

“Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939” (1981)

“Von hier aus. Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf” (1984)

Kasper König

October 25th 2010, 19 h

MACBA Auditorium

From an interview with Kasper König (KK) by Noemi Smolik (NS)

NS: Your first big show after your return to Germany was ‘Westkunst’. What was the exhibition's intention, and why that title, which some thought presumptuous?

KK: The title was a pun on the word Weltkunst [World art], and was meant as a conscious distortion of the kind of imperial ideology that we now consider old-fashioned. In addition, insofar as it evoked what then had been the reality of Europe since 1939 --the division into West and East-- it had a contemporary, political meaning as well as a historical one. So the focus suggested by the title wasn't some kind of ‘regionalism’. The focus of ‘Westkunst’ was artistic innovation; the artwork was at the center. (...)

NS: Your next exhibition, ‘von hier aus’, focused on art of the '80s. What criteria informed your selection?

KK: ‘Von hier aus’ had its ironic side. I had signed a contract to produce an exhibition of West German art, and had to do it quite fast. But the way the problem was posed seemed dubious to me: I wanted to avoid a nationalist viewpoint completely. I had a lot of space --an industrial building of over 100,000 square feet. So I had the idea of an imaginary city. The participating artists would imagine the housing they wanted in this city, which would then be realized in the exhibition. Hermann Czech was the architect. (...) From any given stylistic tendency or particular generation, I chose just two or three artists. I wanted to present a variety rather than a value judgment. (...)

NS: In ‘von hier aus’ you were concerned with neither a direct social context (...) nor with a historical overview. You were looking at ‘autonomous’ art. What does that mean to you?

KK: That as a curator, an intermediary, one does justice to individual artists and their works. And I mean that not symbolically but materially, and in terms of design: that there is a relationship between outlay and result, that the work's reality is indivisible from the idea behind it, that its intellectual and emotional dimension is duplicated in its realization.”

Noemi Smolik, “The show man - Interview with artist Kasper Koenig”, *Artforum International*, November 1994.

Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939

Messehallen, Köln

28 May – 16 August, 1981

Curator: Kasper König

Artists' list, by exhibition space number (see map on top of next page):

World War and Modernism 1939-1945

1 Panorama 1939: Picasso, Kokoschka, Chagall, Rouault, Dalí, etc.

2 Late works in Exile: Klee, Kandinsky, Schwitters, Beckmann; Emigration in Grasse

3 Location New York: Mondrian, Duchamp, Ernst, Matta, Gorky, Cornell, etc.

4 *Relaxation Room*. Breaks in continuity: Picabia, De Chirico, etc.; competition "Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius" [The temptation of Saint Anthony]

Abstraction as world language 1944-1959

5 New art in Europe. Paris 1944-1951: Fautrier, Wols, Dubuffet; COBRA; German painting after the war

6 American Painting: Pollock, Still, Newman

7 Painting of the early 1950s – onset and academia. Monument for the unknown political prisoner

8 Triumph and scepticism – development of abstract painting: de Kooning, Kline, Burri, Vedova, Jorn, etc.; Bacon's "Van Gogh" paintings

