Breathing within and in front of images: 
Rhythm and time in abstract art

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1 Introduction

The problem of time in images has been traditionally addressed in terms of narratology. In accordance with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s normative distinction between the *arts of time* and the *arts of space*, the only acceptable and ideal way in academic painting to depict temporality has been the *pregnant moment*. The passage of time in art is attributed to the successive medium of the text while images and other visual media are said to be still in time. However, phenomena of time have to be addressed in an entirely different manner in pictures that do not depict persons and actions. The development of abstract or non-figurative art and the theories attached to it have helped to generate new concepts concerning temporality in images. Suggestions for an understanding of the temporal aspects in abstract art in the first half of the 20th century culminate in the principle of rhythmicity. However, rhythmicity has not just been attributed to the composition itself, but has become central to ideas about the production and reception of art as well. Thus, issues of temporality in the visual arts can be extended to a number of different dimensions. In the context of the Lebensreform movement and body culture in the beginning of the 20th century, the production and reception of artworks acquired new relevance, a subject of this time period that remains underexplored.

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In the course of my current dissertation project I came across a neglected metaphor and practice binding together the three or even four dimensions of the (pre-)production, composition, and reception of images: the metaphor of breathing in front of and within images, as well as the well-known metaphor of the image as a living organism. Breath as a rhythmic movement of contraction and expansion appears to be a central model in modern art practice and theory, emphasising the importance of rhythmicity on different levels. As this article represents one aspect of my ongoing dissertation, here I want to provide a first overview and some approaches regarding this fruitful metaphor. After introducing the concepts of rhythm in abstract art and modernity in general, I continue with Wassily Kandinsky’s concept of the image as a vibrant space filled with air, and with Johannes Itten’s thoughts on breathing in the processes of the image’s (pre-)production and reception. I then describe Paul Klee’s concepts of pre-creation, creation, and re-creation in the context of biorhythmic phenomena. The last artist is František Kupka, who theorized about the image’s mediality and emphasised the importance of breathing exercises.

2 Rhythm in abstraction and modernity

Rhythm as a ‘time dividing’ phenomenon (Erwin Panofsky) plays a central role in art theoretical conceptions of the first half of the 20th century, for instance in those of Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky. As Janice Joan Schall states in her 1989 dissertation Rhythm and Art in Germany, 1900–1930, all definitions agree on “repetition, interval, and stress” as the central characteristics of rhythm. In his 1919 publication Die Lehre vom Rhythmus in der heutigen Ästhetik der bildenden Künste art historian Willi Drost focuses on aesthetic theories on rhythm from the early 20th century. He notes that concepts relating to rhythm in modernity are not only applied to dance, music and poetry but also

3 See Overmeyer 1982, 33.
4 Schall 1989, 3.
to the “starrsten, totesten Gebilde” (most rigid, most dead forms). In this book, Drost focuses on architectural theory, whose modern theorists in modernity, such as August Schmarsow, considered rhythm no longer as something “Simultanes, Gewordenes” (simultaneous, completed) but as something “Werdendes, das im Nacheinander erlebt werden soll, das vom Sein zum Entstehen zurückgeführt und vom Subjekt Stück für Stück nachgeschaffen wird” (evolving that is to be experienced successively and turned from something existent into something becoming, which is reproduced piece by piece by the subject through reception). These ideas, according to Drost, have been the basis for an understanding of visual arts such as painting and reliefs as rhythmic arts without narration or content in the traditional sense; further, lines, colours, shadows, and lights released from content could be seen as having an “eigenes rhythmisches Leben” (individual rhythmic life) governed by temporal structures.

While definitions of rhythm vary widely, there are common elements. In the most general sense, rhythm is thought of as a temporal sequence of changing elements – up and down, rise and fall, expansion and contraction, darkness and light, accented and unaccented. Different ideas, however, exist regarding the transition between these different elements. While writers in the modern era often conceptualized rhythm as distinct from measure and metre, especially in the tradition of Ludwig Klages, there are other approaches. For example, art historian Alois Riegl understands rhythm as a “geschlossene Aneinanderreihung gleichgeformter Raumabschnitte” (closed unity of uniform sections) and a “reihenweise Wiederholung gleicher Elemente” (successive repetition of the same elements). This definition is commonly used in order to describe the musical metre. The understanding of rhythm as a streaming movement is probably based on an etymology tracing back the term to the Greek word rhein (‘flow’).

