

WALL TEXTS

BACK TO THE PRESENT NEW PERSPECTIVES, NEW WORKS – THE COLLECTION FROM 1945 TO TODAY

**New Presentation of the Collection of Contemporary Art
from 19 May 2020 in the Garden Halls**

The Present of the Museum

Contemporary art and art history, contemporaneity and museum actually exclude each other. Because a museum customarily collects and preserves from a certain temporal distance: artistic positions must first prove themselves to be relevant before they become part of the canon established by museums. Today the collecting, displaying and conveying of contemporary art occurs directly at this exciting interface between canon and contemporaneity. The museum is simultaneously the site where this transition can be observed. In other words: the museum transforms the present into art history.

‘Contemporary’ includes more than the art of the last five, ten or twenty years. The ‘old’ styles do not disappear when a ‘new’ style arises. K.O. Götz, a co-founder of German Informalism, was still producing informal art long after this aesthetic had been replaced by new avant-gardes and formal languages. Above all, ‘contemporary art’ is a highly imprecise, subjective term that has different meanings for different persons. In case of doubt, it begins there where the viewer comes into contact with it for the first time.

Today a contemporary collection must do justice to these multifaceted, mutually succeeding and overlapping presents; they must be related to each other and rendered comprehensible. Chronologies and developments replace each other; they often become imprecise or diminish in significance.

The open structure of the Städel Garden Halls provides for a less targeted perspective onto the art of our present era, which extends from the respective ‘today’ back to the immediate postwar era. The squares, buildings, and streets of the exhibition architecture open uncustomary lines of sight and give rise to juxtapositions whereby connections arise and come into focus while art from several decades is

Städelsches Kunstinstitut und Städtische Galerie

Dürerstraße 2
60596 Frankfurt am Main
Telefon +49(0)69-605098-268
Fax +49(0)69-605098-111
presse@staedelmuseum.de
www.staedelmuseum.de

PRESSEDOWNLOADS
newsroom.staedelmuseum.de

PRESS- AND
PUBLIC REATIONS
Pamela Rohde
Phone +49(0)69-605098-170
rohde@staedelmuseum.de

Franziska von Plocki
Phone +49(0)69-605098-268
plocki@staedelmuseum.de

Jannikhe Möller
Phone +49(0)69-605098-195
moeller@staedelmuseum.de

Susanne Hafner
Phone +49(0)69-605098-212
hafner@staedelmuseum.de

brought together. Strolling visitors can discover in their own ways recent and utterly up-to-date art history.

Geometric abstraction

Painting between Geometry and Colour Field

Geometrical forms, abstraction and the reduction of painterly means have been major characteristics of painting since the beginning of the twentieth century. The renunciation of the depiction of figural motifs and of the artist's personal handwriting focuses attention on perceiving colour and form. Upon closer inspection, atmospheric colour fields and monochrome squares turn out to be a dense concentration of countless gestures made by the brush. Representatives of geometrical abstraction and colour field painting influence each other reciprocally.

Beginning with Kasimir Malevich's famous 'Black Square' (1913/15), a clear formal vocabulary derived from mathematics is elaborated and expanded during subsequent decades. Interlaced squares begin to flicker and to draw the gaze into the pictorial space. The avant-gardes of the early twentieth century are still marked by a belief in the power of art to transform society which, however, is severely shaken by the experiences of the Second World War. Nonetheless, the tradition of the Bauhaus or of Russian Suprematism is not forgotten but instead challenges the new generation of artists to make a considered response. They have recourse to the geometrical art of the avant-garde, which they quote, elaborate or deconstruct. This gives rise to new formal languages which formulate right up to the present surprising variations of what is in no way an outdated pictorial form.

European Informel

Informalism as Revenant

After the destruction, horrors and suffering of the Second World War, art as the guardian of the true, the beautiful and the good must also redefine itself. The issue at hand is whether and how the figurative element, indeed the image of the human being, can find its way into painting. How can art liberate itself from tradition and simultaneously give a new meaning both to itself and to convention?

Arising in Western Europe and the USA is a new formal language which repudiates figurative painting and works with abstract, roughly applied splotches of paint. The deliberate renunciation of a depiction of the world means that the human being appears only as a painterly gesture and as a physical trace of the artist. This loss of figural form is described for the first time in 1951 by the French art critic Michel Tapié as 'art informel', formless art. Its overriding concern is to be intelligible as a 'world language' and to resist any form of ideological appropriation. The origins of Informalism are in the Paris of the 1950s, but this diverse and international

phenomenon could already be recognised as an impulse after the First World War – for example, in the early works of Fritz Winter or Jean Fautrier. In postmodernism, formlessness ultimately evolves beyond the borders of painting into an aesthetic category which we continue to encounter in the contemporary era – for example, with Gerhard Hoehme, Raymond Hains, Imi Knoebel or Wolfgang Tillmans.

