

German Art in the 20th Century

Painting and Sculpture
1905-1985

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Roger de Grey	Foreword	7
	Acknowledgments	8
Christos M. Joachimides	A Gash of Fire Across the World	9
Norman Rosenthal	A Will to Art in 20 th Century Germany	13
Wieland Schmied	Points of Departure and Transformations in German Art 1905-1985	21
Ivo Frenzel	Friedrich Nietzsche	75
Harry Pross	Youth Movements in Germany	83
Werner Becker	The Frankfurt School and its Cultural and Political Influence	91
Wolfgang Rothe	Expressionism in Literature	97
Jill Lloyd	Primitivism and Modernity	105
Georg Bussmann	'Degenerate Art' – A Look at a Useful Myth	113
Irit Rogoff	Representations of Politics	125
Walter Grasskamp	Images of Space	137
	Artists in the exhibition	149
	Catalogue	151
Siegfried Gohr	Kirchner and 'Die Brücke'	426
Sixten Ringbom	Kandinsky and 'Der Blaue Reiter'	429
Carla Schulz-Hoffmann	Emil Nolde	432
Thomas Zaunschirm	Oskar Kokoschka in Berlin and Dresden	434
Georg Bussmann	Louis Corinth: The Late Works	436
Reinhold Hohl	Wilhelm Lehmbruck	438
Sarah O'Brien-Twohig	Max Beckmann	
Hanne Bergius	Kurt Schwitters: Aspects of Merz and Dada	
Uwe M. Schneede	Max Ernst: 'Beyond Painting'	
Matthias Eberle	Otto Dix and 'Neue Sachlichkeit'	
Wulf Herzogenrath	Oskar Schlemmer	441
Richard Verdi	The Late Klee	457
Peter-Klaus Schuster	The 'Inner Emigration': Art for No One	460
Carla Schulz-Hoffmann	Wols	463
Siegfried Gohr	Art after the War	465
Stephan von Wiese	The ZERO Group, 1958-1966	468
Franz Meyer	Joseph Beuys	470
Günther Gercken	Figurative Painting after 1960	473
	Biographies of the Artists	478
	Chronology	502
	Selected Bibliography	511
	Lenders to the Exhibition	513
	Notes on the Authors	514
	Photographic Acknowledgments	515
	Index of Names	516

Wols

"He who dreams while he is awake has knowledge of a thousand things which elude him who dreams only in his sleep."¹ Wols frequently quoted this aphorism which, being of general as well as specific significance in terms of its historical context, took on for him the function of a *leitmotiv*. Stimulated by surrealistic thought patterns, in the widest sense, this statement typifies an approach to reality which deliberately breaks away from an attachment to the merely tangible and factual world and instead aims at what may be termed a 'somnambulist' extension of consciousness.

It would be a mistake to interpret such an attitude as a product of that 'lost generation' to which Wols was posthumously appointed as its leading figure. For the self-destructive process of liberation through the creative act was as much a reaction to the extreme political and social conditions of his time as it was a part of his individual complexities. The notion of the *peintre maudit*, which art critics and art historians see exemplified in Wols, has for him a dimension far exceeding the problems specific to his time. Without deliberately intending it, Wols became the ultimate embodiment of the identity of art and life, an idea which became a central topic in the debates of the avant-garde.

Born in Berlin in 1913 as Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze, this exceptionally gifted boy grew up in Dresden in an upper-middle class environment which made every effort to foster his varied musical and intellectual

talents and inclinations. At the age of seven, he learned to play the violin and breed rare fish – later bought by the Dresden Zoo – at home in his fish tank. He received a classical education, but in 1931 was unable to take the school-leaving examinations, as he was under age. Fritz Busch, at that time conductor of the Dresden Opera, offered to procure him a position as leader of the orchestra; however, Wols was more keenly interested in photography. Hugo Erfurth saw some of his photographs and considered it unnecessary for him to have further training in this field. Wols's genius was apparent in all he did during his childhood and adolescence, which by conventional criteria were privileged and happy, although the artist gave a starkly contrasting view in the following statement: "At the end of my rather unhappy youth, torn apart, in no way homogeneous, I was helpless in the face of all sorts of problems. I was never particularly well informed about the events affecting me and my environment, in spite of all my efforts in terms of work and observation."² This painful awareness of an inner lack of integration marked the life of the artist, even at times when it seemed to be in harmony with what was going on around him. In this sense, the later years were as much a consequence of this lack of 'homogeneity', as he called it, as they were the product of historical conditions.