5 Drost 1919, 5. Author translation. Throughout this paper, the author’s translations from German to English appear parenthetically in italics following the original quotations.
6 Drost 1919, 5 f.
7 Drost 1919, 6.
8 Drost 1919, 9.
9 Primavesi – Mahrenholz 2005, 10.
common etymology is the Greek *rhythmós*, which stresses rhythm’s regularity and proper proportions.\(^{10}\)

According to Klages, the metronomic beat is characterized by the repetition of the *same* elements; rhythm, in contrast, indicates the recurrence of the *similar*, not the identical. Klages concludes that “der Takt wiederholt, der *Rhythmus* erneuert” (*the* metronomic *beat* repeats, *rhythm* *renews*).\(^{11}\) Klages describes the structure of rhythm as a wave movement without clear boundaries, with the transition between moving up and down occurring in the “Abwesenheit von brechenden Kanten” (*absence of breaking edges*).\(^{12}\) Rhythm is thus understood as a fluent movement while the measure’s structure consists of the constant repetition of the tick-tick-tick-tock-tock without fluid transitions. The intervals between the rhythmic elements are not the same but similar, while the metronomic beat follows a mathematical, predictable logic. While rhythm lacks clear beginnings and endings in the transition between its elements and is potentially eternal, metre has clear-cut beginnings and endings, and is dividable.\(^{13}\)

Klages describes rhythmicity with a number of examples: darkness and brightness, ebb and flow, the moon phases and the seasons, the human pulse and breath, the menstrual cycle, and times of enthusiasm and contemplation.\(^{14}\) Through these examples, Klages not only brings in nature’s great cycles, but also the corresponding phenomena in the human body. Moreover, as Schall explains, Klages further defined “[s]ound, light, heat, and electricity” as rhythmic, indicating that rhythm “governs all organic life”.\(^{15}\) Klages understands rhythm as an unconscious principle that is opposed to the *mind*. Along with other influential thinkers of German body culture, such as dance artist Rudolf von Laban and dance critic Hans Brandenburg, Klages did not think of rhythm as a mental and volitional principle but as an

\(^{10}\) Seidel 2003, 292.

\(^{11}\) Klages 1934, 32.

\(^{12}\) Klages 1934, 17 f.

\(^{13}\) Klages 1934, 18.

\(^{14}\) Klages 1934, 33 f.

\(^{15}\) Schall 1989, 24.
irrational and bodily phenomenon. As Helmut Günther points out, these thinkers did not want to train rhythm but to sink into it. For all these theorists, rhythm is regarded as a phenomenon that has a huge influence on the individual.

Klages was part of a group of thinkers who were concerned not only with rhythm, but also with the body and related reform movements. These individuals were, in turn, important to avant-garde artists in the first half of the 20th century. Klages was part of the Munich circle around poet Stefan George, which had a great influence on a number of artists such as Kandinsky, Klee, and Johannes Itten.

Many abstract modern artists not only understood the image itself to be rhythmic and temporal but extended rhythmic principles to dimensions of the production and reception of images. According to those ideas, the image is only truly realized by the recipient’s creative view, and the individual elements of the image are only joined together as a whole through extensive reception. The idea that the image’s rhythms are received and internalized by the viewer is also found in the empathy theory of Theodor Lipps, which strongly informed artists’ theoretical ideas about abstract art. Schall draws on this theory to explain the image’s potential “to link artist, artwork, and viewer in a direct line of communication” through rhythm. Lipps described rhythm as “a psychic experience” which, as Schall summarizes, is joyous, and “stimulates our imitative instinct and evokes a kinaesthetic response in us”. Quoting Lipps, she continues that empathy is “nothing more than the interior aspect of imitation”.

As Robin Curtis puts it, the concept of empathy describes a kind of “involuntäre[], instinctive[] Mimikry an das Andere” (involuntary

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16 Günther 1990, 29.
18 Schall 1989, 14.
19 Schall 1989, 144.
instinctive mimicry) – it is an imposition taking over a controlling function. In *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie*, psychophysicist Wilhelm Wundt also claims that life is rhythmically ordered. In his *Völkerpsychologie* he compares the musical and rhythmic arts with their respective, subjective body rhythms, which are experienced psychophysically through repetition, interval, and intensity by the observer.

Connections between music theory and art theory have been a frequent subject of scholarly investigation. Music has served as a role model, especially for the rhythmization of the image’s surface – or rather, the image’s space for the purpose of a more direct, immediate reception. Ideas on immediate reception are also based on theories about rhythmic, atmospheric vibrations, which are central in both science and occultism throughout this epoch. Vibrations are especially prominent in the theories of Kandinsky.

