

THE LINES OF RENATE KRAMMER

One of the many Zero points on the way to complete abstraction and to contemporary direct works with reality was achieved in the 1960's when Richard Long thematized his own movement in the surrounding landscape. Under the term »Land Art«, what happened here in 1967 was one of the most radical expressions of modernism Richard Long had selected a path and repeatedly walked this path trampling down the grass until a line formed. Entitled »Line Made by Walking«, it sought as a radical goal to use nothing other than the pre-existing Earth surface and the possibility of one's own motion. Regarding the diverse and variously combined methods and mechanisms of modernism that have been implemented today, which through their permeation of one another have made possible a kind of diversity within simultaneity, one asks oneself how radical such a work would have to be today. The sensation of absolute reduction as the foundation of artistic expression is certainly different today; currently artists seek less to explore new territory in general, thereby confirming a linearity of art development, even as they are much more occupied with placing the dimension of subjective confrontation in the foreground. One does not seem to ask the question as to what the most radical form of art could be and how this could be assessed in the context of the general development of art, rather artists follow paths in their own works and find impulses in their own sphere – what do certain decisions mean in context to oneself and to one's portfolio of work? The decision can follow a logical continuity or a radical, intentional breaking with the past. A Zero in the world of art is seen in many ways as a new start as well as a cleaning up of the mind.

When applied to visual arts, this means making do with the barest of essentials.

Regarding media and material there are many possibilities that in themselves reach back to already existing examples of developing methods or forms. Abstraction, monochrome, absolutism of material, extension into the real world, connection with other art forms: all affect a concentration on the essential. Points and lines did not become the fundamental element of picture production for nothing. One does not need to go back to the mystical past to recognize that. The instrument-based arts (media, etc.) clarify the line and point as being the basis module. The contour sketch, as described by Plinius in the version of the creation story of painting, returned later in the 1960's as the »general-purpose« drawings of builders before being pulled into the art world. By the production of 3D models, lines were used to represent non-existing objects that resulted in spatial grid constructions. The »wireframe« models could subsequently be made real. The digitally produced line became the basis for new real objects. Otherwise, the point has made a career as the pixel (picture point). Today, every digital picture consists of countless pixels, which are continually becoming smaller and thereby generating a clearer and sharper picture.

Let us stay with the line and point, which determine each other and ultimately stand at the beginning of visual development.

According to Kandinsky, the line is the first description of motion. The point, when moved in any desired direction, leaves a track – the line. »The geometrical line is an invisible being. It is the track of a point in motion, a result. It is created out of movement – and that being through the annihilation of the point with all its most perfectly closed peacefulness. Here, the leap from static to dynamic takes place.«¹ It is noteworthy that in his revolutionary text, Kandinsky is not concerned about the representational form of objects, people or animals, rather on the grammar of the visual: points, lines and planes. One can understand this as freeing the line from representation. No longer as a secondary element that presents the illusion of another element is the line to be known, rather in the absoluteness of its own self-portrayal with no other reason. This way the line also becomes independent of its material and can manifest itself as described above, without the need of any instruments (pencils, brushes). As such, this lets itself be traced

even further back in time. Early findings of carved and notched bones or stones have been dated from roughly 35,000 years ago. Today, diverse abstract-like signs and markings bear connection. It remains to be seen to what degree these symbols are mythical, spiritual or recordings of the surrounding reality. In any case, they may well have a strong connection to motion, that is, our human urge to move. As such, they are signs of rhythmic expression. The freedom of movement of the hand that tends to make rhythms and the graphic imagination that tends to make forms are both responsible for pictorial representation in general. The physicality of the body (hand, arm, finger) enables full freedom of motion in space to generate lines and points. The two fundamental sources of expression are therefore gestures and graphic depiction. From this point on, the repertoire has been refined over the course of time, dependent upon tools, materials and the sophistication of the representation of reality. The rest of early representations (cave paintings) appear rudimentary and influence us as being rather abstract or at least abstracted. That might be due to a lack of formal representational capabilities, for over the course of time the depiction of reality or at least its illusion becomes ever richer in variations and exacter. Only the Modern Age set itself again on the search for the way back to the primal, the fundamental – to the Zero. This is how non-objective Art is so connected and bound with the independence of the line. The line becomes the goal and no longer used as a tool for the representation of the world of objects. The line becomes in itself a reality, no longer a psychological seismograph or a contour, rather itself as itself.

