

## Jos Näpflin *NACHTEN*

CounterSpace, Zürich 29 October – 28 January

Given Robert Walser's dramatic and tragic life, it is a challenge to separate the writing from the man, all the more so as the Swiss writer's works drew on experience and were frequently semiautobiographical. Jos Näpflin's exhibition *NACHTEN* (*Nights*), based on research on Walser, adds further strands, such as geography and life expectancy, to this existing tangle. Walser wrote novels and a greater volume of short-form fiction, driven foremost by moods and ambiance rather than narrative. He observed feelings and objects 'as ordinary as they are remarkable', as he once described an apple painted by Paul Cézanne. He died on Christmas Day of 1956 during a walk from the asylum in Herisau, Switzerland, where he had spent the last 23 years of his life. Though admired by fellow authors including Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Elias Canetti and Hermann Hesse, his writing did not gain widespread fame until it was rediscovered in recent years, first in literary circles and latterly in an art context. So while reflecting on his countryman, Näpflin is working with a figure whose reputation has taken on its own dynamic of late.

*NACHTEN* presents the viewer first with a dividing wall placed in the middle of the

exhibition entrance, obscuring sightlines – or, Walser-like, giving us pause to contemplate what might be of interest, and otherwise overlooked, in the show structure. To the right a videowork and other installations occupy the larger space, while a smaller gallery to the left contains four more elements. Here *Der lange Schlaf* (*The Long Sleep*, all works but one 2016) clarifies how Näpflin employs Walser – author and individual – as his raw material. On the wall is a print of the story *Der Träumer* (*The Dreamer*) of 1914, which describes a man lying on a mountain meadow in summer, carelessly allowing day to pass and night to fall. In pen, Näpflin adjusts the heading to 'Der lange Schlaf', as well as other details, so summer turns to winter, the live idler to a peaceful corpse. A documentary photograph of Walser as found in the snow is stuck to the page, and in an accompanying audio piece an actor reads the revised version, his spoken authority and the image making the new scenario seem more credible than the original.

J.M. Coetzee, in secondary literature on Walser, has written disparagingly about the use of that photograph, which shows dark footsteps

in the snow and his supine body, hat at a remove. It is an unspectacular yet keening memorial for Walser, who also wrote of how 'times do come when one knows that one is no more and no less than waves and snowflakes'. Näpflin uses and reuses the image delicately. In *The Last Walk* (*Footprints*) (2015), the shapes of those last steps Walser made are cut out of polished steel and hung on the wall, where they make a path into illusionistic distance while reflecting the space they are in. *Nach dem Frost* (*After the Frost*) is an installation of three pillars that clone the gallery's central structural pillar; one of them has toppled into a wall. Amid the forest the columns evoke, a further cut-off pillar serves as a plinth for jagged pools of liquid, like meltwater; monuments can be fragile, all that is solid melts. Informed by the currently fashionable conflation of Walser and his work, Näpflin leaves his history and fiction entangled. The artist does not try to create clarity by virtue of facts, but instead forms a composite overview to which hindsight also contributes. The optimistic fatalism of this exhibition – the message that we, too, will disappear – is an apposite homage to the author. *Aoife Rosenmeyer*



*The Last Walk (Footprints)*, 2015, polished steel sheets, 17 parts, approx 95 × 174 cm.  
Photo: Tashi Brauen. Courtesy CounterSpace, Zürich