

Bruno Jakob
By Roman Kurzmeyer

Bruno Jakob is a painter, and he is also one of the main characters in a lovely picture book written and illustrated by Maira Kalman in 1990 called “Max makes a million”.¹ The slim volume, which resembles a children's book, tells the story of Max. Max is a dreamer, and a poet, and he is a dog. He dreams of living in Paris, something which, as he himself says, is not so easy for a small New York dog to do. How could he, and from what would he, make a living in Paris as a poet? And if you have friends like Bruno, says Max, you can also have a good life in New York. There he is: Bruno! Max shares a studio with Bruno, and Bruno is his best friend. Max says that Bruno does “invisible paintings”. Some people insist that Bruno is mad. But Max says that Bruno is simply working on his ideas.

Years have passed since the book was published, and Bruno is still living in New York. Meantime he has quite severe looking dark glasses and, over his white shirt, he usually wears a black blazer which he has made to measure, with inside pockets suitable for holding brushes, pencils and sheets of paper, all of which he needs for his work when he's on the road. When you are with Bruno, it can happen that he will suddenly stop, reach into one of his inside pockets and pull out a small white box which he will hand to someone or hold in front of some object. At moments like these, he is painting.

Bruno Jakob uses energy, water, ideas, light or touch as tools when doing his invisible paintings. He then makes a note of the place and time, the method, title and his signature on the back, for example, of the above-mentioned box which he worked on with energy and ideas. He captures, among other things, the energy of a person or an animal, memorises a particular situation, notes down his observation or deliberately interrupts the flow of time. The world is his studio. His painting is not visually graspable in itself, irrespective of the method used, meaning irrespective of whether he works with water, ideas, touch or energy. This is what is expressed in the designation used by the artist: ‘invisible painting’. But what distinguishes an idea-painting from a normal piece of paper whose surface is visually identical with that of the artwork?

In an article written on the “Masterpiece”, German art historian Hans Belting describes how in the 19th century the term art gradually became transferred from a technical skill to a conceptual achievement.² This change is one of the historical preconditions for the possibility of invisible art in the 20th century. Whoever is not familiar with this development will be blind to Jakob's invisible painting.

In 1951 Robert Rauschenberg produced his “White Paintings”. He did not wish his white canvases, painted with a knowledge of the work of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, to be seen as a pure form of monochromy, although they are certainly that as well, but rather as concrete and open sites of an incident which is deliberately removed from the artist's control: the white painting as empty canvas, unleashing different pictorial ideas in each viewer. At the time of their genesis, Rauschenberg's white paintings were already understood not only as projection planes, but also in a concrete sense as a site. This has to do, among other things, with the painting process: Rauschenberg applied paint to the canvas, laid it still damp on the floor in the dust and then painted it again. That summer, when Rauschenberg was working on the *White Paintings*, the American composer and artist John Cage had his most recent composition, “4'33””, performed by the young pianist David Tudor. In this piece, so important in the history of new music, we are enabled through the pianist's own silence and inactivity over a given period of time (four minutes and thirty-three seconds)

to perceive the surrounding noises. Cage opened music up to everyday sounds and to chance. He enthusiastically said of Rauschenberg's white paintings that they were "landing strips" for particles of dust. In one interview he even opined: "No more paintings need to be produced now that the empty surface has its images and incidents."³ It is said that Rauschenberg himself was interested, for example, in the possibility which his white canvases presented of making shadows visible. He painted pictures without subject or composition, yet which are still representations. The world is back in the picture.

Jakob Bruno knew nothing about all this when he produced his first *Invisible Paintings*. Yet one cannot speak about his painting without referring to this historical moment in the history of more recent art, when a new possibility for artistic practice and a new concept of art were established, a concept which in retrospect can be linked above all with the oeuvre of John Cage. In my view, this link is as strong as that to Yves Klein, whose exhibition "Le Vide" (1958) at the Iris Clert gallery in Paris is referred to by Ralph Rugoff in "A Brief History of Invisible Art".⁴ In that exhibition, Klein showed an empty room which he had filled with his own awareness and energy. The exhibition mounted in San Francisco by Ralph Rugoff in 2005, in which Bruno Jakob was also represented, included not only important conceptual works by, among others, Art & Language, Michael Asher, Robert Barry, or Bethan Huws and Carsten Höller from the younger generation, but also the "Invisible Sculpture" (1985) by Andy Warhol.