Thus, there are three conditions of the line: the representational line, the self-depicting line and the real line. The line existed in the form of notches, carvings and in the form of tracks in nature long before the forming of the artistic consciousness that we know of today. With his »Line Made by Walking«, Richard Long made nothing other than that which had already been in existence for several thousand years. He does bring it into a new context and thereby changes the meaning of its signification.

Today it belongs to a repertoire from which artists can widely select. The Zero points are no longer off in the distant and untapped, rather they are already widely known and even varied. Points of reference result from multifaceted quotations.

Renate Krammer, who began to draw in order to give her work a new and fundamental impulse, does not need to busy herself with fundamental research, rather draw upon the knowledge of previous developments. Consequently, paper and pencil suffice for Krammer. One cannot turn the wheel back and begin the process as new. To decide for oneself to use paper and pencil without exception for the further exercise of art also means to give oneself to a certain context as well as to particular traditions and truths. As an artist, she must define for herself a path and, following that, a place at which to arrive. As such, that one silent day, which lent itself as a title for one of her central works, was indeed a decisive moment. »On a Silent Day« is the title, following Agnes Martin's series »On a Clear Day« from 1973, of Krammer's monumental series of pencil drawings made in 2015. In them, the horizontal line varies itself in 30 square formats in a manifold of ways. Drawing exclusively by freehand alone and always horizontally, Renate Krammer turns the line into an element with which all other forms of design can be apparently reached. Closeness and width as well as line length and the distance between lines are the only design decisions to be made. Like picture points (pixels) these lines are the most elementary pictorial elements incapable of further reduction. What the artist here sought was the most extreme manifestation of formlessness. What she possibly found was the knowledge that, while this formlessness as topos exists repeatedly in modernism, it nevertheless never seems to be reached at the end. How should formlessness appear, without making a new form in itself? »Minimal Art« had a similar goal: »Art does not exclude the unnecessary Frank Stella found it necessary to paint stripes. Nothing extra is in his paintings. Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity. He is interested in the necessity of painting. [...] His stripes are the paths of the brush on the canvas. These paths lead exclusively to painting.«² What sounds so

decisive and clear here, written down with the tone of a manifesto hides pitfalls. Can such an emptied design be achieved from which we could speak about complete formlessness?

Renate Krammer nearly seems to prove the contrary through the very richness in variations resulting from the series »On a Silent Day« that is capable of generating such amazing variety. The line drawn freely by the hand does not in the end create an anonymous formless design. They are evaluable through the individuality of the handwriting as well as their artistic form. Left over space (negative space) generates renewed lines and planes that all follow different rhythms which overlap one another and thereby propagate an illusion of space. At the same time, they also posit questions regarding the process of becoming visual. The relationship between frame and picture surface is being referenced here as well as the illusion of other multiple factors – space, light.

Renate Krammer uses the irregularity of the freehand stroke to its full potential, empowers it even and thereby achieves new pictorial information. Swarms, rhythms, movement in general: all of these make the design suddenly readable with objects. Stylized, later realistically fashioned, bird silhouettes suggest at first many associations, yet soon are seen clearly as having components of content. This design does not emerge from a mimetic need, rather it happens through the process of drawing. The motoric quality of the hand, the finger, even the arms may well be responsible for this. The monotonous character of the work process that seems automatically to pick up the irregularity of freehand drawing, which subsequently is either consciously avoided or left to run free with dynamic energy, is also responsible for the result.

The way in which Renate Krammer draws – exclusively on paper with pencil and always horizontally – borders on script. Handwriting, also a mode of recording or a way of understanding reality, is after all a form of drawing. When the beginning of visual recording began roughly 35,000 years ago, one needs to set the beginning of script roughly 25,000 years later. Script subsequently until even today has become an unmistakable reflection of the human. Our speed, relaxation, clarity, concern, anger all become manifest through our handwriting. In addition to the sensual fascination of a representational or a purely gestural line, the dynamic of handwriting presents the fascination for something that is rarely perceived in its entire full mystery: that script is capable of transporting complex verbal and intellectual content by means of a row of straight and curved lines on a plane in a defined space.