### 3 Kandinsky: the image as a vibrant space filled with air

The concept of the image as a breathable atmosphere appears to be the precondition for a number of concepts of rhythm in modernity. In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* Wassily Kandinsky described a piece of artwork in terms of a breathing and breathable space. The atmosphere created by an image is, according to him, “geistig dasselbe wie die Luft” (*spiritually the same as air*).\(^\text{23}\) It is an “in der Luft schwebende[s] Wesen” (*being floating in the air*) consisting of colours and forms moving forwards and backwards.\(^\text{24}\) The image thus becomes a space generated by a pulsating movement. At the same time, Kandinsky thought about the reception of his and other artworks. In a 1912 article, he wrote: “Jedes Werk und jedes einzelne Mittel des

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20 Curtis 2009, 12 f.
21 Schall 1989, 45.
24 Kandinsky 1952, 111 f.
Werkes verursacht in jedem Menschen ohne Ausnahme eine Vibration” (Each artwork and means of a work produces a vibration in every human without exception). The term ‘vibration’ was not only used in the context of theosophy in Kandinsky’s period, but was also applied to scientific and pseudo-scientific ideas of the epoch, such as aether theory and alternative medicine.

Alternative therapist and author Andrew Osborne-Eaves is a source of Kandinsky. In Die Heilkraft der Farben (1906/1932) Osborne-Eaves claims that “[d]as Leben, gleichgültig, ob es ich als Amoeba oder als Mensch ausdrückt, läuft in Form bestimmter Schwingungen, Rhythmen oder Vibrationen ab. Sind die Vibrationen harmonisch, dann nennen wir diesen Zustand Gesundheit. Unharmonische Vibrationen erscheinen als Krankheit” (Life, no matter whether it is the life of an amoeba or a human is characterized by oscillations, rhythms or vibrations. If the vibrations are harmonious, we call this state health, if they are disharmonious they appear as disease). The terms ‘oscillations’, ‘rhythm’, and ‘vibration’ are used synonymously by Osborne-Eaves, and, as central concepts in art theory, harmony and disharmony are regarded in this concept as analogous to similar concepts in medical discourses. However, in Kandinsky’s writings the rhythm of images is not as explicitly applied to medical treatments. Such ideas are more prominent in the theories of other artists, such as Itten, Klee, and Kupka. However, the ‘balance of the whole’, the harmonious composition, and the harmonious vibrations or rhythms are all important aspects in Kandinsky’s concept of the image.

Harmony, according to Kandinsky, is constructed by contradictions and oppositions, inspiring his popular phrase: “Gegensätze und Widersprüche – das ist unsere Harmonie” (Opposites and contradictions – this is our harmony). The principle of opposition engages in a lively interplay with the phenomenon of the striving forwards and backwards.

27 Osborne-Eaves 1932, 43.
28 Kandinsky 1952, 109. In Italics in the original.
of elements. However, one characteristic of Kandinsky distinguishing him from his Bauhaus colleagues is the typical connection between rhythmic and ‘arhythmic’ elements in his compositions. Moreover, during his career he replaced certain terms – for instance, replacing the term ‘vibration’ with ‘tension’ in the 1920s – and he did not speak of rhythm as frequently as others did. In his teachings at the Bauhaus he defined rhythm as a “grundgesetz” (basic law) in nature. According to Kandinsky, while every element is characterized by latent tensions, new tensions arise in combining various elements. Kandinsky defined rhythm as a kind of pulse and vivification, and claimed that there can be no artwork without rhythm.

According to Kandinsky’s concept of rhythm, the different elements of a composition create a tension, not through the repetition of elements but through the relations between them. Composition IV (1911) shows such an interplay of tensions created by contradictions and oppositions, with lines and colour forms joined using contrasts. Here, Kandinsky strived for a harmonious relationship between cold and warm colours, granting heavier cold colours such as blue and green less space than the warm shining colours and the airy white. This combination of warm and cold colours creates a back and forth movement, with light colours appearing to move forward and darker heavier colours receding. The sensation that one is looking into a three-dimensional space is strengthened by the arrangement of lines, as the diagonal lines in the lower left, together with the grouping of other lines and colours, gives the impression of looking into a great depth.

