

Extrait de l'introduction

Unlearning *Westkunst*, 1981

Mathilde Arnoux and Maria Bremer

'Unlearning is not forgetting, it is not deletion, cancellation nor burning off. It is writing bolder and writing anew. It is commenting and questioning. It is giving new footnotes to old and other narratives. It is the wiping off of the dust, clearing of the grass, and cracking off the plaster that lies above the erased. Unlearning is flipping the coin and awakening the ghosts. Unlearning is looking in the mirror and seeing the world, rather than a concept of universalism that indeed purports a hegemony of knowledge.'<sup>1</sup>

A detour sparked our interest in the *Westkunst* exhibition (Cologne, 1981): we discovered Tomáš Štrauss's critique of the exhibition in his book *Beyond the Great Divide*.<sup>2</sup> There, Štrauss, a Czechoslovak-born critic who settled in West Germany, highlighted the inadequate definition of 'Western art' proposed by the exhibition organisers and how this affected the understanding of Eastern European art. Reading Štrauss's text gave us the strange impression of dealing with a historical account rooted in a Europe still divided by the Iron Curtain, but which remained valid for much of the art history that we have inherited.

[...] More recently, media coverage of Russia's disgraceful invasion of Ukraine has revealed the persistence of a general tendency to speak about 'Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans without listening to local voices or trying to understand the region's complexity',<sup>3</sup> a phenomenon which political theorists such as Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz have termed 'westplaining'.<sup>4</sup> The survival and indeed strengthening of 'Westernising' views within and beyond the realm of art history compelled us to engage in a close reading of *Westkunst* as an instance of their historical emergence.

Initiated by Cologne politician Kurt Hackenberg and Museum Ludwig director Karl Ruhrberg, *Westkunst* was organised by art impresario Kasper König in collaboration with art critic Laszlo Glozer, and held at the Rheinhallen in the city's Trade-Fair centre. [...] *Westkunst* brought together some 800 works, primarily paintings, drawings, and sculptures from the global North-West; women artists and socially engaged art from the 1970s were largely excluded. According to the two organisers, the exhibition represented a second phase of modernism (German: *die Moderne*, here translated in the artistic context as 'modernism' with a small 'm'), which started with the outbreak of World War II and the accompanying exile and disparagement of certain artists, and, in their rather heterodox view,

<sup>1</sup> Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *In a While or Two We Will Find the Tone: Essays and Proposals, Curatorial Concepts, and Critiques*, Berlin, Archive Books, 2020, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> See Tomáš Štrauss, 'Ostkunst – But with a Question Mark: A Developmental Sketch of a Different yet Similar Art', in Id., *Beyond the Great Divide: Essays on European Avant-Gardes from East to West*, Dijon, Les Presses du reel / Paris, AICA Press, 2020, p. 165–179. The essay originally appeared in German: "'Ostkunst" – nur mit Fragezeichen: Entwicklungsskizze einer anderen und trotzdem gleichen Kunst', *Das Kunstwerk*, 38/2, 1985, pp. 5–6 and 30–32; reprinted in Tomáš Štrauss, *Zwischen Ostkunst und Westkunst: Von der Avantgarde zur Postmoderne. Essays (1970–1995)*, Munich, Scaneg Verlag, 1995, pp. 121–137. A first version of his review of the *Westkunst* exhibition appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (15.08.1981) as 'Westkunst – Ostkunst? Die Verdrängung eines Zusammenhangs'. On the same topic, see also Tomáš Štrauss (ed.), *Westkunst–Ostkunst: Absonderung oder Integration? Materialien zu einer neuen Standortbestimmung*, Munich, Scaneg, 1991. See also Andrea Bátorová's essay in the present volume.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz, 'The American Pundits Who Can't Resist "Westplaining" Ukraine', *The New Republic*, 04.03.2022, online: <https://newrepublic.com/article/165603/carlson-russia-ukraine-imperialism-nato> [accessed: 06.12.2024].