Figure

Portraits: Beyond the Representable

The portrait is one of the oldest genres in art. It is influenced by the particular notion of humankind typical of the era in which it occurs; therefore it is subject to constant change. The goal has been to record the essence of a personality or an individual's self-concept. In a self-portrait, on the other hand, work and artist are inseparably connected with each other. Fantastical combinations of motifs and instances of role-play provide the self-portrait with limitless possibilities which are able to develop freely over the course of the twentieth century: beginning in Surrealism with Marcel Duchamp's female, artistic alter-ego *Rrose Sélavy* or Claude Cahun's androgynous stagings all the way to Cindy Sherman or Jürgen Klauke from the 1970s.

Masquerades, collage-like arrangements and playful bodily depictions create new identities: from an alter ego all the way to transformation into a completely different person. The portrait as a supposed mirror image is pursued to the point of absurdity. This investigation and exploration of self-image or artistic identity comes to expression in photography just as in painting or sculpture and object art. Mark Manders has been working since 1986 on his *Self-Portrait as a Building*, a depiction or rather an inquiry into his own artist-self, whereas Asta Gröting in her work *wir, wir, wir, du, du, ich* focuses on the relationship between inner and outer. There arise abstract structures which have to do with moods and thoughts and offer viewers space for their own experiences and projections.

Human Images – On This and That Side of Abstraction

Fierce and applied with thick paint, fragmented or distorted to the point of unrecognisability – the depiction of the human being in art after the Second World War reveals one thing above all: that humankind has lost its intactness, its lack of wounds. The belief in the capability of creating a better world has been shaken to its very foundations. The creative output of the postwar era is characterised by abstract approaches to painting, by an informalism fully detached from the figure. But the portrait does not disappear. Artists repeatedly direct an intensive focus towards the human image in an era marked by the overturning of all values, by trauma and fears regarding the future.

The works oscillate between abstraction and figuration, brutality and empathy, irony and earnestness. Thick bulges of paint give rise to new forms which immediately dissolve once again. Such diverse artistic positions as Art Brut, the group CoBrA or artists such as Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti, all of whom depict deformed bodies, in fact share commonalities in their search for new possibilities of expression. An exploration which continues right into our present era. The recording of an emotion or of an expression is now considered to be more important than the representation of a concrete person. In the context of war and destruction, painting continues to be possible only as an act of barbarism, the pictorial figure only as the abstract conveyor of pain.

The Return of History – Painting in the 1960s

In Germany ever since the 1960s broken bodies, upside-down pictures and a brutal, destructive aesthetic have marked the pathway out of abstraction and into a new figuration. The formal point of departure for these pictures remains the figure and the human image. Artists thereby articulate the demand for a new approach to the immediate present. The coming to terms with the National Socialist past and the division of Germany come to expression in painting. Numerous artists in West Germany refuse to flee into the abstraction of Informalism; many artists in the GDR distance themselves from the figurative painting of Socialist Realism. Pain, guilt and suppression give rise to a rugged, coarse manner of painting in shades of crimson and umber. In search of new paths in the visual arts, Georg Baselitz and Eugen Schönebeck issue in 1961 the *1. Pandämonische Manifest*, in which they emphasise the need for a painterly transformation which also includes a return to figurative painting. They seek through their art to set up a counterweight to prudery and the repression of feelings. These artists thereby provoke anger and create a scandal in both parts of Germany.

Expansion of the panel painting into space

The Extension of the Panel Painting

Toilet brushes, fabric, plastic sheeting or building supplies: contemporary painting incorporates much that is foreign to art. Entirely without the use of oil and canvas, objects of everyday life become material that is deemed to be worthy of art. Artists transfer reality directly into their works instead of depicting it through painting. This eliminates the separation between reality and painting which was still clearly defined at the beginning of the twentieth century in the shape of a framed, flat canvas. This deliberate cancelation of borders stands in the direct tradition of modernism: in 1917, Marcel Duchamp displayed an ordinary urinal as a work of art, thereby unleashing a scandal. In the collages of Cubism or as so-called readymades in the Dada movement, simple everyday objects acquired the status of art. Today as a matter of

course, pieces of furniture are combined with canvas in a productive manner. The borders between genres are increasingly dissolved. Painting opens into the surrounding space and overcomes the traditional form of the panel painting. This radical intertwining of everyday life and painting facilitates a new concept of the picture which overrides the notion of the framed panel painting as a window onto the world.