In 1932, at the age of 19, Wols went to live in Paris, not only to experience the intellectual climate of the metropolis of the arts, but very definitely also to escape from Germany: although never really a political animal, Wols was, so to speak, an existential anti-Fascist and his 'public life' was significantly formed by this attitude. The subsequent stages of his life may be summarized as follows: in 1933 Wols travelled to Barcelona with his future wife Grety; there he refused to respond to his call-up to the German 'labour service'; this resulted in constant problems with the authorities. After a brief episode in Ibiza, during which Wols worked as a photographer and chauffeur and Grety as a seamstress, he spent three months under political arrest in Barcelona and in December 1935 was deported to France without identity papers. In 1937 there followed a period of comparative stability. Wols had an opportunity to work as official photographer at the Paris World Exhibition. In 1939, at the outbreak of war, he was interned. During this period he worked increasingly on drawings and watercolours. But he also began to drink heavily. After his release in 1940 Wols and his wife lived in depressing financial circum-

stances and in constant fear of the German occupying troops in Cassis and Dieulefit near Montélimar. In 1945, the Paris art dealer René Drouin organized Wols's first exhibition at the recommendation of his poet friend Henri-Pierre Roche. Wols made a last minute attempt to prevent it from taking place. He did not attend its opening but showed the exhibition to his dog, "explaining the pictures to him and reminding him how he, the dog, had helped him, when during the winter he had thawed the frozen Chinese ink with the warmth of his belly."³ The exhibition did not bring Wols any financial success, but it was to make his name: he attracted the attention of Jean-Paul Sartre, who from then on repeatedly helped him financially, and of Jean Paulhan, Leon-Paul Fargue and Henri Michaux. The last years of the artist's life were marked by extreme hardship and constant see-saw periods of feverish work, illness and many unsuccessful attempts to control his drinking. In 1951, after a period in an institution for alcoholics, Wols died of food poisoning, at the age of 38.

The creative output from this relatively short span of time makes Wols the actual founder of 'non-formal' art as well as of 'poetic abstraction' and 'tachism'. He was probably the most important protagonist of these styles, as for him life and art were congruent: his *oeuvre* is an interpretation of his, by bourgeois standards, chaotic existence. "Wols fashions his drawings as a snail does its house – in a natural and painful process."⁴



Fig. 1 Wols, *The Bottle*, 1943/45

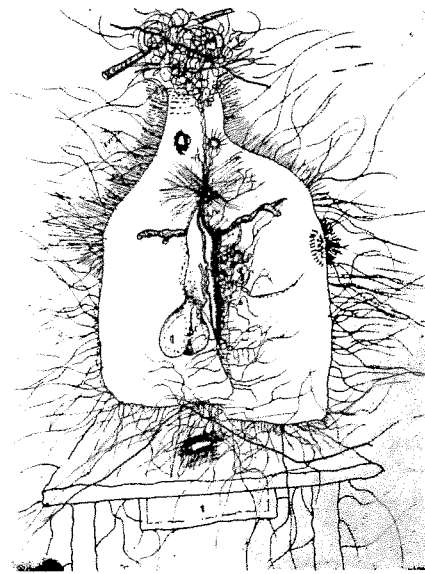


Fig. 2 Wols, *The Bottle*, 1943/45

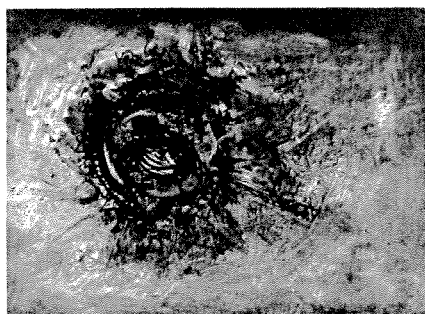


Fig. 3 Wols, *The Eye of God*, about 1949

This beautifully apt comparison, drawn by his friend Roche, describes an essential characteristic of Wols's *oeuvre*, reiterated very frequently by art critics: it is the fact that his art never becomes a separate object but always remains an integral part of his life, to the extent that it can give a more direct and immediate account of it than any real events or facts could. Paintings and drawings become the actual language in which the subjective psychological situation is described. This is not possible through objective representation; the 'non-formal' picture is more precise than any explicitly descriptive form, and this becomes directly apparent when Wols's photographic self-portraits are compared with any of his paintings. The photographs always have something strained, sometimes almost ridiculous, about them. They look as if Wols were embarrassed to meet himself eye to eye in front of the camera, and so he escapes increasingly into a pose and hides behind the mask of a dandy, a small-time crook, or just someone pulling stupid faces.

