

“Hello David, I have to talk to you.”

When David Weiss started working with Peter Fischli in 1980, he ended his career as a solo artist. This is understandable considering the intensity of the collaboration and the success story of Fischli/Weiss, but also astonishing considering the mature oeuvre that this draftsman had already produced by then. For years, only the tip of the iceberg was known to the public: the legendary collection of rain drawings in *up and down town* (1975) and two small editions, *Comix/Drei Geschichten* (*Comix/Three Stories*, 1974) and *Wandlungen* (*Transformations*, 1976). They clearly testify to the fact that there was an artist David Weiss prior to the Fischli/Weiss duo, who undoubtedly treated this part of his life work as a basis and a source but otherwise kept it under cover, coming back to it only later when preparing other early books of drawings for publication. The *Nine Books 1973–1979*, published posthumously in 2014, reveal the exceptional legacy of this great, unknown draftsman, whose early work may now be (re)discovered.

This boxed set of nine books comprises not only previously unpublished artist's books such as *I Wish That I Sailed the Darkened Seas*, *Frauen*, *Im Bad*, *Morgengrauen I* and *Morgengrauen II*, but also re-editions of *Comix* and *up and down town*. The book *Wandlungen*, being entirely different in format and artistic approach, is not part of the set, although it, too, hinges on a single idea, the principle of transformation, shown to be an endless process and the project as a whole a never-ending collection. When Weiss sent his dealer

and publisher Pablo Stähli a hefty, snail-mail package in April 1976, he mentioned in his cover letter an alternative version and other pages that he would like to add to the “first 60”—at his own expense, if necessary. And after the meticulously printed book had been published in 200 copies, he immediately started in on some new series, filling page after page with signs and drawings in the same fashion: images morphing from top to bottom, line by line, as in a Chinese book. It therefore makes sense not simply to re-issue the *Wandlungen* but to include the entire body of works, thus offering greater insight into Weiss's universe of imagery and ideas.

The sequences the artist created vary in length: rarely one page, usually four, five, seven or even more pages. The individual series can be distinguished from one another wherever the pages are numbered and, in some cases, dated. Where they end is not as clear-cut as their beginnings, which generally show a simple elementary sign, for instance, a square, a circle, a curlicue or an arrow, out of which new forms emerge, sometimes metamorphosing into entire sceneries and even narratives. It usually took Weiss one or two days to do a sequence and he created most of the *Wandlungen* in little more than a month in the fall of 1975, the images literally flowing out of him in a near infinite stream of drawings. He produced another, related series that year as well. Weiss was similarly productive once again between November 1977 and April 1978, at which time he drew new motifs on different paper, possibly working even more rapidly than before.

The biographically motivated, psychological reading of this artistic project is based on a personal crisis (a relationship), during which time Weiss was thrown back on himself, seeking to cope by drawing and turning his inner world inside out. In the above-mentioned letter to Pablo Stähli, he writes, “In the originals, there is a drawing where you see me with a big black hole in my head, that could be the last picture.... On the next page there's someone shitting out of his head, that would be a nice little logo, it says a lot, in case we need one at the beginning, or something.” There are more than enough intimations in the early series of the dark side, the sadness, the melancholy, the rage and the anxiety: in one sequence David appears between Caspar and Friedrich (Caspar David Friedrich), then gets rid of the two antipodes to sit by himself on the edge of the world watching as his two adversaries disappear over the horizon—only to fly right back at him with renewed strength like cannonballs. In other drawings, the conflict is played out inside the protagonist himself: two figures gesticulate and argue until one is devoured by the other; or a shadow, lying in ambush, approaches the main figure and overpowers it from behind. Sometimes murderers are on the move, wielding sharp knives and looking for trouble. The artist's own weapon is his palette, not of colours but of specific amounts of envy, hate, resentment and jealousy, to give every situation the desired piquancy.

And lastly, there is the challenge of facing the other: the artist is confronted with a primeval man, the embodiment of instinct or morality, who initiates the dialogue that he will conduct with himself and the world: "Hello David, I have to talk to you." In those days, David Weiss was much preoccupied with dream interpretation and psychoanalysis.

In his letter to Pablo Stähli, he also ponders the title of the upcoming publication: "The working title 'Associations' is the easy way out and it's not wrong and it meant I didn't have to labor over a title, which is now taking its revenge.... 'Buch der Wandlungen' is the best thing I've come up with so far, but then you'd have to add 'Zeichnungen' (Drawings) to distinguish it from the Chinese book of oracles. But at least it would be a little funny, slightly cocky and certainly fitting. Maybe it could be pared down to 'Wandlungen'." Both of the terms proposed for the title are extremely accurate descriptions of what is happening in this book. Associations and transformations are much more than mere metamorphoses of form. The craftsmanship is constitutive, and unmistakably evolutionary developments can clearly be traced in Weiss's eloquent inventions: whole bundles of lines flow out of a drawing pen and take on a life of their own; an upset inkpot breeds anamorphic figurations; faces and stories emerge in the traces of the artist's hand, giving free rein to the imagination. But whatever the case, the flood of imagery, the series and variations, are always generated by inner images and emotions, as explicitly demonstrated by Weiss's self-portrait "with a big black hole in my head" or the figure "shitting out of his head". Insight into various inner worlds, as seen in other drawings, is less specific but ultimately also a metaphor for the same thing. We see knives slicing open surfaces to reveal dark worlds looming out of the depths; vessels empty out, allowing spirits and other wondrous characters to escape out of bottles; the negative space between two figures proves to be a third overpowering might. And so on and so forth. The crystal ball appears as the universe, generating visions of ever new imaginary worlds.

Weiss goes back to the beginning again and again. He draws a simple square, makes a cube out of it that turns into a building block, around which others congregate until a whole city emerges and is filled with life. Or a cube morphs into a modern-day Pandora's box that opens up to release unwelcome creatures; a match proves to be exceptionally flammable; waves break, spewing debris; and graphic structures turn out to be interconnecting rhizomes.

And so the whimsical reference to the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, known in German as *Buch der Wandlungen*, is not only a play on the fact that the world is subject to ceaseless change but also that opposing forces determine our lives and underpin our actions. Weiss's *Wandlungen* are no exception. On the contrary: by describing the associative series as a process

that is motivated formally *and* mentally *and* emotionally, connecting all these levels, the transformations encompass all the experience and richness of an artist who set out to explore himself and the world and, in so doing, stretched his feelers out in every direction—sending us, too, on wonderful journeys of discovery: "Hello David, I have to talk to you."