Bruno Jakob developed the basis for his current work in quite a different cultural context. Born in 1954, he grew up on a farm in Aarburg in Switzerland. The Jakobs were leaseholders on a small farm, whose land was later distributed among other farmers. Bruno Jakob studied art in Basel and Düsseldorf. Although he has lived in New York since 1983, the first of his "Invisible Paintings" were done on his parent's farm around 1968. Before his studies he had set up a studio in which to draw and paint under the roof of his parent's house. A cardboard described by Bruno Jakob as one of the earliest works for which he used energy as a painterly tool dates from those years. When Jakob paints and draws, this cardboard is close by. His experience when painting is that one possibility of not only imagining images, but also of actually seeing them on the empty plane, is to intensely study, to concentrate his gaze on this white cardboard. This is an observation he shares with many other painters from the whole of art history. What is specific to Jakob is that he draws the conclusion not only to accept these images and let them survive as "Invisible Paintings", but also to consistently develop his working method in that direction. He began to paint with water in 1969, initially on blotting paper. In 1973 he found a roll of transparent plastic foil at the printer's where he was working, which he has since preserved like an exposed but undeveloped film full of concealed images. To continue working on his chosen path numerous possibilities were open to him: in 1976 he put sheets of paper out in the rain so that it could depict itself, or exposed sheets of paper to fog; he laid sheets of paper along an ant road and followed individual ants that walked across the paper with a pencil; he worked in the garden, letting flies and mites compose his images by marking those spots where they alighted for a moment on the paper; he tried to draw the rain. In those years, he also produced images without solid supports. He painted on plastic sheeting and then removed the layer of paint from the plastic once it had dried. His roll- and fold-images on cotton fabric involved a combination of processes (painting, spraying, rubbing). The painted fabrics are rolled up and exhibited as partly rolled or folded images, with the result that the image as a whole remains invisible.

Bruno Jakob developed his interest in the invisible, the concealed, the latent, the lost, the unrealised and the non-depictable early on in his career and has since been processing these aspects of the image for painting, while at the same time never ceasing to represent the world

and depict ideas. What emerge, and have so far scarcely been referred to, are, for example, figurative drawings that show him painting. There are also videos of situations when he is working in an artistic way. It can happen that Bruno Jakob paints in the city, using one hand and water on paper, or that he paints on a flowering mountain meadow, using the morning dew to paint flowers. Or else he holds a camera in his other hand and documents the surroundings where he is in the process of concentrating on an image. These tapes document real time and the simultaneity of different events, of which painting an image can be one. John Cage had different compositions performed at the same time, for example, and spoke of an undetermined event.⁵ In performances by Bruno Jakob, the videos are often played unedited, so that the viewer is confronted with real time. Jakob also paints in front of audiences. When doing this he often carries out several processes in parallel and changes the aggregate state of his painting tools, for example, by letting water evaporate during a performance and using the steam to paint.

When John Cages says that one of the main tasks of contemporary art, as he understands it, is that the artist not preoccupy himself with himself and his feelings, but open people's eyes to the world and thus change the view of that world, this comes very close to Bruno Jakob's concept. However paradoxical this assertion may initially seem, his work is above all visual, although it claims to be the opposite. His painting is neither abstract nor non-figurative or conceptual, and it also does not create its own symbolism. Instead, it addresses the viewer in the form of a drawing, a painting, a photograph, a moving image or a performance, i.e., in an artistic medium, and challenges him through its open structure to question his relationship to the visible. The visible components of the work are oriented around conventional features of pictorial works and allow the painting to appear credible as a deliberately undertaken action. It would be suspect to designate Jakob as a concept artist, yet without the concept art of the 1960s his painting would not be perceptible as art and would remain material; a painting created with energy and additionally through touch would be no more than a canvas. In his work Bruno Jakob links concept art with painting by actually using invisible painting tools.

The deliberate rejection of a mode of depiction, writes Arthur C. Danto, includes “the rejection of a whole mode of reference to the world and to people”.⁶ In the case of Bruno Jakob, this rejection would mean criticising the picture-maker for retiring behind his working method, but also doubting the structural openness of his painting and thus of course his painterly practice, which grasps each individual work as a potential form and establishes each image as a resonance chamber for the viewer.

¹ Maira Kalman, *Max makes a million*, New York / London 1990.

² Hans Belting, “Meisterwerk”, in *Die Welt der Encyclopédie*, Frankfurt am Main 2001, pp. 253-256.

³ John Cage cited in Wulf Herzogenrath, “Über John Cage: Inseln der Konzentration”, in *Künstler: Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst*, Munich 1991, p. 9.

⁴ Ralph Rugoff, *A Brief History of Invisible Art*, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco 2005.

⁵ On John Cage see also “John Cage über die bildenden Künste”, in Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage im Gespräch. Zu Musik, Kunst und geistigen Fragen unserer Zeit*, Cologne 1989, pp. 124-139.

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Die Verklärung des Gewöhnlichen. Eine Philosophie der Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 87.