In the self-portrait with the sticking-plaster, too, there is something artificial and deliberate about the wound: the cross-shaped, clean, white plaster degenerates into a mere ornament. The actual wound does not lie in the realm of visible objects but transcends it: it is more 'existential' than its

external form. In contrast, the real self-portraits are the paintings, drawings and watercolours, and to some extent the photographs with their extremely surrealistic structures and close-ups, the repulsive carcasses, garbage and poster fragments.

It may suffice to illustrate these observations with a few examples which also serve to demonstrate the extent to which, in Wols's work, the basically 'non-formal' approach results in quasi-organic formations, or at least formations which could be described in such terms.

The watercolour *The Bottle* (figs. 1 and 2), which originated between 1942 and 1945, achieves an almost devotional effect through the dissolving and blending of the object with its background, the combination of blood and earth colours as well as the 'elevation' of the simple bottle into a protagonist and determining factor of the picture. The bottle becomes an existential symbol, a metaphor both for Wols the artist and the man. In another version of the same theme, the bottle becomes a creature growing and expanding uncontrollably on all sides, containing within itself both vagina and phallus, and thus including and devouring identities of the greatest possible diversity.

The Eye of God (fig. 3) represents the sum of Wols's creative approach. It does not look down on mankind from an 'exalted' vantage point but emerges from within; it is like a whirlpool pulling the observer into the 'inner world'. The centre of being is deep inside the picture, it can be released only gradually, in 'age rings', from the incrustations and dross of human existence. And this is possible only through the constant renewal of wounds, as is directly indicated by the multiple eruptions of blood-red and black. Another characteristic is the oscillation between organic processes of growth – human, vegetable and psychological. Their form of expression is ambiguous, containing a wide range of associations and a wealth of possible transformations from one level of consciousness

and reality to another. Thus, in *Peinture*, the suggestion of natural growth (leaf) and of destruction (innards) are contained in equal measure. The proximity of death communicates itself as an existential force, a force not verbally (and thus objectively) communicable but nevertheless 'real' and bound up with growth, life and vitality as indispensable preconditions. Connections have frequently been seen, particularly during the 1950s, between Wols's painting and the nuclear holocaust, resulting in some rather bizarre interpretations. (Compared to the explosive force of a Wols painting, "the terrible 'beauty' of an atomic mushroom seems merely ornamental").⁵ But they did at least grasp one side of Wols's work: its unbreakable union of chaos and liberation, in which the act of liberation itself, leading inevitably towards death, is to be understood as a positive value. Seen from this angle, it is clear how Georges Mathieu arrived at his observation: "Après Wols, tout est à refaire..."⁶ There can be no doubt that after Wols, everything had to begin anew: everything, that is, with regard to a 'non-formal' method of painting which can develop its criteria only from existential necessity, if it is not to sink to the level of superficial ornament.

Notes

- 1 Werner Haftmann (ed.), *Wols. Aufzeichnungen, Apborismen, Zeichnungen*, Cologne, 1963, p. 53
- 2 *Préface*, unpublished manuscript by Wols, quoted from Laszlo Glozer, *Wols, Photograph*, Hanover/Munich, 1978, p. 14
- 3 Henri-Pierre Roche, 'Einige Notizen über Wols', in exhib. cat. *Wols 1913-1951. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen*, Berlin, 1973, p. 28
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *Magnum*, xxiv (on the 'documenta '59'), Cologne, 1959, quoted after Glozer, p. 8
- 6 Georges Mathieu, *Au-delà du Tachisme*, Paris, 1963, p. 35

Art in the Post-War Period

Essentially there are three different lines of inquiry into the art of the post-war period in the Federal Republic of Germany: one approach consists in finding out how thoroughly German artists familiarized themselves with developments outside Germany during the period of the Third Reich and the last war. The second question to be considered is how work on problems concerning the arts which was interrupted by the Nazi dictatorship was resumed. Thirdly, one needs to ask whether an analogy can be drawn between the split already dividing West and East German art and the hardening attitudes of the two political blocks. Such questions touch on three formative developments which, in the many diverse strata of the first post-war decade, cannot easily be brought together.

Such an investigation has, as its background, a situation which in Germany was different from all other European countries because of the 'Degenerate Art' campaign. Not one of the great artists active in the first half of the twentieth century had returned to Germany. Beckmann had been driven into exile, as had Schwitters, Klee, Feininger, Kandinsky and Kokoschka.¹ Foreign artists who had worked in Germany, for instance with the Bauhaus, had also left, at the latest after the enforced closure of that institution in 1933. The New Bauhaus, which had been re-established in the USA, had given fresh impetus to a great number of young American artists of the post-war period, and the work of Josef Albers deserves a special mention here.