Between progress and denial 1956-1972

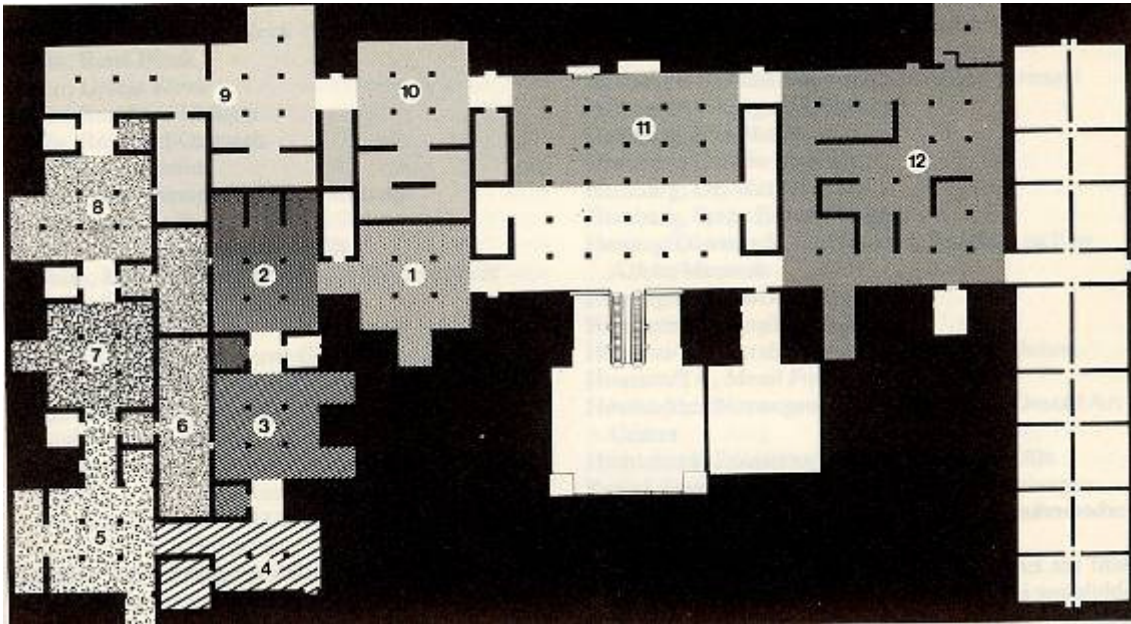
9 *Relaxation Room*. Abandoning of painting: Rauschenberg; "This is Tomorrow"; Yves Klein, "Nouveau Réalisme"; Happening and Fluxus; Zero

10 Image and object – the early 1960s: Oldenburg, Lichtenstein, Warhol; Stella, Judd

11 Entrance hall. Segal, Thek, Keinholz, Fahlstroem, LeWitt, Flavin, de Maria

12 The 1960s: Beuys, Nauman, Serra, Broodthaers, Merz, Kounellis, Polke, etc.

Today – 37 artists of the younger generation



Westkunst exhibition map, in: Glozer, Laszlo: *Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, DuMont: Cologne 1981, pp. 330-331.

A few statements on “Westkunst”

1.

"In 1981 *Westkunst*, presented in Cologne and curated by Kaspar König, served to underline, from the wide range of [artistic] proposals produced throughout the Western map, the new German artistic identity, which had been erased after the Second World War and recovered later with the new expressionisms. Though covering a wide chronological period --from 1939 to 1981-- and featuring an international crowd of artists who would reach critical acclaim in the eighties --Borofsky, Chia, Cucchi, Daniels, Paladino, Salle, Schnabel, West, among many others-- the show acted as a springboard for a generation of German artists that were unknown outside national borders until then, and that away from foreign influences were able to connect their art to their contrasting local roots."¹

Anna María Guasch, “El arte de los ochenta y las exposiciones”, *D'Art*, no 22, 1996, pp. 143-162 (p. 147).

2.

“The exhibition ‘Westkunst’ is a thesis exhibition. It states (...) that 20th century art is alive in a certain way: In its entirety it is contemporary art for us. Contemporary art but not in the sense of historical testimony. This historical role is discarded, it has become chronicle or legend, sometimes it even remains hidden or forgotten.

Something else is decisive for us: How can we make use of an art that has already become historical at the time of its production.

(...)

We have reached the statement of the exhibition ‘Westkunst’: the thesis of the current effectiveness, of the unexhausted energy of the works.”

Laszlo Glozer, in *Westkunst. Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1981, pp. 13 & 15.ⁱⁱ

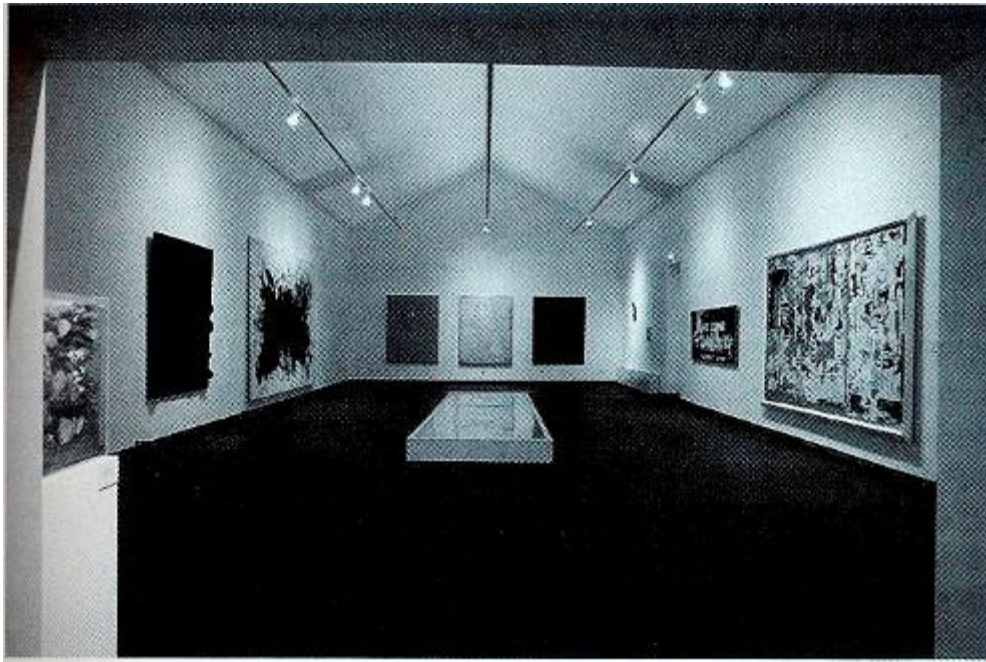
3.