29 Kandinsky 1952, 78 f.
30 Schmidt 2002, 259.
31 Weißbach 2015, 232.
32 Weißbach 2015, 286.
33 Weißbach 2015, 282.
34 Weißbach 2015, 283.
35 Wassily Kandinsky, Komposition IV, 1911, 159.5 x 250.5 cm, Oil on Canvas, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf. The image is available online on the museum’s website.
In *Composition IV*, while there are sometimes clear boundaries between the elements and colour forms, in most cases there are freer forms of colour progressions. Apart from colour forms, the composition is therefore also characterized by the arrangement of lines of different length, width, and form, with both individual rounded and jagged lines and groups of almost parallel lines. These lines structure the canvas, sometimes framing colour forms, in other cases generating intersections or free elements. The composition does not seem to be governed by any strict law that is transparent to the viewer. By joining very different elements in a free arrangement, Kandinsky creates a lively composition that forces the observer’s view to move. The eye can move in various ways across the image, iteratively making out new combinations of elements, tensions, and relations. The image’s complexity thus demands an extensive reception. While colour forms might encourage the eye to rest for a while, the groups of lines encourage a dynamic reception in which the eye remains in motion.

Kandinsky’s concept of rhythm was little influenced by Klages and the idea of rhythm as a ‘wave movement’; rather, it is to be seen in terms of dynamic tensions, movements, and vibrations. Temporality plays a crucial role in Kandinsky’s concept of reception, as the observer must perceive the rhythms in the form of vibrations, which can be thought of as wave movements. At the same time, Kandinsky combines rhythmic, sometimes almost metrical elements (such as lines), and arhythmic elements (such as free colour forms); these elements are not ‘revived’ repeatedly in a composition in the sense of a rhythmic variation, but occur as individual, arhythmic elements. While Kandinsky related the rhythmic principle as an airy back and forth – especially with regards to reception and the composition as a whole – his Bauhaus colleague Johannes Itten, along with others, extended the dimension of time to the production of images. Thus, other artists not only used the metaphor of the image as an airy space or pulsating atmosphere, but also explicitly used the principle of *breath* as a metaphor or even an artistic practice.
4 Johannes Itten: Breath in image production and reception

Itten’s teachings at the Bauhaus and his Itten School founded in 1926 in Berlin contained far more than his popular colour theory. He strongly emphasised the preparation of the production of an image and the development of good artistic expression. The practices that both precede and accompany the production of art are part of the literal meaning of the word extensive for Itten. Breathing is only one aspect within what is generally Itten’s very physical approach to the preparation of the artistic creation. Breathing can be understood as the connecting principle that both metaphorically and practically describes and binds together the time before and during the act of painting, the structure of the composition, and the process of reception.

In addition to his education by Adolf Hölzel, the Persian health, breathing, and healing doctrine of Mazdaznan is an important point of reference in understanding Itten’s teachings and work. In his publication Mein Vorkurs am Bauhaus. Gestaltungs- und Formenlehre, he writes, making an analogy to the teachings of Mazdaznan: “So wie wir atmen, so denken wir, und so ist der Rhythmus unseres täglichen Lebens” (As we breathe we think, and thus is the rhythm of our everyday life). In a 1929 journal entry Itten emphasises the “Pflege der individuellen Atmung […] im Hinblick auf die Gesundheit und Leistungsfähigkeit des Menschen” (maintenance of the individual breath […] regarding the health and productivity of man). As early as 1918 he writes that the regular, rhythmic movement signifies “Bewusstsein, Leben, Gesundheit” (conscience, life, health) while the irregular, arhythmic movement means “Bewusstlosigkeit, Tod, Krankheit” (coma, death and sickness). This echoes the passage by Osborne-Eaves quoted earlier, in which regular rhythms are defined as a principle of life. In his curriculum at his Berlin school, Itten linked the laws of rhythm not just with composition and reception, as Kandinsky did, but also to the body of the artist and the creative process. According to Itten, the dynamics of

36 Itten 1963, 9.
37 Rotzler – Itten 1972, 228.
38 Badura-Triska 1990, 299.
colour-form-rhythms must be put into a relationship of correspondence with the cardiac rhythm and the dynamics of the lungs, as rhythmic breath and rhythmic creation must correspond to each other.\(^{39}\)

After examining his students and analysing their breathing styles, Itten categorized them into ‘types’ according to their temperaments, with the goal of best supporting them according to their individual needs.\(^ {40}\) Itten implemented morning exercises consisting of “Entspannungs-, Konzentrations-, Atem- und Ton-Übungen” (exercises of relaxation, concentration and sound) which, should “die allein eine wahre, naturechte und geistgerichtete Erziehung des totalen Menschen gewährleisten” (provide a true, natural and spiritual education of the total human).\(^ {41}\) The aim was for each pupil to find his or her individual, ‘natural’ rhythm.