Notwithstanding these losses, a certain continuity remained below the surface of official National Socialist art. A tenuous artistic current continued to use a moderate, if hardly intact, form of lyrical abstraction and figuration. However, it retained only a very few features of modern art. The extreme tendencies of pre-war art were collectively neutralized.²

In the 1930s, doubtless regarding it as something of an artistic outpost, a number of German artists made frequent visits to the Villa Romana. The painters and sculptors who went to Italy were mainly those who continued to pursue styles based on antiquity and late impressionism, such as Toni Stadler, Gerhard Marcks, Hermann Blumenthal and Josef Fassbender. For the most part, it was these artists, and those who had remained in Germany, who took over the reconstruction of the art academies and associations after the war. It becomes clear, then, that the above-mentioned continuity of

a moderate form of modern art also became important in the post-war period.

In the early post-war years, older artists like Willi Baumeister and Karl Hofer had become the protagonists of the two mainstream movements, the 'realistic' and the 'abstract'. There was a great deal of fierce argument about style. These discussions, however, stifled others which should have taken place, with the result that, particularly since a considerable amount of political zeal was brought into the debate, the final decision in favour of abstraction was not made on the basis of the 'right' kind of argument. What this decision was meant to prove was that the Germans, now liberated, had overcome the aberration of taste which had occurred during the National Socialist period, and were now in a position to understand and practise modern art. Here one can see the beginning of an involuntary and perhaps even unconscious repression of such questions as how art could react to Germany's catastrophic situation after 1945; how the new art should be linked to Germany's own artistic tradition and history; and what it wanted to achieve beyond simply adopting the latest ideas from abroad.

A further general observation remains to be made about developments in the arts after the First World War. The reaction then had been epoch-making in its seriousness and aesthetic radicalism. After the Second World War the reaction had more to do with content; confined to themes and motifs, with the aforementioned artists it had not raised any fundamental problems of form. The abstract and semi-abstract painters of the

older and interim generations neither came to terms with the reality bequeathed by the war, nor with history. Adorno saw this loss in the following terms: "the invisible relationship of the present to the twenties is conditioned by historical discontinuity . . . The tradition, even the anti-traditional tradition, has been broken off; half-forgotten tasks have been left behind."³ Although the reception given to early Expressionism, which was perceived as a protest movement against the war, and intended also as a form of restitution to the artists who had been outlawed, did dominate the re-awakening art world, the focus was mainly on matters of exhibition and publication, rather than discussion and analysis. There followed the rehabilitation of Klee and Kandinsky, which meant the recognition of the art of the Bauhaus, and from which arose certain consequences for abstract painters. Absent entirely was the re-acceptance of Dada, which might have been conceivable as a reaction to the war. Thus the climate of the Weimar period was recaptured only selectively, as proof of a worthy tradition rather than as a means of taking over the unresolved problems of that tradition. Attempts to accommodate surrealism in art, which were undertaken by the Galerie Rosen in Berlin, remained generally isolated.

Today it has become manifest that Joseph Beuys was the only artist who unreservedly came to terms with the war. Only at the end of the 1950s did it become apparent that, albeit still in the background, a debate had started in German art about the consequences of the war, as Baselitz and A. R. Penck began to reflect upon their situation in



Fig. 1 Karl Hofer, *Descent into Hell*, 1947

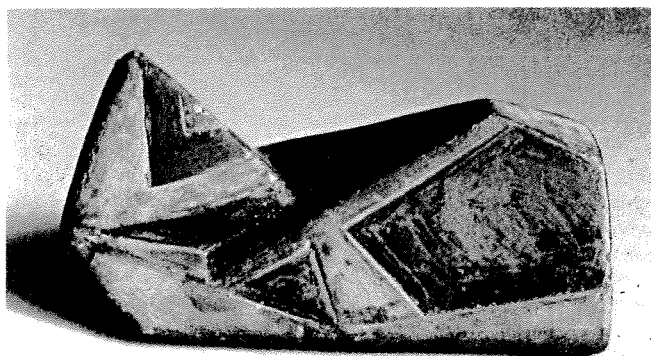


Fig. 2 Ewald Mataré,
*Abstraction of a
Reclining Cow*, 1946

a divided Germany. These painters re-examined problems of modern art, which made it possible for them to become aware of the conflict in their position between the seemingly successful progress of German art and 'the loss of memory' in respect of German art's pre-war roots. So it was only in about 1960 that serious thought was again given to the opposing viewpoints of the modern art movements in Germany before the Second World War.