“The organizers of *Westkunst* developed their interior architecture from the standpoint of conventional museological space. They established a celebratory architecture, a series of vast spaces, often flanked by lateral appendages. Pillars and thick walls served to reassure the visitor of the permanence of the frame when the decor was, in fact, very light. Bright walls and diffused lighting combined to make the rooms appear larger. Work from the seventies was housed in a section, partitioned at intervals, which had no enclosed spaces; contemporary work was found in identical parallel rooms, each opening to the next at a common angle but with no corridors. The slow rhythm of separate large bright spaces preceded an open, non-structured space and a uniform grid. What could be a more evident metaphor for the workings of history? (...) *Westkunst* (...) scaled down any evocation of events external to art; its chronological division included a period when art and artists in particular were severely tested by history. Not once are the works summoned as documentation of a history other than that of art.

(...)

The works were grouped in coherent series according to a formal, historical (in terms of production) and iconographic framework. (...) The exhibition was organized according to an historical progression with its proper temporality; in other words, it had its own particular developments, its own hierarchy based on the relative position of the work of this or that artist.”

Jean-Marc Poinot, “Large Exhibitions. A sketch of a typology”, in Greenberg, Reesa; Ferguson, Bruce W., and Nairne, Sandy (eds.): *Thinking about Exhibitions*, New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 39-66 (pp. 43-44 & 46).



“Westkunst”, view of “Nouveau Réalisme” room (R. Hains, Y. Klein et al; no 9 on the exhibition map)

in: Greenberg, Reesa; Ferguson, Bruce W.; Nairne, Sandy (eds.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 42.

Von hier aus. Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf

Messe Düsseldorf

29 September – 2 December, 1984

Curator: Kasper König

Artists: Peter Angermann, Ina Barfuss, Georg Baselitz, Eugen Batz, Lothar Baumgarten, Thomas Bayrle, Bernd und Hilla Becher, Joseph Beuys, Bernhard Johannes Blume, Jürgen Bordanowicz, George Brecht, Marcel Broodthaers, Werner Büttner, Holger Bunk, Walter Dahn, Hanne Darboven, Jiri Georg Dokoupil, Gerald Domenig, Felix Droese, Rainer Fetting, Robert Filliou, Lili Fischer, Günther Förg, Katharina Fritsch, Nikolaus Gerhart, Ludwig Gosewitz, Hans Haacke, Eva Hesse, Antonius Höckelmann, Rebecca Horn, Thomas Huber, Jörg Immendorff, Milan Kunc, Axel Kasseböhmer, Gerard Kever, Hubert Kiecol, Anselm Kiefer, Martin Kippenberger, Per Kirkeby, Astrid Klein, Imi Knoebel, Thomas Lange, Silke Leverkühne, Markus Lüpertz, Peter Mell, Gerhard Merz, Olaf Metzler, Reinhard Mucha, Christa Näher, Gruppe Normal (Peter Angermann, Jan Knap, Milan Kunc), Albert Oehlen, Markus Oehlen, Nam June Paik, A. R. Penck, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Dieter Roth, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Ulrich Rückriem, Salomé, Tomas Schmit, Thomas Schütte, Andreas Schulze, Manfred Schulze, Manfred Stumpf, Norbert Tadeusz, Herman de Vries, Thomas Wachweger, Andy Warhol; video: Marina Abramovic, Klaus vom Bruch, Marcel Odenbach.

