

## Westkunst, 1981: A Historiography of Modernism Exhibited (Paris, 10–11 Mar 22)

Paris, German Center for Art History / Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte  
(DFK Paris), Mar 10–11, 2022

Sira Luthardt, Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art/Deutsches Forum für  
Kunstgeschichte

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.

#### Programme of the Workshop

Thursday, 10/03/2022

13:30 Reception

14:00 – 14:45

Introduction by the organisers

14:45 – 15:45

Britta Hochkirchen

The Present on Display. Temporal Arrangements of Comparing in the “Westkunst” Exhibition

15:45 – 16:45

Kristian Handberg

Exhibiting Cobra at “Westkunst” and Across the Iron Curtain. A Case of Danish Transnational Modernism Exhibited in Cold War Europe 1960-1989

16:45 – 17:00 Break

17:00 – 18:00

Stefan Vervoort

Time-Image Models: Thomas Schütte’s “Westkunst Modelle” (1981)

18:00 – 18:15 Break

18:15 – 19:30

Jean-Marc Poinot and Henry Meyric Hughes, in discussion with Andrea Euringer Bátorová

Book presentation: Tomáš Štrauss, *Beyond the Great Divide: Essays on European Avant-gardes from East to West* (Paris, AICA Press, 2021)

19:30 – 21:00 Dinner (for participants)

Friday, 11/03/2022

9:00 Reception

9:30 – 10:00

Introduction by the organisers

10:00 – 11:00

Vera Wolff

Westkunst from Japan. Global Art History in the Cold War

11:00 – 12:00

Elitza Dulguerova

Concerning the International in Art, and its History in Particular. The Example of the Paris Biennale

12:00 – 12:45 Snack

12:45 – 13:45

Friederike Sigler

Passive-Explosive: Artistic and Curatorial Protest Against the “Westkunst” Exhibition

13:45 – 14:30

Final Discussions and Conclusion

--

Registration requested by mail to [marnoux@dfk-paris.org](mailto:marnoux@dfk-paris.org) and [maria.bremer@ruhr-uni-bochum.de](mailto:maria.bremer@ruhr-uni-bochum.de).  
Presentation of a valid “Vaccination Pass” with QR code requested at the entrance.

Reference:

CONF: Westkunst, 1981: A Historiography of Modernism Exhibited (Paris, 10-11 Mar 22). In: Arthist.net, Feb 16, 2022 (accessed Oct 8, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/35928>>.