

IN THE SPIRIT OF WALSER

"We don't need to see anything out of the ordinary. We already see so much."

A number of years ago, I enjoyed reading a selection of short stories by Robert Walser, with a forward by Susan Sontag and a postscript by the translator Christopher Middleton, and from there I went on to read his novels: The Assistant (1908), Jakob Von Gunten (1909), and The Tanners (1907). He is a modernist but at the same time unlike any other modernist. He can be self-effacing, indignant, curious, happy, but always about the most modest people, things, or occurrences. Walking was important to him and The Walk (1917) is one of his best-known short stories. During his lifetime he crisscrossed Switzerland on long, solitary hikes and he died on Christmas Day walking in the snow. The finest writing on Robert Walser and his work is by another walker/writer W.G. Sebald who described him as: "A clairvoyant of the small." And started his essay for *The Tanners* as follows: "The trace Robert Walser left on his path through life were so faint as to almost have been effaced altogether...he was only connected with the world in the most fleeting of ways. Nowhere was he able to settle, never did he acquire the least thing by way of possessions. Even the paper he used for writing was secondhand. And just as throughout his life he was almost entirely devoid of material possessions so too was he remote from other people." Of his writing Sebald wrote that Walser, "almost always wrote the same thing and yet never repeated himself." And that his, "prose has the tendency to dissolve upon reading so that only a few hours later one can barely remember the ephemeral figures, events, and things of which he spoke." Walter Benjamin went, as far as to say that, "the point of every one of his sentences is to make us forget the last one." Sebald also wrote: "If Walser had any literary relative or predecessor, then it is Gogol. Both of them gradually lost the ability to keep their eye on the center of the plot, losing themselves instead in the almost compulsive contemplation of strangely unreal creations appearing on the periphery of their vision, and about whose previous and future fate we never learn even the slightest thing."

Walser lived in Berlin from 1905 to 1913 and his first publications achieved a great deal of success and received support and praise from Kafka, Musil, and other contemporaries. Toward the end of this period when his success faded and life in Berlin became difficult he returned to Switzerland, first to Biel and then to Bern. More and more he expressed himself through miniscule writing on scraps of envelopes, calendar pages, or visiting cards, using the early German script *Kurrent*, a version of medieval shorthand, which for a long time was thought to be indecipherable until recognized by Jochen Greven, and later transcribed by Werner Morlang and Bernhard Echte and published in 1985. These microscripts would seem to indicate a withdrawal from society brought on by his lack of success and his slow slide into madness. He entered the Waldau Clinic in Bern in 1929 and was then transferred in 1933 to Herisau Clinic where

he died in 1956. After 1933, which coincidentally also marked Hitler's rise to power in Germany, he no longer wrote. And it was said that when asked why, he replied, "I am here to be mad not to write."

I was fascinated by the microscripts, which I first saw in an extraordinary exhibition in 2008 in Berlin entitled "Notation." Kalkül und Form in den Künsten". Then Christine Burgin worked on the book Microscripts with its translations by Susan Bernofsky and was interested in creating an exhibition in New York with the help of the Walser Center in Bern. We decided to collaborate on showing the microscripts together with first editions of his publications, many of which were illustrated by his brother, as well as photographs. I became more and more interested in the connection between his writings and certain contemporary artists and out of this has come a series of exhibitions: "In the Spirit of Walser". This is a purely subjective choice and avoids any attempt at an inclusive exhibition or homage to the writer. Hundreds of artists have made work in homage to Walser, many of a highly personal and sometimes romantic and sentimental nature. This is not an area that interests me personally and I am confident that the artists who have agreed to work on this project will produce work that is as original as its inspiration. With this in mind I have asked each artist to write a text that will be published with the documentation of the exhibition.

On December 3rd, the gallery will open the first part of the exhibition with the archival material being shown together with 3 clay sculptures by Peter Fischli and David Weiss. This will be followed by Moyra Davey in January, Thomas Schütte in February, Rosemarie Trockel in March and Tacita Dean and Mark Wallinger in April.

--Donald Young