In \textit{Elemente der Bildenden Kunst} (1930), Itten described the artistic practice as follows: “Wenn wir den Rhythmus der Atmung parallel stellen zum Rhythmus der zu zeichnenden Formgestalt, dann werden wir momentan ergriffen von der Gewalt einer Ausdrucksform” (Putting in parallel the rhythm of breath to the rhythm of the form to be drawn, we are instantly taken by the force of this expression.)\(^ {42}\) Breathing and drawing are executed in parallel, with the artist supposed to breathe in the temporal rhythm of the lines as he draws them. According to Itten, the artist’s breath is manifested in the lines he or she draws, and thus infused into the image metaphorically: “Die rhythmisch geschriebenen Formen haben einen Wind, einen Atem in sich, der sie zu einer lebendigen Formfamilie macht” (The rhythmically written forms have a wind, a breath in them, turning them into a living family of form); without this breath they would be “unrhythmisch kalt, zusammenhanglos und abweisend” (arhythmically cold, without connection and distant).\(^ {43}\) According to this logic, the artist’s breath flows into the work and is then extracted upon reception.

\(^{39}\) Itten – Rotzler 1972, 229.
\(^{40}\) Itten – Rotzler 1972, 52.
\(^{41}\) Itten – Rotzler 1972, 234.
\(^{42}\) Itten 1980, 29.
\(^{43}\) Itten 1963, 98.
The way in which Itten conceptualizes breath according to the image’s composition on a receptive level becomes clearer when taking a look at his analyses of art works from different epochs. For instance, according to Itten, *Maria with Christ*, the stained-glass window in Chartres, breathes “im selben Rhythmus wie die Sonne” (*in the same rhythm as the sun*) and Renoir’s *Le Moulin de la Galette* makes us believe that we breathe in a magical world, the result of the modulation of warm and cold colours, which creates a pulsation within the composition. Itten argues that, through reception, observers should give themselves up completely as individuals and feel that they are totally a function of the image. Recipients are thereby able to breathe within the space of the image, in correspondence to the rhythm of the composition. It was not only European, but also old Egyptian and Indian art that provided models for such an empathic observation. Drawing on empathy theory, in his 1917 article “Über Komposition”, Itten asks his readers to feel the “unendlich verschlungenen linearen Rhythmus” (*eternally winding linear rhythm*) and the “gleichmäßig durcheinanderflutende Bewegung” (*uniformly streaming movement*) in the artworks of Indians. To experience an artwork for Itten means to revive it, to bring it to life; as he wrote in 1921: “Ein Kunstwerk erleben heißt, dieses wiedererleben, heißt, sein Wesentliches, sein Lebendiges, das in seiner Form ruht, zu persönlichem Leben erwecken”.

For Itten, preparation for artistic creation consisted of sensitization and relaxation through gymnastics and breathing exercises, as well as through the empathic ‘vivification’ of harmonious compositions. In *Elemente der bildenden Kunst* Itten states that these “konstruktiven, varia- und kombinatorischen Übungen für den jungen Künstler richtige Gesundheitskuren darstellen” (*constructive, variable and combined exercises are real health treatments for young artists*). Through these
exercises, body awareness is trained and a special concentration on one’s own breath is attained. The breathing reception of images before the actual painting or drawing process, the extensive physical training of young artists, and the working process are all tied to rhythmic processes that aim to educate a holistically harmonized and healthy human being.

Itten agrees with Klages’ concept of rhythm, describing rhythmicity using the examples of the pendulum swing, breathing in and out, the heartbeat, the lunar rhythm, the solar rhythm, and the rotational cycles of various celestial bodies. In 1938, he demanded that curricula should be in harmony not only with students’ temperament and talents, but also with the seasons.

The seasons are a recurring topic in Itten’s oeuvre. Vorfrühling (Prespring, 1966) features some of the basic characteristics of Itten’s seasonal images (fig. 1): A cluster of rectangles of different shapes, sizes, and hues structures the canvas. The colours green and orange dominate the field, with smaller grey, violet, blue, and light pink highlights. The upper part of the image is not subdivided but filled with a curving orange and a blue field, reminiscent of a skyline. While orange is dominant along the edges, green prevails in the centre. The irregular cluster of rectangles in the centre produces a dynamic impression—making the eye jump from field to field—while the corners allow the eyes to rest. The contrast between the warm, calming orange and the fresh green increases this effect.