Firstly, after 1950, non-representational painting symbolized the new-found feeling of freedom in its demonstrative rejection of the figurative, which had so totally imbued the style practised during the National Socialist period. On the other hand, however, contemporary abstract symbolism seemed fortuitous, since the many steps necessary to reach abstract Expressionism or the non-formal, via Surrealism and Realism, had not been taken for well-known historical reasons. Therefore a legitimising connection was sought, both in non-figurative art before the First World War, and also in the poetry of the German Romantic Movement, which had already shown signs of abstraction. Furthermore, the tendency towards expressiveness as a German characteristic was confirmed by the stylized handling of paint, which was perceived as a subjective act. Then the question was posed as to why the work of 'Cobra', the group of Belgian, Dutch and Danish artists tending towards Expressionism, had not really been able to gain any influence; that is, if one disregards the group called 'Spur', whose activity was limited to Munich. The existence of this 'Expressionism', influenced by folk art, and within which Surrealism was taken up and debated, only started to be strongly felt, though claiming other sources, around 1960, in Berlin.

The polarization between unfashionable figurative and fashionable non-figurative movements was actively encouraged, particularly by the older protagonists of the two styles. The debate took place on many levels. Hans Sedlmayr and Wilhelm Hausenstein took a stand against Baumeister, and in 1950 'The First Darmstadt Dialogue' on 'The Human Image in our Time' resulted in a split

vote. Baumeister, against the background of his earlier contact with the French avant-garde, saw himself as the advocate of abstract art, vigorously pleading for the recognition of the non-figurative, while Karl Hofer took the part of the figurative artists. Nearly every large general exhibition gave rise to a quarrel about ideology. The argument, however, could not be resolved, since it rested on humanistic debates about the human image. If one looks closely at the apparently opposing trends, an odd and unexpected harmony becomes apparent, for example between Baumeister and Hofer. After the war, Baumeister returned to a form of abstraction which seemed to have been drawn from the alphabet of a mystical world language. Depicted as murals, as calligraphic images, and as patterns of decorative art taken from other cultures, abstract images once again became representational. The so-called realistic works by Carl Hofer, on the other hand, are really allegories. Scarcely a single scene or figure is substantiated by any narrative structure in the picture. Already abstracted figures stand as if divorced from their background, to which they cannot be related because of their angular outlines (fig. 1).

After the war, both these tendencies had become rather lifeless and lacked credibility. Abstract art never reached that degree of absoluteness, which characterized American art, or the work of Wols, for example; and realism, far from approaching reality, shrouded it in a kind of picturesque allegory. From today's viewpoint both of these polarities are wrong. Neither managed to create an art which was able to break out of its traditional, one may say affirmative, framework and find new forms of imagery. This art was too easily satisfied with associations and strictures, without exposing itself to the existential search for a symbol. The problems inherited from the 1920s were not recognized and dealt with. The radicalism of certain approaches to handling colour in Expressionism was missing, as was the anti-traditional impetus, coming from Dada and Surrealism, and any radical geometrical abstraction. The extremes became inter-

mingled and blurred, and were no longer visible.

Therefore the following conclusion can be drawn: 'Abstraction' and 'Realism' were not what they were alleged to be; both were rather styles, marked by literary-humanistic trends, which pursued certain ideas, but did not introduce a revival of German art. And therein lies the cause of the weakness of a large proportion of post-war art in Germany.

Public art thus became increasingly standardized and abstract, but outside the mainstream a number of artists continued to work on authentic problems in a surprising and consistent way. In particular, the following names should be mentioned here: the sculptors Hans Uhlmann and Ewald Mataré (fig. 2), the painters Ernst Wilhelm Nay, Werner Heldt, Richard Oelze, Bruno Goller (fig. 3), Werner Gilles and Emil Schumacher (fig. 4), the etcher Otto Coester and the water-colourist Julius Bissier. They had all initiated independent ways towards an artistic solution which did not conform to increasingly entrenched official trends. These artists found it more important to adopt an individual approach than to form groups and adhere to programmes. Most of them, as one would expect, lived fairly secluded and isolated lives, in particular Heldt, Oelze and Goller, Gilles, Coester and Bissier.