Similarly do the lines of Renate Krammer behave. The ordering of lines lies closely to script; the irregularity of the freely drawn lines lies close to individual handwriting. In both cases there is the possibility for highly complex content as well as an original quality that can no longer be reduced. Both cannot be freed of content and allow for the reception of manifold possibilities. It appears in this work that the entire art history of the line has also been condensed – and swings along simultaneously as a metalevel of meaning. For the artist, the moment referring to her work up until that point might well have been radical. One quiet day she might have been open to this insight that she had reached a personal Zero point. The public might have different points of reference and thereby see something objective where abstract has been intended, and vice versa. As such we are here also dealing with context-specific work to a certain degree. As in many objective art expressions, the context in which the work is seen plays a decisive and fundamental role. Thus, new things can be re-experienced, receive new nuances of meaning and try on their own to make themselves acknowledged.

Renate Krammer has created a nearly endless universe that does not seem to leave out any possibility of variation.

As such another level of deconstructivistic analysis offers itself: the material. One can be even more specific. When one follows the proposition that in nature the line does not appear and thereby it is already a cultural convention, if not an abstraction, it seems to follow that the pencil could be left out to use only paper and the motoric quality of the

body. Thick paper, produced from mulberry silk, torn with the tear-side facing up, produces a relief-like 3D depth of order. Without a doubt, the boundary between two planes can be described as a line. A torn-apart plane generates not only two new planes, also two new lines – the torn edges. Suddenly, the drawing is gone, and one can order the artwork only in the context of, or rather an extended understanding of drawing and even then, because the material (mulberry silk paper) also presents a picture plane, one that justifies the condition of the object. The ripped strips of paper can be arranged in a rectangle form creating the metaphor of a frame. Whether a graphic design or even a relief is the result must remain an open decision left for the viewer. In any case, a picture has been produced. All classical criteria have been fulfilled – frame, picture surface and design. The tear is the trace of the working process, as is the drawn line from the pencil or the trampled-down line of the »Land Art« work. The consistency of the mulberry silk used by Krammer can be guessed in its own name, which indeed proves to be decisive for the work. When torn, the fiber-rich paper leaves a long hairy edge. One thinks immediately of fabric, above all when the work is large and lies on the ground - »Floor Sculpture«, 2017; these are far ahead of a drawing or even a graphic image. The method alone enables this, the work process creating a transformation of a fundamental kind – from picture to object, from abstract to a content-readable object, from paper to fabric, etc.

Here one sees very well why the artist is working in this way. Her works are a constant balancing act between the objective and the abstract, as well as between one layer of meaning and the next one. The theme of line remains present, even when it can quickly dissipate and change into something completely different. Thus, Renate Krammer's work remains open and keeps open the possibilities of continuing in unimaginable dimensions. The experience of Art History and its technical advancements (Medial Arts) make the line and the point even today into one of the fundamental elements of aesthetic design. Like the binary code that, working only with 0 and 1, can still formulate everything else, it seems that the point and line function like an eternal binary code within visual representation. In Renate Krammer's case it is perhaps to be understood that the line and paper are equivalent.

Finally, it seems that it does not matter to the artist if the work is to be understood as really abstract or objective – much does not lie in her hand rather in the subconscious and conscious recording of images within the view and recipient. This form of openness is the quality of contemporary art.

Günther Holler-Schuster

1 Wassily Kandinsky, Point and Line to Plane. A Contribution to the Analysis of Painting Elements, 7th Edition, with an Introduction from Max Bill, Bern-Bümpliz, 1973, p. 57.

2 Carl Andre, To the »Stripe Pictures« of Frank Stella, quoted from: Minimal Art. A Critical Retrospective, Gregor Stemmerich (editor), Dresden, Basel 1995, p. 194.