Material Becomes Picture – Zero and Nouveau Réalisme

Political and military conflicts as well as the economic upsurge of the western world characterise the 1960s. The artists of this era include these social transformations in their works. At the start of the decade, a challenge is issued to the painting on canvas which once exclusively subscribed to two-dimensionality. Picture carriers are slit, ignited or perforated. There arises a complex dialogue of light and space which expands painting into the third dimension. Artist collectives cohere into a loose network transcending national borders. The Nouveaux Réalistes appearing in France make reference to everyday life and to the reality of an industrial society oriented towards consumption. They transfer waste materials and everyday objects into art, thereby establishing a connection to social reality. Representatives of the group of Düsseldorf artists known as ZERO, on the other hand, pursue coloured clarity and material concreteness in their art. Their dynamic light projections cause painting, object, light and space to blend with each other.

Painting in Space – Minimal Art and its Successors

In the works of Minimal Art, industrially produced substances such as aluminium, steel, glass, plastic or concrete replace the materials of traditional artistic genres. During the mid-1960s, artists in New York strive for structural clarity. Their objects are reduced to utter simplicity and for the most part consist of primary geometrical structures such as the cuboid or the rectangle. The focus is on excluding all personal and incidental elements from the works of art. Their formal language is explicitly opposed to the vividly expressive, painterly gesture in Abstract Expressionism. The objects are not presented upon a pedestal but stand freely in the exhibition space. Walking around the object, the viewer is supposed to experience its pure form. The production is detached from the artist, who provides only the design – an anticipation of the Conceptual Art of the following decade. The impact of the work of art in its contiguous space and the experiencing of it from various perspectives and contexts become the point of departure for artistic contemplation.

Painting and photography

Same, Same, but Different – Serialism and Repetition

During the 1960s, serial structures, repetitions and sequences become an artistic method in various media: from photography past painting all the way to the object. The painterly gesture disappears. For a long time, it had epitomised the creative power of the artist. Repetition instead brings to mind a mechanical production process, so that the picture seems to be almost objective and not to be guided by the painter's subjectivity. Commodities and (advertising) icons are repeatedly reproduced as pictorial motifs in the painting, graphic design and collages of Pop Art. Works such as the ten black panels by Peter Roehr consist of the repetition of many individual, identical forms. They are reminiscent of the industrially produced, formal structures of American Minimal Art; they convey a keen sense of the materiality of the picture. In the medium of photography, temporal successions can be indicated by means of the series – with an affinity to film sequences. But multiple exposures of an object also serve to investigate it more closely. The German economic miracle of the 1950s and 1960s and the now widespread mass production have an impact on art just as does the rendering anonymous of the artistic signature.

German Pop – Between Consumption and Rebellion

Situated between economic miracle and student revolt, a young generation of artists protests during the 1960s against artistic and social conventions. Their art is colourful, striking and critical of society. The pictorial inventory is reminiscent of motifs from comics or the omnipresent popular and commercial culture. In painting and collages, this material from everyday life is recombined and sometimes injected ironically into alternate contexts. Artists take photographs from family albums or newspapers, then reproduce them in large, painted raster-points or transfer onto canvas photographs which are distorted in the act of painting. In this way, the concept of the creative, artistic genius laying claim to individuality and originality is put to question in a both playful and provocative manner. Through their use of motifs from the world of objects, these artists distance themselves from the abstract painting of the immediate postwar era. The young Federal Republic of Germany is more critically examined during the 1960s than is the case with Pop Art in Great Britain or the USA: German art takes up a clear position regarding consumption and the media. The bourgeois idyll becomes a target, frequently aimed at with witticisms and irony, for an entire generation of artists who confront an obviously widespread repression of recent German history with a new pictorial language close to everyday life.

Varieties of German Pop – The Beauty of the Unfathomable

The art of the 1960s and early 1970s transfers banal, everyday objects into painting: from plastic toy to typewriter. Artists form loose associations or come together for exhibitions without, however, adhering to a common concept. The works of German Pop accordingly evince a similar diversity and derive their motifs from the colourful advertising aesthetic of the 1960s.