The way of life of these remarkable artists can be seen as a symptom of the difficulties encountered by art in post-war Germany. Their alienation and evident exclusion from this newly developing society exposes the change in situation. Asgar Jorn wrote: "I believe that artists are becoming increasingly homeless, vagabonds and wanderers, who are also renewers. They fought hard before



Fig. 3 Bruno Goller, *The Big Ear*, 1956



Fig. 4 Emil Schumacher, *Picture*, 1957

the war, but people then knew their place. After the war everything changed. We don't belong anywhere."⁴

For the artists represented in this exhibition, this new situation meant that, for example, Ernst Wilhelm Nay did not return to Berlin, since his studio had been destroyed. He went to live with friends at Hofheim, in the Taunus. Over the following years and eventually, after 1951, in Cologne, he did achieve the transformation from a late Expressionistic figurative style to pure colour forms. This did not entail an informal and gestural handling of colour, but rather a specific system of colour areas, in which he used colour in a complementary, as well as in a chromatic way. As a result, his system achieved spatial depth by the distribution of colour alone. The emotional content of his earlier figurative paintings was not repressed, but was translated into colour forms. In this way he worked out his Expressionistic legacy, and also resolved the colour/area problem of Kirchner's late works.

Just like Nay, the Berlin sculptor Hans Uhlmann did not yield to the prescribed post-war style. Had he done so, it would have meant the loss of the calculated geometrical severity, and of the inside-out logic, of his sculptures. Uhlmann even added colour to his work, which was unusual, since at that time the sculptor's material was meant to speak for itself, unadorned. Uhlmann, an engineer by profession, had come into contact with Russian constructivism before the war. At that time he began to translate the plastic volume of his work into tension between area and space. His work is significant in that it is not committed to a single constructive theme, but produces unexpected results in the opposition and conjunction of certain forms. At the same time, however, Uhlmann's method of construction is never

formally orientated. As well as a love of nature, there is something enigmatic and demonic in it. The distinguished corpus of drawings by the artist testifies to this (fig. 5).

After the war, Werner Heldt devoted himself wholly to the representation of Berlin, as the place where Germany's catastrophe and the confrontation between the new world powers from the East and the West could be experienced at first hand. In his paintings Heldt developed a system which combined overlapping cubes with a kind of vaulted plasticity. He achieved a synthesis between a universally valid solid structure and an existential experience of symbolism, where objects and colours intensify the sadness and melancholy in his pictures. Heldt had no illusions about Berlin, he saw no freedom for the city, but perceived it as a deserted place. His synopsis of 'Berlin and Sea' and 'Berlin and Still Life' has a certain visionary quality, though without being Surrealistic. After the war, a small group of artists had tried to find room for Surrealism within modern art, with the Galerie Rosen in Berlin as their meeting place. However, the distinguished Surrealist Max Ernst had for decades been absent in France and in the USA. The dominant personality in post-war Germany was Richard Oelze, who lived in Paris from 1933 to 1936, and during his time there had extensive contact with Surrealists. In 1935 Alfred Barr visited his studio and bought two paintings. One of these, *Expectation* (cat. 198), was a premonition, in visual terms, of the coming terror. Oelze remained an outsider in Paris. When he returned to Germany after the war, he settled in Worpsswede, where he had lived in the early 1930s. He produced strange visions of landscapes, which engendered mysterious figures and fabulous creatures. In his work Oelze formulated the eerie and sinister events which surrounded him; it does not encourage escape into the realms of fantasy. The almost tangible spaces in his paintings are desolate and

terrifying. Oelze's visual concepts could be described as Surrealism without a narrative. As already perceived in *Expectation*, the causes and generators of horror, destruction and fear are not named, which conjures up terror all the more forcefully.

While certain artists quarrelled about the rightness of various stylistic formulae against the background of the emerging division between East and West, there were a few others who went on working logically, without allowing themselves to be forced into false alternatives. The political background of the arguments, however, came more and more to the fore. After 1953 Realism was considered a culturally backward concept. It was left to the Eastern Bloc, while West Germany, also in a cultural sense, joined the other victorious powers. The avant-garde, which before the war had encompassed a great range of possibilities, was now divided up into spheres and regions. Art, too, had been enlisted into the service of the Cold War.