<sup>4</sup> On 28 June 2024, a conference put the transfer of this term from political theory to the humanities up for discussion. See the announcement of the workshop "'Westplaining" in Art History', online: <https://arthist.net/archive/41282> [accessed: 19.06.2024].

lasted until 1968. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue (hereafter, following the author's own term, 'handbook'), Glozer contended that the works showcased derived their lasting contemporaneity from the 'unexploited' [*unverbraucht*] potential of modernism, which was itself anchored in the values of freedom and individual expression.<sup>5</sup> In dialogue with this historiographic ambition, which was never clearly endorsed by the organisers, architect Oswald Mathias Ungers's white-cube conversion of the Trade-Fair premises imposed developmental and synchronic perspectives on the art exhibited. It was structured into twelve historical units plus a contemporary one titled *heute* (today), centred on the art of the 1980s and curated by gallerist Rudolf Zwirner. In the main body of the show, the presentation of the artworks, most of which were loans from Peter and Irene Ludwig's collection, was interspersed with occasional vitrines holding historical documents, partial exhibition- or artist-studio-reconstructions behind glass walls, and nine didactic films specially conceived for the occasion.<sup>6</sup>

[...] *Westkunst* was the subject of impressive media coverage at the time – not least due to its budget of 7 million German marks and its prominent role in Cologne's city branding – and generated considerable public debate, but it has not, till now, been the object of a comprehensive scholarly reconsideration. [...]

Based on the study day 'Westkunst, 1981: A Historiography of Modernism Exhibited', organised by Thomas Kirchner, Mathilde Arnoux, and Maria Bremer at the German Center for Art History in Paris on March 10–11, 2022, this book refrains from engaging with the historical protagonists directly, while bringing together new research perspectives on *Westkunst*, thus adding to the existing body of first-hand accounts<sup>7</sup> and the few assessments of the exhibition in secondary literature.<sup>8</sup> The editors and authors of this volume have scrutinised *Westkunst*'s universalising claims by focusing on the artistic tendencies exhibited, from abstraction to the expressionisms and the so-called 'exit from the picture'; on exhibitionary discourses and practices of decontextualisation, comparison, and appropriation; on the alleged realisation of the values of progress, freedom, and autonomy; on the enacted conceptions of temporality and the architectural devices of narrativisation; on the exhibition's blind spots and exclusions and the critical reactions it elicited. This analytic output makes fresh use of the archival materials on *Westkunst*, which are neither centralised nor systematised, and range from press clippings preserved at the Kunst- und Museumsbibliothek (KMB) and the Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln, project files from the Kasper König holdings at the Zentralarchiv für deutsche und internationale Kunstmarktforschung (ZADIK), drawings, correspondence, and concept papers from the Ungers Archiv für Architekturwissenschaft (UAA), to the nine films conceived and realised to complement the exhibition, along with supplementary media coverage, kept in the archives of Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR). These readings and viewings, of which we republish significant excerpts,<sup>9</sup> have helped us discern the historical and geo-cultural positionality from which *Westkunst*'s assertions were made.

<sup>5</sup> Laszlo Glozer, 'Die unverbrauchte Moderne: Drei Jahrzehnte Gegenwartskunst', in *Westkunst: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, ed. by Laszlo Glozer, exh. cat., Cologne, DuMont, 1981, p. 13–329, here p. 13–24, available online: <https://archive.org/details/westkunstzeitgen0000unse> [accessed: 06.12.2024]; English translation by Gérard Goodrow, see the Documents section of the present volume, pp. ##-##.

<sup>6</sup> See Mathilde Arnoux's essay 'Fabricating the Universal: The *Westkunst* Documentaries' in the present volume.

<sup>7</sup> See especially the contributions in *Kunstforum International*, vol. 44/45: *Westkunst – Realismus – Mimesis*, 2–3/1981 (May–August): Marlis Grüterich, 'Gegenwart nur in der Vergangenheit? Ausschnitte aus Gedanken zur Westkunst vor und während einer Ausstellung gleichen Titels', pp. 144–151, online: [www.kunstforum.de/artikel/gegenwart-nur-in-der-vergangenheit](http://www.kunstforum.de/artikel/gegenwart-nur-in-der-vergangenheit); Georg Jappe, 'Zurück zur Begabung', pp. 19–23, online: [www.kunstforum.de/artikel/zurueck-zur-begabung](http://www.kunstforum.de/artikel/zurueck-zur-begabung); Annelie Pohlen, 'Groß einsteigen und dünn auslaufen. Von den Gefahren der "Westkunst" und der Eintracht der Kunst', pp. 128–143, online: [www.kunstforum.de/artikel/gros-einsteigen-und-dunn-auslaufen](http://www.kunstforum.de/artikel/gros-einsteigen-und-dunn-auslaufen). See also Thomas Kellein, 'Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939', *kritische berichte*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1981, pp. 61–65, online: <https://doi.org/10.11588/kb.1981.3.9746> [all accessed: 06.12.2024].