Itten depicts spring as an exciting and stimulating season, as opposed to winter, which he thinks of as a time of tranquillity, suitable for calm work. He describes the seasons as “Atemzug” (breath), where winter is a time of inhalation and summer a time of exhalation. The composition’s dynamic rhythm can thus be linked to the

50 Itten 1980a, 106.
52 Johannes Itten, Vorfrühling, 1966, 120 x 120 cm, oil on canvas, private collection.
54 Itten 1961, 132.
idea of life, growth, and productivity in spring, a kind of vibrancy, which might also go with an elevated breath as a source of life force. It is important to note that the rectangles’ rhythm is not regular in a mathematical sense, and thus not predictable. Thus, Itten echoes Klages’ concept of rhythm – which demands variations on a theme – and thus a kind of free regularity. What is not evident, though, is how Itten correlates the rhythm of breath as a fluid movement to the jumping structure of rectangles in his composition. I will address this issue in the following section using the example of another artist concerned with temporality in art: Paul Klee.
5 Paul Klee: Pre-creation, creation, and re-creation

The circulation of blood and breath – which are central to Itten’s art pedagogical concept – are also significant to Klee’s art theory and practice, who applied the phenomena of biological rhythms to the production, composition, and reception of images. Joining Bauhaus in 1920, Klee had a friendly relationship with Itten. Although Klee was sceptical about the Mazdaznan doctrine, breath is a recurring topic in his teachings and writing. Itten’s depictions of seasons and natural phenomena in abstract rhythmic arrangements of free rectangles show many parallels to Klee’s earlier compositions. In Klee’s Pädagogische Skizzenbüchern, published 1925, the body rhythms of breathing are depicted using the model of the lemniscate, a figure-eight eternal loop that was described by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in terms of both “contraction” and “expansion”.

Breath is understood by Goethe – and by others in the romantic natural philosophy – as a basic principle of life, regenerating and maintaining life in the rhythmic alteration of systole and diastole. Klee analogously evokes the lemniscate in terms of a purifying pulmonary function. Itten also uses this loop when describing different kinds of rhythms.

The understanding of breath as a living function becomes evident in another drawing by Klee published in Bildnerische Formenlehre, in which he labelled the red line denoting arterial blood with \( R = \text{regeneration} \) and the venous, blue blood with \( D = \text{degeneration} \). In the breathing process the loop of the lemniscate is reproduced as a rhythmic alternation between increase and decrease, breathing in and breathing out as a regenerative change in the blood circulation: The swarming out of the lemniscate according to Klee was supposed to perform a change of colour from red to blue. Thus, according to

55 Schulz 2000, 80.
57 Itten 1980a, 108.
58 Paul Klee – Bildnerische Form- und Gestaltungslehre, BG I.4/25. The page is available on the website of Zentrum Paul Klee.
Heribert Schulz, forms, lines, and colour serve to increase and decrease the qualities of movement and material. Colour changes in an image therefore represent points where the recipient is supposed to start breathing in or out, providing a rhythm that parallels the process of breathing and that coincides with the pulse.

Klee did not only apply his model to the reception of art works, and his art theory is characterized by connections to the levels of production, composition, and reception. In 1924 he writes: “Die Vorbewegung in uns, die tätige, werkliche Bewegung von uns, in der Richtung des Werkes und die weitere Fortführung der Bewegtheit im Werk auf andere, auf die Beschaier des Werkes, das sind die Hauptschnitte des schöpferischen Ganzen, als Vorschöpfung, Schöpfung und Nachschöpfung” (Our pre-movement, the active, real movement from us in the direction of the work as well as the continuation of the work to others, the observers of the work, these are the main parts of the creative whole, as precreation, creation and recreation). The differentiation between the distinct time levels describes the different moments in the process of artistic creation.

Concepts of temporality in art are also important to Klee’s understanding of ‘form’. He regarded form not as something static and unchangeable, but in terms of formation, i.e. the process of forming: “Formung, nicht Form als letzte Erscheinung, sondern Form im Werden, als Genesis” (forming, not form as last appearance but form as a becoming, a genesis). More precisely, Klee sees form as a rhythmic movement in time, with every work moving “sowohl entstehend (produktiv) als aufgenommen (rezeptiv) in der Zeit” (in development (productive) as well as receiving (reception) in time). Ideas about the image’s mediality are crucial in this context.

