” is not defined by its basic circumstances alone but dreams of transcending these circumstances, these conditions, and attaining liberty. When looking at the *Mona Lisa* it desires to use language to overcome language itself: “When his quill had reached this point, the writer looked up at the wall as though the immortal picture were tarrying in his immediate vicinity, so familiar had his imagination made him with the object in question, and wrote on, deep into the night understood by no man, without words.”²⁰

10 Robert Walser, “In einem Gemach, dessen Wände schwarz strahlten”, *ibid.*, p. 149.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

13 See Artur Gläser, “Der Kavalier mit dem Handschuh. Zwiegespräch vor Bildnissen Alter Meister”, in: *Sport im Bild*, 1928, no. 23, pp. 137ff. Walser was probably sent an author’s copy of the issue, as it also contains his text “Die Pariserin” (see p. 1389).

14 C. K., “Mona Lisa unter Röntgenstrahlen”, in: *Der Bund*, 4 January 1928, no. 5, vol. 79, evening edition, p. 2.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

16 See Reto Sorg, “Vom romantischen Traumbild zur virtuellen Realität. Zum Topos der ‘Fernen Nähe’ bei Robert Walser”, in: Anna Fattori/Margit Gigerl (eds.), *Bildersprache, Klangfiguren. Bilder der Intermedialität bei Robert Walser*, Munich 2008, pp. 177–191, and Wolfram Groddeck/Reto Sorg/Peter Utz/Karl Wagner (eds.), *Robert Walsers ‘Ferne Nähe’. Neue Beiträge zur Forschung* [2007], 2nd ed., Munich 2008, especially pp. 9–13 (Introduction).

17 Robert Walser, “In einem Gemach, dessen Wände schwarz strahlten”, *ibid.*, pp. 149f.

18 Boris Groys, *Logik der Sammlung. Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters*, Munich 1997, p. 7.

19 Paul Klee, *Tagebücher 1898–1918*, textkritische Neuedition, ed. by Paul-Klee-Stiftung, Kunstmuseum Bern, revised by Wolfgang Kersten, Stuttgart/Teufen 1988, no. 951, p. 365.

20 Robert Walser, “In einem Gemach, dessen Wände schwarz strahlten”, *ibid.*, p. 150.