<sup>8</sup> See Waldvogel, *Aspekte des Kuratorischen am Beispiel der Praxis von Kasper König* (note 9), pp. 124–147; Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte: Eine Revision nach zehn Jahren*, Munich, Beck, 1995; Hans-Jörg Heusser, 'Ist Westkunst wirklich Weltkunst? Ein post-Greenbergsches Postskriptum', in Beat Wyss (ed.), *Bildfälle. Die Moderne im Zwielicht*, Zurich, Verlag für Architektur Artemis, 1990, pp. 157–162.

<sup>9</sup> See the Documents section in the present volume.

[...] If we examine *Westkunst* in the light of the Cold War division of Europe, and especially of the marks this left in Cologne, the exhibition is revealed as paradigmatic of the ways in which hegemonic concepts of 'Western art' and the accompanying processes of othering were fashioned in the art world. [...]

We [...] called upon researchers who, having received most of their training in the 'West' or 'former West', nevertheless use different methods and individual specialisations; these include architectural history through the lens of artefact theory (Samuel Korn), constellational approaches to curatorial studies and *Bildwissenschaften* (Britta Hochkirchen), media and cultural history (Mathilde Arnoux), close readings of artworks through art theory from its historical context (Stefaan Vervoort), the history of critical curation and exhibition display (Friederike Sigler), the history of diplomacy through exhibitions (Kristian Handberg), and discourse history and the historiography of art history (Andrea Bátorová). Taken together, these approaches allow one to grasp the extent to which the historiography of modernism and its counterarguments – an entangled history of modernism, as it were – were enacted on this occasion through the works exhibited, architectural spaces, visitor circulation, displays, handbook, films, critical reception, as well as through the exclusions operated, and the interrelations of all of these elements.

It seems essential to consider how this fabrication of Western art occurred, by reintegrating what it has repressed, rendered invisible, and excluded; these in turn constitute an essential part of its character. Focusing not only on what the exhibition declared but, more importantly, on what it enacted, best allows us to consider its omissions. Our goal was not merely to fulfil a superficial demand for diversity – we make no claim to exclusivity (other perspectives could further enrich the discourse) – but rather to reintroduce ambiguity, explore uncharted possibilities, evoke a sense of complexity, restore fragmented meanings, and reopen inquiries where the exhibition seems to categorise everything rigidly in order to suggest a singular narrative of Western art. [...] The exclusion of female artists, of artistic practices other than drawing, painting, and sculpture, of art produced outside urban centres, and of art from the other side of the Iron Curtain and Colour Line, can be seen as essential to the formation of the concept of modernity and its connection to a certain conception of art that was central to the exhibition.

Just as art is never independent of its conditions of production, geographical locations are never 'free of myth and fantasy',<sup>10</sup> never free of the histories that unfold within them. It is historiographical perspectives that delineate and isolate these spaces – spaces that are not critically assessed remain unthought. By highlight the extent to which Western art's representation is shaped by these overlooked elements, we hope to destabilise the historical and geographical confines that have traditionally framed our inquiries, particularly when examining a specific case study. It is in this spirit that we should like our first publication dedicated solely to the *Westkunst* exhibition to be received. Throughout its pages, diverse viewpoints meet to shed light on this historical event and its fragmented documentation. Through critical analysis, past and present debates related to it are revisited; our aim is to ignite alternative approaches to the kind of exhibition that has historically perpetuated dominant narratives in art history – and thus 'unlearn' these narratives.

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<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The West and the Rest. Discourse and Power' (1992), in Id. and Bram Gieben (eds.), *Formations of Modernity. Understanding Modern Societies: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, p. 185.