As with Kandinsky and Itten, Klee uses air – a medium that promises a light, rather loose rhythm – as a metaphor to describe artworks.
In his 1920 article “Schöpferische Konfession”, Klee describes an artwork as a *villegiatura* representing a possibility to change the air and to be drawn into a “Welt […], die ablenkend Stärkung bietet für die unvermeidliche Rückkehr zum Grau des Werktags” (world that distractively provides revitalization in the view of the necessary return to the grey working day). The artwork allows to nourish the “hungernden Nerven” (hungry nerves) and fill the individual’s “erschlaffende[] Gefäße mit neuem Saft“ (flagging vessels with new juice). Thus, the image appears as a refuge against the everyday rhythm, which is understood as an eternal return of sameness. The observer spends time in front – or rather within – the image, in accordance with the rules of the image and its rhythmic order, which contributes to ease, relaxation, and nourishment with new force and vitality. The reception of the image may thus become a regenerative activity.

It is paramount that Klee’s ideas be understood in light of the concept of the individual rhythm. Klee did not understand rhythm as a uniform metrical structure or law but as an undividable, indivisible whole – as an organism composed by oppositional colour forms and which is harmonious in itself as a whole. Klee strove not for the even musical beat but for a free composition, loosely comparable to Kandinsky’s concept of harmony being produced by oppositions and irregularities, which are seen as essential to a good artwork. Klee’s ‘fugue’ *Blühendes* (1934) is characterized by an irregular rhythm of rectangular forms differing in shape, size, and colour. Unlike in Kandinsky’s compositions, similar forms are repeated, bearing more similarities to Itten. However, rhythm in Klee’s work is not experienced as linear, but as a dynamic, pulsating movement of cold and warm, dark and bright colours. The irregularities of the shapes create the impression of three-dimensionality, much more than in the case of Itten’s composition *Vorfrühling*. Moreover, the forms develop a temporal structure: While the eye might move slowly around the arrangement of big rectangles close to the four corners of the composition

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64 Spiller 1971, 80.
65 Paul Klee, *Blühendes*, 1934, 82 x 80 cm, oil on canvas, Kunstmuseum Winterthur. The image is available on the museum’s website.
at first, reception is accelerated as it approaches the centre, which is dominated by both smaller and brighter rectangles. The image appears as a breathing organism, moving back and forth, breathing slower or faster. According to Klee, who based his ideas on Goethe and Klages, such rhythms are revived by the observers, with these rhythms invoking a harmonic balance. Like with Itten’s Vorfrühlings, Klee’s image’s title, Blühendes (Blooming), evokes ideas on life, growth, renewal, spring, and other aspects of nature’s cycles. Breath and other body rhythms such as pulse and blood circulation serve as metaphors for these kinds of compositions, as well as for Klee’s ideas on art.

6 František Kupka: Breathing exercises and the image as an air space

The harmonious balance with natural rhythms is crucial to another artist who was – unlike Kandinsky, Itten, and Klee – not associated with the Bauhaus. Although Czech artist František Kupka was more connected to Austrian and French artistic circles, he and Itten shared the idea that the nerve mechanism and brain activity should be in harmony with seasonal changes, i.e. natural rhythms. Kupka not only held the maintenance of his own hygiene important, but he also applied principles of hygiene to his production-aesthetical approach. Like Itten, he also was influenced greatly by the Lebensreform movement and practiced gymnastics – ideally “nackt im Garten” (naked in the garden). In Kupka’s theory, biorhythms and a good artistic practice are linked: “Ein guter Blutkreislauf, gute Lungen- und Hautatmung und gute Verdauung, sind Rhythmen und Harmonien, welche ihrerseits den Ausdruck regeln” (A good blood circulation, good lung and skin breathing as well as good digestion are rhythms and harmonies regulating the expression). Good artistic practice thus depends on the rhythm of life in general, and the rhythm of breath and the pulse of the artist in particular.

Kupka is thus one of a number of artists who connected their artistic practice with general body rhythms, especially breathing. His ideas are based on the art of Japanese drawing, which was also an important source for both Itten und Klee:

"Die Japaner haben für den Zeichenunterricht klare Vorschriften über Körperhaltung und Atmung, die der Schüler einhalten soll. [...] Es wäre für uns vielleicht von Vorteil auf die Japaner zu hören: Wenn wir einen Strich zum Beispiel von oben nach unten ziehen, sollten wir die Luft langsam aus der Lunge ausströmen lassen und umgekehrt die Luft einatmen, wenn wir ihn von unten nach oben ziehen. Der Atemrhythmus sollte wenn möglich mit dem Rhythmus der zeichnerischen Handlung übereinstimmen und sie ohne Unterbrechung begleiten" (The Japanese have clear rules regarding body posture and breath. It might be an advantage to listen to the Japanese. [...] When they draw a line from top to bottom, we should slowly release the air from the lung and the other way around breathe in when we draw a line from bottom to top. The breathing rhythm should – if possible – be in accord with the drawing activity and go with it without break).

