

CFP:

Westkunst, 1981 : une historiographie de la modernité mise en exposition

Westkunst, 1981: a Historiography of Modernism Exhibited

Westkunst 1981 : eine Historiografie der Moderne im Ausstellungsformat

March 10–11, 2022, German Center for Art History Paris

The German Center for Art History Paris invites interested scholars to participate in a workshop based on the exhibition *Westkunst* on March 10–11, 2022.

In 1981 a large exhibition opened in the trade fair center in Cologne under the title *Westkunst—Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939* (Western Art: Contemporary Art Since 1939). Organized by art critic Laszlo Glozer and curator Kasper König, the show was composed of twelve historical sections and a contemporary one entitled *Heute* (Today). Along with the 700–800 artworks and archival material, the exhibits included reproductions of exhibition presentations and artist studios, and nine films specially created for the event. Overall, the Western-centric survey highlighted the avant-garde and politically charged themes of “freedom” and “individual expression.” From the organizers’ perspective, the collection of historical works represented a “second wave of modernism” that they considered to have been active through World War II and continued until 1968. According to the exhibition’s thesis, the displayed works derived a lasting contemporaneity from modernism’s “unrealized” potential. In a visual and spatial representation appropriate to this ambitious historiographic concept, the architect Oswald Ungers attempted to demonstrate that modernism had contemporary characteristics. His concept was based on the choreographic possibilities offered by the exhibition format to emphasize – in addition to diachronic references – the synchronicity of the various artistic positions and trends of the period in question. The public was thus invited to experience the idea advanced by the curators, a discourse that was reinforced by the emphasis placed on the material presence of the iconic works.

Caught in the Cold War perspective, the press coverage at the time failed to question how the exhibition naturalized modernism as an ongoing project of the West. However, some critics, among them Thomas Strauss, pointed out an effect that today we would call “othering”: the title “Westkunst” evoked the concept of “Ostkunst” (Eastern art) by analogy. In general, in the exhibition’s reception the press tended to emphasize the blatant exclusions, many of which were market-driven. The overview offered by the exhibition took neither works by women artists nor committed positions of the 1970s adequately into account, which led to public protests, including those of Klaus Staeck and Ulrike Rosenbach.

In the four decades that have passed since the *Westkunst* exhibition, art-historical research has often advocated a global approach to dispel the idea of the supremacy of Western art. At first, the focus was placed on alternative or marginal currents of modernism. Subsequently, relational and transcultural processes of varying geographic scales were uncovered, thereby undermining assumptions of self-contained art phenomena.

Our workshop proposes to reexamine the *Westkunst* exhibition in taking this shift in perspective into account. We invite interested scholars to reconsider the Cologne show with a view to its implicit universalism, the analogy it gave rise to, and the exclusions it made. From there, we would like to understand the extent to which way this large exhibition contributed to perpetuate or transform the effective narrative that a certain art history has circulated. In this context, the key element is that *Westkunst* focused on presenting a “second wave” of Western modernism as “contemporary art.”

Addressing this historiographic process in the exhibition format should facilitate an investigation of the effects of *Westkunst*. To what extent do this exhibition's narratives implicitly persist in contemporary approaches to the periodization and historicization of 20th-century art? Did the exhibition's reception already reveal the fields of conflict that arise today by the presentation of an art history of modernism in a global context?

A collective reexamination of *Westkunst* should thus serve to historicize ideas of Western artistic hegemony by focusing on a concrete event and thereby shedding light on the premises of art historiography today. The following topics will be central:

- the historical situatedness of the dialog with modernism in the context of the Cold War, especially with regard to the construction of a cultural identity of (Western) Europe;
- the art-historical narratives asserted in the conception, production, and reception of the exhibition, including their historical-theoretical premises and effects;
- the construction of the art-historical account through the spatial and temporal design of the exhibition (selection of works, manner and order of display, and choreography);
- national and transnational references to other exhibitions (e.g., documenta 7, 1982; the 1980 and 1982 editions of the Biennale de Paris; and the 1996–1997 exhibition *Face à l'Histoire 1933–1996: Engagement, témoignage, vision*, presented at the Centre Pompidou in Paris);
- the development of critical fronts and relevant discussion parameters for the curation of modernism, today in transition.

Interested scholars are requested to submit an abstract (max. 400 words) of a possible contribution and a short biography (max. 200 words) in German, French, or English to [marnoux@dfk-paris.org](mailto:marnoux@dfk-paris.org) and [Maria.Bremer@ruhr-uni-bochum.de](mailto:Maria.Bremer@ruhr-uni-bochum.de) by November 30, 2021. Travel and accommodation costs for speakers may be covered by the DFK Paris under certain conditions.

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