

## Lee Walton: Drawing and Baseball

Essay by By William C. Agee

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On first seeing Georgia O'Keeffe's work, Alfred Stieglitz is reported to have exclaimed, "At last!" We are likely to have a similar response on first seeing the art of Lee Walton, for here, at last, is art about baseball. In a series of remarkable works on paper, Walton has added something new, fresh, and truly authentic to the venerable medium of drawing. But baseball? Can it be? To be sure, there are no literal images of players or fields, but Walton has done something more meaningful and original. Through his own variations on the language of abstraction, working through analogy and equivalents, he captures the ceaseless movement, the dynamic forces, the ebb and flow of this most beautiful of games. Anyone who has played or just loved the game will understand this immediately. But the beauty of baseball is in its mirror reflection of life, its pace, rhythms, its twists and turns, its lulls and its drama, so these drawings will speak to us even if baseball has not been in the scope of our experience. Walton well understands this, for he has also done a series of drawings based on the chance, random movements of pedestrians and cars in urban settings.

The work comes from deep impulses and instincts and thus is anything but a passing novelty or whim. Walton always made drawings as a kid, and he always played baseball, continuing to do both in college in California, where he had grown up. Combining them, in retrospect, now seems only natural and inevitable. He has made art from what he has always known, doing what he has always done, what has always been a part of him, a seamless fusion of art and life. This has been the guiding principle behind much of our best modern art, a principle taught by Robert Henri, a great teacher, to generations of students, Edward Hopper and Stuart Davis among them. One thinks especially of Davis, who took up uniquely American subjects but rendered them in the universal language of abstraction, while insisting all along that he was a realist. For Walton, as for Davis and Henri, drawing is the subject. While working, Walton can think about the game while using it to think about the medium of drawing, to test and expand its expressive and formal possibilities.

No doubt alerted by the whims of the game itself, Walton was early on attracted to the idea of the laws of chance and their profound role in life, manifest in the work of John Cage. He was further drawn to the conceptual approach of Sol LeWitt and especially to the systems built and developed by LeWitt to structure his work. To capture and record

the course of a ball game, Walton has developed his own methodology of systems, keys that guide his manual responses to the action on the field. These systems are the result of careful thought and study and are laid out on the drawing itself; once we get the hang of it, we can follow the game with ease and clarity. His notations will remind the diehard fan of the art of keeping score, a method seemingly as old as the game itself, like some ancient hieroglyphic alphabet, based on accepted symbols and punctuated by idiosyncratic signs to highlight memorable plays. For the fan and player, the scorecard is like a diary of a deeply personal world that can be forever consulted and relived, both its highs and its lows, its moments of joy as well as its moments of despair.

In the baseball drawings, Walton orders the space of the sheet according to the shape of the diamond and field, their graceful symmetries in place, the players in their positions. The size and orientation can sometimes remind us of bubblegum baseball cards, familiar to every kid caught up in a youthful passion for the game. Within this space, simultaneously the space of the drawing and of the field, Walton responds to the unfolding game, following the system outlined by his keys. A sheet can be an inning, or it can represent a player; curved lines can stand for base hits; a fly ball out is a straight line, then bent on an angle; a double is a wide stripe running top to bottom; a home run is a thick line across the top of the space; areas of wash usually represent a strikeout, either swinging or looking, a telling difference for the ballplayer and fan alike.

Walton's is a performative art, his hand responding to the game like a seismograph, recording shifts and swings of fortune through subtle nuances of touch, feel, pressure of his brush and his hand. He reacts to the game as Henri Matisse responded to the motif in nature, as Jackson Pollock did to inner, psychic forces. The range of effects echoes the game and its events. Some innings are neat and clean, indicating a good pitcher doing his job well, while others are fuller, even messy, telling us that the game—or life—got complicated, as it does, always filled with the new and unexpected. Curving lines can dominate, intersecting and crisscrossing as in an action painting, or right angles can carry a space, suggesting a Mondrian subjected to chance and whim, a ball taking a bad hop. Thus does Walton depict the World Series or intense rivalries such as the Yankees-Mets subway series. As with a Homeric epic, to which baseball has often been compared, we can trace the journeys of these young heroes as they leave home, setting off to face unknown dangers as they travel afar, returning finally to home, once again safe.

While the intersecting lines and areas of wash in Walton's drawings represent the specifics of a game, they can also suggest the very ambience of the park, its colors and

structures. At one juncture of lines we are reminded of the folklore of the game, as in Yogi Berra's famous dictum: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Walton's drawings remind us of the family of great draftsmen from which he has descended. Among them are surely Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Paul Klee, and even Willem de Kooning of the 1940s. But Walton's model of structural clarity, of the very architecture that he values so highly, has been, above all, the work of Richard Diebenkorn, a fellow Californian he has long admired. From these models Walton has wrested a personal and unique art that works on multiple, ever-changing levels, through the process David Smith termed the "visionary reconstruction of art history." In this way, the best of our art has been fostered, enriched, and sustained, and so Lee Walton will continue to renew the medium of drawing.

-William C. Agee  
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