Notes

- 1 A few general bibliographical references: Paul Vogt, *Geschichte der deutschen Malerei im 20. Jahrhundert*, Cologne, 1976; Jutta Held, *Kunst und Kunstpolitik in Deutschland, 1945-49*, Berlin, 1981; Suzanne Page (ed.), *Art Allemagne Aujourd'hui*, Paris, 1981; Jost Hermand, 'Die restaurierte Moderne. Zum Problem des Stilwandels in der bildenden Kunst der Bundesrepublik Deutschland um 1950', in Friedrich Möbius (ed.), *Stil und Gesellschaft*, Dresden, 1984, pp. 270-302; See the article 'Die Überlebenden', *Das Kunstwerk*, 1, 1946, p. 39.
- 2 Fritz Schmalenbach, *Die Malerei der Neuen Sachlichkeit*, Berlin, 1973, p. 52.
- 3 Quoted from Gerhard Knapp, *Theodor W. Adorno*, Berlin, 1980, p. 22.
- 4 Quoted from Jürgen Claus, *Kunst heute*, Hamburg, 1967, p. 39.



Fig. 5 Hans Uhlmann, *Black-Red*, 1951

1958-1966: ZERO Group

Considered in retrospect, the ZERO group appears as a league of artists sharing a specific intellectual and spiritual climate, rather than a group committed to a clearly defined formalistic concept. Otto Piene's screen and fire pictures, Mack's reliefs of light, Uecker's nail structures – to mention only a few of the most striking examples – do not entirely share the common denominator of a committed group programme. In 1965, Uecker expressed this as follows: "ZERO has been, from the beginning, an open space in which artists have experimented with various possibilities of giving visionary form to the concepts of purity, beauty and silence. This was perhaps a silent yet at the same time a very loud protest against Expressionism, against a society with an expressive mentality."

To this end, Yves Klein's contribution was of great importance in that it showed the way. His monochrome pictures were first exhibited in the Federal Republic in May/June 1957 by Alfred Schmela, owner of a Düsseldorf gallery. His work demonstrated that the artist is not merely a craftsman, a producer of artefacts, but a generator of limitless ideas. Thus art received new impulses which carried it far beyond its hitherto defined and restricted field, 'liberating' it from the burden of its tradition. Both Mack and Piene received important impulses from Yves Klein, and organized 'evening exhibitions' of the new artistic phenomena in Piene's Düsseldorf studio at Gladbacher Strasse 69. This was the beginning of the ZERO movement. On the occasion of the seventh evening exhibition, 'The Red Picture', in April 1958, the first of three issues

of the periodical *ZERO* was published. Manzoni's visit to Düsseldorf in July 1959 further strengthened the movement. The first German exhibition of Jean Tinguely's work in January 1959, held at Schmela's gallery and including Günther Uecker, had earlier on created the possibility of an international show: the exhibition 'Vision in Motion' in March 1959 at the Hessenhuis in Antwerp showed ZERO for the first time in an international context. A new international artistic language had now been established: Monochromy, as represented at the seventh evening exhibition, 'The Red Picture'; Vibration, the subject of the eighth evening exhibition and of the second issue of *ZERO* in October 1958, and Light. ZERO strove to go beyond a merely subjectivist mode of expression. The monochrome canvas dispensed with any gesture of movement. By the use of white, no preference was given to any particular colour: the totality of its spectrum contains all colours. Structuring a surface with a screen, for instance, allows inherent laws to be experienced which were objectively derived from the realm of natural phenomena. Many works were created with the intention of arriving at an expansion of the 'limited' human conception of reality, and are thus essentially an antithesis to any illusionistic, that is, goal-directed method of presentation, which merely reproduces the 'old' world over and over again. Even an associative or symbolic memory of this world must be eliminated as far as possible.

The first means, then, of obliterating reality, or at least of making it relative, was acquired by the movement in the form of phenomena. Many of the early ZERO works

came close to being experiments in an Op Art brand of psychological awareness: the observer faces a structural field rendered mutable by rotating movable sources of light. In this way he experiences the limitation of all immutable and directed relationships of reality and thus comprehends their relativity: "Our eyes will perceive the world all around us; single-directedness has made us blind" (Uecker).

But the visible world cannot be obliterated just by putting it into motion. The methods of Op Art thus prove to be too limited. Reality could be obliterated only if physical matter, as the grid that our eyes are, were to be transformed into a weightless field of energy. ZERO therefore developed the impulse given by Yves Klein to accomplish an "immaterial" work of art. Again and again, Uecker describes states of weightlessness: "light will enable us to fly ...; we shall see the sky from above ...; everything will permeate us."

It was light, then, which enabled the ZERO artists to overcome matter and gravity, at least mentally. This manifested itself pictorially in such a way that the substance of the works seems to dissolve. These structures of light and shadow, transposed to the realm of the monumental, extend to works like the *City of Pillars*, described by Uecker as a utopian architectural project. In such a "new realm of life", the human senses would become finely attuned to a new experience of reality.