A few statements on “von hier aus”

1.

"Important exhibition held in Düsseldorf in 1984, it was organized by Kasper König in a 1,400 m exhibition hall. The show aims at presenting the broadest overview of art trends in Germany, particularly in Düsseldorf and Berlin. Its title, *Von Hier aus* ('from here on', or 'hereafter'), does not conceal the desire to single out Düsseldorf as main contemporary art center (especially against Cologne, which had organized the *Westkunst*), thanks to the prestige of its [art] school and its master, Beuys. The organizer of the exhibition, though a native of Cologne, stresses three main [art] trends: a historical one, that of Fluxus and the foreign artists who worked in Germany (Filliou, Brecht, Paik and Broodthaers); the new painting, with huge works by Kiefer, Salome, Baselitz and Penck; and on the lower level of the exhibition space, the 'young builders', who conceive their works largely in connection to places (Mucha, Schütte, Katia Hajek ...)."ⁱⁱⁱ

Claude Rossignol, "Von hier aus", in Durozoi, Gérard (ed.): *Diccionario de arte del siglo XX*, Madrid: Akal, 1997, p. 669.

2.

"The most important condition for the exhibition was set --the capturing of the spectrum of German contemporary art.

The declared intention was an exhibition as event. Instead of an affirmation of known constellations it should foster the intellectual discussion of new perceptions in art and the return of 'new' styles. The main focus on new approaches and the inclusion of marginal positions played an important role. (...) The criteria of the selection should be determined by achievements and changes of artistic positions and attitudes --of authenticity and intensity, endurance and historical impact--, and not by a preconceived catalogue of criteria that would confirm past experiences."

Kasper König in the introductory pages to König, Kasper (ed.): *Von hier aus. Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1984, n/p.^{iv}

3.

"The celebration mainly comprised the invention of a novel type of exhibition architecture which could integrate innovations or modifications to the staging of recent contemporary works while taking into account the desire to produce a manifestation of mass. In one

exhibition hall, architect Hermann Czech conceived of a doubly articulated architecture. Taking advantage of the freedom a ranked architect enjoys in a space not parcelled out in square meters, he imagined the necessary number of independent constructions by dispersing them according to a random and open topography.

(...) Hermann Czech, in effect, declined all the variations on the theme of sanctuary or those marks of its architecture which could only be discerned by the colour or moulding of a cornice under which would have hitherto hung a mounted panel. The entirety was clearly highlighted by an elevated entrance which allowed the visitor to take in the entire hall at a glance. The viewer could also remark on the manner in which the specific installations or constructions slid between architectures like so many monuments, autonomous among the museological ones. (...)

Beyond treating painting with great consideration, the exhibition included extremely diversified works (installations, sculptures, environments, films, video, etc.) selected according to a scenario (von hier aus) without narrow temporal or national constraints. The selection was an integration of representative works from the German art scene since 1970; several artists who had disappeared for a number of years (Hesse, Palermo, Broodthaers...) or were foreigners who had been active in Germany (Filliou, Koepke, Kirkeby, Paik...).

Jean-Marc Poinot, "Large Exhibitions. A sketch of a typology", in Greenberg, Reesa; Ferguson; Nairne, Sandy (eds.): *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Routledge: New York, 1996, pp. 39-66 (pp. 60-62)



"Von hier aus", view of the installation, Düsseldorf, 1984, Kasper König, in: Greenberg, Reesa; Ferguson, Bruce W.; Nairne, Sandy (eds.): *Thinking about Exhibitions*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 60.

Prof. Kasper König, born in Mettingen (Westphalia, Germany) in 1943, has been director of the Museum Ludwig in Cologne since 2000. Even while still studying he was already organizing exhibitions --such as the “Claes Oldenburg” show (1966, Moderna Museet, Stockholm), at the early age of twenty-three-- and published numerous books. In 1976, in collaboration with Klaus Bussmann, he launched the “Skulptur Projekte Münster”, a decennial artistic event held in coincidence with the documenta. In 1985 König was appointed to the newly established chair for “Kunst und Öffentlichkeit” (Art and the Public Sphere) at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Three years later he was made professor at the Städelschule Frankfurt and then appointed its president in 1989. During the same period he was also the founding director of the Portikus exhibition hall in Frankfurt am Main. As a curator König organized numerous large-scale exhibitions such as “Westkunst” in 1981 at the Cologne Fair, “von hier aus” in 1984 at the Düsseldorf Fair, and “Der zerbrochene Spiegel” in 1993 in Vienna and Hamburg. In 2000 he supervised the art project “In-Between Architecture”, which accompanied the Hanover EXPO. In 2007 he co-curated with Brigitte Franzen (in association with Carina Plath) the fourth edition of the “Skulptur Projekte” in Münster. He has been awarded an honorary degree by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and has also earned the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