Kupka connects bodily practices with the artist’s creative work, charging the composition with a specific rhythmicity and time structure that can be ‘reproduced’ by the recipient’s creative eye. In his view of reception, Kupka uses a metaphor reminiscent of Kandinsky’s theoretical assumptions and use of the metaphor of the breath. Kupka also describes the image’s space as a breathable space, arguing that a composition can produce the feeling of “keine Luft oder umgekehrt zu viel Luft zu bekommen” (not being able to breathe properly or the other way around have too much inflow of air). Unfortunately, Kupka did not elaborate further on this idea. Klee, however, expressed a similar idea: “Große Spannbreite von Pol zu Pol verleiht einer Handlung tiefes Ein- und Ausatmen, das bis zum keuchenden Ringen wandlungsfähig ist. Geringe Spannweite dämpft die Atemzüge bis zum sotto voce ab” (A great range from pole to pole provides the action with a deep breathing in and breathing out that can change to a panting gasp. A limited range lowers the breathing). This idea can be applied to both Itten’s and Klee’s compositions, which alternate between smaller and bigger forms, in arrangements that

69 Kupka 2001, 96.
demand a slower or faster reception. Kupka’s *Ordonnance sur verticales en jaune* (1913)\(^{72}\) features an arrangement of yellow, black, grey, and blue vertical forms. Compared to Itten and Klee, these forms are linear, and are received as vertical movements. The production process as a breathing process can be imagined clearly, with long lines designating longer breaths and shorter lines short breaths. Lines are drawn from both top to bottom and bottom to top. A ‘breathing’ movement also characterizes the composition, as the alternation of darker and lighter colours produces the impressions of depth and three-dimensionality.

### 7 Further research and conclusions

Metaphors and practice of breathing are not only associated with the European Lebensreform movement but, as seen with Kupka, are more and more merged with meditation and Zen Buddhism. For instance, American artist Mark Tobey, a founding member of the Munich group ZEN 49, wrote: “We artists must learn to breathe more” – a static image does not contain breath, “it doesn’t breathe”.\(^{73}\) The titles of Tobey’s images – such as *Edge of August* (1953) and *Northwest Drift* (1958) are often related to climatic-seasonal phenomena invoking a temporal structure of the image and the temporality of natural cycles. Thus, the artist’s breath and natural phenomena such as climate and winds are correlated as rhythmic phenomena. Mark Rothko, too, uses the terms “breathability” and “breathingness” to describe his work.\(^{74}\)

The phenomenon of breath in artists’ theories and practices has not yet been described and investigated thoroughly, with Robin Veder’s 2015 publication *The Living Line: Modern Art and the Economy of Energy* being an important exception. Veder investigates the principles of breath and body movements in art using the example of

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\(^{72}\) František Kupka, *Ordonnance sur verticales en jaune*, 1913, 70 x 70 cm, oil on canvas, Centre Pompidou, Paris. The image is available on the [museum’s website](https://www.centrepompidou.fr).

\(^{73}\) Mark Tobey quoted in Seitz 1962, 31.

\(^{74}\) Wick 2008, 26.
artist Arthur B. Davis (1863–1928). Davis demanded that “all art should breathe with the ‘lift of inhalation’”. Although Davis was not an abstract artist, Veder argues that Davis’ work and, especially, his striving for a “conflation of human physicality and visual form answers a question central to early twentieth-century modernism and persistent in scholarly discourse” – namely, “Can an artist bring the body’s moving lines, organic rhythms, and essential vivacity to a static work of art without representational and narrative imagery?”. Veder makes a clear case for the fact that, in the context of both modern body culture and in a variety of psychophysical experiments, the view that the “kinaesthetically sensitive viewer breathes in empathetic response to form” became more and more widespread during this time.

The production of images as air and breathing spaces is connected to ideas on the temporality of artworks, as well as to discourses within modern body culture, gymnastics, and relaxation. All stages of the artistic process including the reception of the image are thus linked through the metaphor and practice of breathing. Breath not only serves as a fruitful metaphor to understand the complexity of temporal aspects in art, but breath and – by extension – blood circulation and pulse are also understood as biorhythms that govern all artistic creation and perception. In the view of all of the artists’ presented in the present paper, the processes of preparatory education and production, as well as the composition’s inherent temporality and the time of reception, are all connected by biological phenomena.

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75 Veder 2015, 41.
76 Veder 2015, 67.
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