

## Pathways

Ruegg, Ilona, published in GAGARIN 13, Artists in their own words, Juli 2006, Antwerpen Belgien

Snow had fallen again, late in spring, a lot of snow. Hardly anyone wanted to stay indoors but the pathways lay under a thick white cover, completely invisible. The gravel paths, which together formed a system, had been specially laid out to give the guests the opportunity to go out into the fresh air during the short breaks. Several interconnected loops made it possible to make new decisions over and over again at the branches and, on this not very extensive terrain, to develop a complex set of movements during which there was seldom a feeling of going in circles. After a short while there could arise a sense of having been on the road for a long time.

But now there was not even a trace of the pathways. The casually scattered trees which otherwise defined the insides or the edges of the loops rose up out of the seamless white. It was decided that the paths should be cleared according to the memory of the layout under the snow cover. The machine munched its way gently through the deep snow, trying to replicate the pathways and laying down the same image, white on white, that the light gravel had picked out against the summer grass. The tracks were now sunk knee deep in the white mass. During the next break it was again possible to return to the outdoor walks. Just like the gravel paths, the cleared tracks were narrow, just wide enough for one person. Passing was difficult and walking two abreast impossible. On the crunching snow they incessantly did their rounds, which were in fact complicated loops. You wouldn't have been able to say that they were avoiding each other, and yet their paths never crossed. The whole terrain was visible, the air fresh, and without getting into advanced calculations, every one seemed to reach the next branch well in advance of any collision, which then allowed them to continue on their way undisturbed. It was impossible to tell whether the crunching sound conveyed the information; in any event the walkers' gaze was more roaming than peering, just as much turned inward than outward into the distance. Their manner of walking couldn't have been more varied. Those walking faster fell directly into hesitant movements in order to avoid slipping into the wake of the slow. But having branched off they resumed their pace undisturbed, their footing now perhaps even more confident on the slippery surface. Now and then one stood still, and activity in the vicinity immediately slowed. Their movements were marked with the care of wanting to avoid a traffic jam. Even if a certain density did develop, it was arranged more in a kind of loose tangle. The one who had temporarily formed the motionless centre was apparently unaware of this. When he then gave up this position by resuming movement, he started off the process of unravelling the tangle which he was unaware of having caused.

It happened that some defined the same loop several times, with no apparent reason. Perhaps they had just missed the branch, or their fast pace didn't allow them to change direction. They represented a particular difficulty for those who wanted, even if it was only once, to use the same loop. If someone wanted to slip in, there was a high probability that someone else would appear at the entry point of the other loop at just the same time. For a while it seemed that those moving in circles had an excluding right to repeat themselves. Those who perhaps wanted to join the circle had to wait for a moment when the point of connection happened to be free; yet this never resembled waiting at a closed door. The open terrain made any calculations possible long before a problem arose so that, by slowing down or in some cases even moving backwards, a convenient moment could be brought about without a standstill. The movement in a supposedly closed circle was sometimes extraordinarily dense because more and more walkers had managed to join. This, in turn, seemed to put some off even attempting to join in. Yes, it was obvious that they passed by with some lack of interest and so had more freedom to choose their pace since there were remarkably few on the move along the intertwined paths. Here, time seemed neither to stand still nor slow down. The tracks, interlinked in many ways, enabled patterns of movement which were hardly ever repeated and so produced surprises again and again.

While the snow lay wet and heavy on the cleared tracks, under the budding trees little brown islands were starting to form. They grew by the day until they reached the pathways in places and immediately coloured them brown. Was it those who couldn't resist the temptation to leave the white path for a moment that brought the colour back with them, or was it that piece of earth which tainted the snow by infection? In any case, the constant walking and the rising temperature both accelerated the melting process which was underway. In sunny places the snow began to recede at its edges. Soon their steps were leading through damp earth and in shadowy places back into mushy snow. The white edges which had previously defined the cleared tracks, no longer corresponded to them at all. In return, the original gravel path revealed itself here and there. The walkers were still following each other at greater or shorter distances, but they could be said to be walking behind each other in lanes, some here on brown grass, some there on gravel or still in the snow, which resembled a joyous confusion. Some began to crush the snow edges in order to encourage the retreat of the snow mass. The more the edges retreated, the more the

bright gravel path stood out in places only to disappear under the remaining cover of snow and reappear further on. You could soon make out the original pathways, set back slightly from the cleared tracks and it didn't take long for some to tramp through the remaining snow and so to reveal the missing stretches of path.

If the walkers' movement had previously been continuous and mostly forwards, differentiated only in the relative fluidity of speed, the constant switching between old and new pathways now enabled completely new directions of movement. At no point did the temporary confusion caused by the changeable system of paths prevent the walkers from continuing their ceaseless activity. Previously they had been able to rely solely on the cleared, edged tracks. They used them as a matter of course, felt completely free in setting off in their direction, in deciding which new loop they wanted to slip into at the branches and in choosing their own pace, as long as they avoided crossing paths with others or overtaking them. But now the tracks were disappearing and were simultaneously only just appearing. Only in places had the tracing, in the form of the cleared tracks, corresponded entirely with the gravel path. For a short while they chose to move on one track or the other, changed according to mood and thus made one of the two disappear, while focusing increasingly on the second, emerging one. Some used this as an opportunity to increase their pace irrespectively, despite the fact that someone ahead was slowing down, and simply change lanes where possible in order to avoid an unwanted collision. Now, they occasionally had no problem walking around for a while next to each other, one on the snow, the other on gravel, and the walkers' paths often crossed, as a matter of course, without resistance.

A little later the brown islands under the trees had dissolved favouring the white flecks which got smaller and smaller inside the loops of the pathways. Again gravel was underfoot.

©Ilona Ruegg 2006

Original text in German, title „Parcours“ – Translation From German to English Craig Rollo, Antwerp