

The Modern Gesamtkunstwerk

College Art Association, Los Angeles, CA

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The Gesamtkunstwerk – the “total artwork” conceived by the composer Richard Wagner in the mid-nineteenth century – presents a challenge to traditional conceptions of modernist art history. A synthetic, multimedia entity, the Gesamtkunstwerk clashes with the autonomy and medium specificity that critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried identified with twentieth-century modernism. At the same time, this art form’s drive toward aesthetic totality fits uncomfortably with the anti-art stance and politically revolutionary ideals imputed to the “historical avant-garde.” Indeed, like Wagner himself, the Gesamtkunstwerk long suffered from its association with totalitarian politics. What, then, should we make of artists’ avid engagement with forms of the total artwork during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Examples of this experimentation include domestic and theatrical decorative programs of the French Nabis and Dutch artists affiliated with de Stijl; performative events from the collaborative productions of Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, to interactive Dada evenings in multiple world capitals, to theatrical revelry on and off stage at the Bauhaus; and exhibition installations at the Sturm Gallery in Berlin or by Surrealist artists in New York and Paris.

This panel aims to re-examine the Gesamtkunstwerk as a theoretical and practical model for artists from the time of Wagner to the end of the modernist period. We seek to build upon recent scholarship that refines our understanding of Wagner’s original conception, as well as later permutations of the Gesamtkunstwerk, with papers that explore this paradigm’s aesthetic and political dimensions. Contributions may conceive of the Gesamtkunstwerk broadly, to include not only decorative programs, art installations, and theatre pieces, but also architectural ensembles, collaborative studio practices, communal artistic retreats, and political rallies or spectacles. How did modern artists envision the Gesamtkunstwerk, and how did they bring their concepts to fruition? What are the stakes for current scholars of considering such a variety of practices through the lens of this theoretical model? Does the Gesamtkunstwerk demand new definitions of modernism – and postmodernism? Proposals that consider postmodern instances of the Gesamtkunstwerk that shed light on modern precedents also will be considered.

To be considered, please submit a preliminary abstract of 1-2 double-spaced pages to anger@grinnell.edu and bellow@american.edu. For more on the CAA application process, see

<http://conference.collegeart.org/2012/> or contact the panel conveners.

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Reference:

CFP: The Modern Gesamtkunstwerk. In: ArtHist.net, Apr 5, 2011 (accessed Jan 21, 2026),
<<https://arthist.net/archive/1166>>.