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Compiled by Karin Jaschke (KJ)

ⁱ Original text: “En 1981, *Westkunst*, presentada en Colonia y comisariada por Kaspar König, supo poner, entre la gran diversidad de propuestas producidas por el mapa “occidental“, el acento en la nueva identidad artística germánica, borrada a raíz de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y recuperada con los nuevos expresionismos. La muestra, aunque abarcaba un amplio arco cronológico – desde 1939 hasta 1981 –, así como una concurrencia internacional de artistas que los ochenta iban a consagrar – Borofsky, Chia, Cucchi, Daniels, Paladino, Salle, Schnabel, West, entre muchos otros – sirvió de trampolín a una generación de artistas alemanes hasta aquellos momentos desconocidos fuera de sus fronteras, que al margen de influjos foráneos, habían sabido conectar el arte a unas raíces autóctonas y diferenciales.” (translation by MG)

ⁱⁱ Original text: „Die Ausstellung "Westkunst" ist eine Thesenausstellung. Sie behauptet (...), daß die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts auf eine besondere Weise lebendig ist: Sie ist in ihrer Gesamtheit für uns Gegenwartskunst. Gegenwartskunst aber nicht im Sinn von historischer Zeitgenossenschaft. Diese zeitgeschichtliche Rolle ist jeweils ausgespielt, wurde zur Chronik oder Legende, bleibt auch manchmal versteckt oder vergessen. Entscheidend ist für uns etwas anderes: Wie weit können wir Gebrauch machen von einer Kunst, die ihrer Entstehungszeit nach schon historisch geworden ist. (...) Wir (sind) bei der Behauptung der Ausstellung "Westkunst" angelangt: bei der These von der gegenwärtigen Wirksamkeit, der unverbrauchten Energie der Werke.“ (translation by KJ)

ⁱⁱⁱ Original text: “Importante exposición presentada en Düsseldorf en 1984, es organizada por Kasper König en un hall de feria de 1.400 m. La muestra tiene por finalidad presentar el más vasto panorama de las tendencias del arte en Alemania, y más particularmente en Düsseldorf y Berlin. Su título, *Von Hier aus* (A partir de aquí), no oculta la voluntad de ubicar Düsseldorf como principal centro artístico contemporáneo (sobre todo frente a Colonia, que había organizado la *Westkunst*) con la ventaja del prestigio de su escuela y su maestro, Beuys. El organizador, originario sin embargo de Colonia, pone el acento en tres corrientes principales: una histórica, la del Fluxus y los artistas extranjeros que han trabajado en Alemania (Filliou, Brecht, Paik y Broodthaers); la de la nueva pintura, con inmensas obras de Kiefer, Salomé, Baselitz y Penck; y, en el nivel inferior del espacio de exposición, los "jóvenes constructores", que conciben sus obras en gran medida en función de los lugares (Mucha, Schütte, Katia Hajek...).” (translation by MG)

^{iv} Original text: „Die wichtigste Voraussetzung für die Ausstellung war vorgegeben – das Erfassen des Spektrums deutscher Gegenwartskunst.

Die erklärte Absicht war eine ereignishafte Ausstellung. Statt der Bestätigung uns bekannter Konstellationen sollte sie die geistige Auseinandersetzung mit den neuen Wahrnehmungen in der Kunst und der Wiederkehr der „neuen“ Stile fördern. Das Schwergewicht neuer Ansätze und die Einbeziehung von Rand-Positionen spielte dabei eine wichtige Rolle. (...) Die Kriterien der Auswahl sollten von den Leistungen und Wandlungen der künstlerischen Positionen und Haltungen bestimmt werden – der Authentizität und Intensität, der Ausdauer und geschichtlichen Wirksamkeit – und nicht von einem vorgefassten Kriterienkatalog, der bisher gemachte Erfahrungen bestätigt.“ (translation by KJ)