The object itself becomes the theme of painting. Items from everyday life are staged so as to fill the entire canvas; they acquire human characteristics and resemble portraits. Sometimes strangely foreign, sometimes seemingly familiar, the objects convey an unsettling aspect, such as when Bettina von Arnim or Lambert Maria Wintersberger degrade humans into robot-like beings. With a clinical chilliness, both person and object are dissected; they ultimately come to blend into each other. The artists turn a critical eye to our perception defined by consumption and advertisements. They take up the visual language of the media and thereby play with our attitudes of expectation when viewing art.

The 1980s – Painting after the End of Painting

Large-format pictures with expressively applied, richly contrasting colours fill studios and exhibition spaces. Almost parallel to each other, artists in the Rhineland, Hamburg and West Berlin develop a new and complex pictorial language during an era marked by postmodernism, Punk and club culture. Overflowing with irony, these works take up a provocative stance through a representational mode which, though depicting objects, is at the same time deliberately held open: oscillating between figure and a daunting mass of colour, between concept and a deliberately utilised dilettantism (Bad Painting). Suddenly everything seems worthy of being included in a picture, and the artistic realisation is accordingly free. These young painters appear to make reference to representatives of postwar painting such as Georg Baselitz or Markus Lüpertz even while simultaneously distancing themselves from them. The younger generation (all born around 1950) views the present primarily with scepticism and irony. After the phases of a Concept Art reduced to pure ideas or a Minimal Art exploring simple, clear forms, the younger artists together make an essential contribution to the revival of painting. They seek their own, provocative response to the aforementioned postwar avant-gardes and to their own historical era.

Urban Spaces – Views of Streets and Buildings

Perspectives into deep street canyons tilt into threatening scenes, close-ups of passersby convey insights into private moments, crowds become a vibrating unit or move along the margins of chaos: scarcely any other motif combines as many opposites as does the city.

In modern painting and photography, the settings for urban daily life, with their streams of people and traffic, come to convey location, time and atmosphere.

So-called street photography acquires a constantly increasing status from the 1960s onward. Shorter exposure times and smaller cameras offer new possibilities to photographers. Metropolises such as New York or Mexico City can accordingly be shown in innovative perspectives.

In Germany as well, the city in all its facets becomes a theme for a wide variety of media. The destruction of the Second World War and the political upheavals of the following years continue to leave their mark: ruins, gaps between buildings, bunkers, new constructions and the dividing Wall. A depiction of the city also always includes a response to the past as part of our cultural memory. And above all, the pictures of external space can likewise be interpreted as a mirror of people's inner state. Viewers are simultaneously participants in everyday scenarios. They are onlookers who observe from a condition of anonymity and can become lost in the streets.

Rituals and the Unconscious in Art

Rituals structure our communal life throughout all areas of society and constitute an essential element of each and every community. These recurrent, not always consciously performed actions, which are charged with symbolic, religious or emotional significance, follow specified rules and regulatory systems. Ever since the 1960s, ritualised procedures have been used as aesthetic strategies in the visual and especially in the performative arts. Their function is to cast light on both: the specific actions and the meanings thereby conveyed. Cultic processes acquire an aesthetic dimension through these reenactments, i.e. through the performative transfer of traditional rituals into art. Moral borders are tested and taboos are deliberately broken: for example, with regard to the (naked) male or female body and its sexuality, religious or shamanistic customs, capitalistic practices or the individual's self-experience. Rituals are subject to constant transformation. They come to be forgotten, revive themselves or return in altered form. Thus, they are always a mirror of the present era and its social conventions.

New Images – Photography in Resemblance to Painting

In the late 1980s and even more in the 1990s, photography establishes itself in a previously inconceivable manner as an independent artistic medium. 150 years after its invention, photography develops its aesthetic potential in a rapid process. This supersedes the often asserted opposition between the putative documentary character of photography and a notion of painting as the product of an act of free artistic creation. Linking up with modernist tendencies from the prewar era, photography now liberates itself once and for all from the function, long ascribed to it,

of depicting reality and truth. There arises a new concept of the work of art which includes all possibilities and forms of expression inherent to the medium.

Digital images are subsequently manipulated and generate new realities. Spaces are constructed expressly for the photographic image. Deliberately chosen sections influence our notions of the actual pictorial object. This development was fostered not least of all by the first professorship for artistic photography, established in 1976 at the Düsseldorf Art Academy and held until 1996 by Bernd Becher in close collaboration with his wife Hilla Becher. The viewer is ultimately called upon to 'unmask' the picture or to investigate a new, perhaps not entirely true reality.