Finally, though, the "play of light", which had been a vital element to the group for their elaborately worked out "mysticism of light", remained artificial. Therefore, as a further element besides light and movement, there emerged the "state of whiteness". This is a condition of totality: of the most intense brilliance of colours (as the whiteness of light includes the whole spectrum of colours), of the highest purity, and of the utmost spirituality – a condition, then, of hallucinatory insight, which is the goal of meditation and expansion of consciousness.

Having experimented with new spiritual artistic forms from the late 1950s, the 1960s were increasingly characterized by allowing art to 'enter life'. During this period of economic growth, before the following economic crisis, the ZERO artists now aimed at reaching all layers of society. They left their studios and galleries and went out into the streets with demonstrations in the form of happenings. On the occasion of the publication of the third issue of the periodical *ZERO* in July 1961, an exhibition was staged



Fig. 1
ZERO demonstration
in Düsseldorf in 1961.
Günther Uecker is
painting Hunsrück-
strasse white.



Fig. 2 and 3
ZERO Festival on the
Rheinwiesen in
Düsseldorf, 1962



at the Galerie Schmela, and the first ZERO Festival was celebrated in the Old Town of Düsseldorf. It was truly a celebration of light, with aluminium flags, metal foil, light reliefs, soap bubbles, balloons and spotlights, and there were even a parade and fireworks. Günther Uecker had painted a whole street – Hunsrückstrasse – white, “in order to create an empty space outside the increasingly hardened mechanisms and principles of order” (fig. 1). In 1962 another ZERO Festival followed, this time on the recreation grounds along the Rhine, the Düsseldorf Rheinwiesen (figs. 2, 3). These first Düsseldorf happenings brought the avant-garde into direct contact with public

life: artistic consciousness dealt directly with the social environment. The basic visual approach was that the power of the artistic imagination was to transform life.

In 1966 the ZERO group disintegrated, having been exposed to a constant series of new impulses. It had never conceived of itself as being a group of artists committed to one confined programme. The paths of Mack, Piene and Uecker had slowly begun to diverge. While Mack pursued his elevated idealism, using light as a purely spiritual medium, and Piene developed his cosmic utopia, Uecker moved away from the ZERO brand of mysticism to a realistic objectivity, or, in his own words, “Ideas which may

serve as examples for a new environment” (1969): “I have tried to attack certain taboo areas in order to create ever new associations of consciousness. In this way I have boarded up cultural fetishes...” (1970). Thus Uecker was able conceptually to expand the beginnings of ZERO. In contrast, Mack with his Sahara projects and Piene with his laser beam research projects at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have been working towards an expansion of the early methods and artistic means of the ZERO group.

Joseph Beuys

It is well known that Joseph Beuys has strong links with European pre-history, with the spirit of Romanticism and with *fin de siècle* Symbolism. But what about his relation to contemporary art history? Faced with the enormous and polymorphic body of work the usual art historical sequence which starts with the informal and ends with the trans-avant-garde, fails to apply. In addition, such simplistic notions are totally disqualified by the 'comprehensive conception of art' proclaimed by the artist, with its inclusion of theory, pedagogy and politics in artistic activity. One knows, to be sure, that much in Italian *arte povera* has its origins in Beuys; on the other hand, his artistic position is defined in part by his decisive opposition to the spirit of American art of the 1960s. However, did it not seem to us in 1970 as if Beuys and Minimal Art were just two aspects of the same artistic truth? The relationship appears real, even from the present-day point of view, when one looks back at the hiatus which first emerged in new American painting around 1950. Before that, pictures and sculptures always worked as finite systems; the viewer received messages from them concerning world views and models of identification, relationships of spatial tension or the note struck by specific colours. Jackson Pollock's 'all-over' – which one experiences as a total and self-governing form determined by the artistic process – or Barnett Newman's col-

our fields, whose precise form corresponds to the specific colour's potential for expanding – both involve the viewer in a new way. Abstract Expressionism influenced the sculpture of the 1950s and 1960s mainly by setting a precedent for the use of open form and energy impulses, as seen in the painting of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. But of greater importance was the fact that, in the wake of Pollock and Newman (of Mark Rothko too, to some extent), the viewer's relationship to the artistic product was changed. It did of course retain something of its original function. However, the proportion of formulated communication was reduced, and increasingly the artist used the work of art as an instrument with which to induce in the viewer, in the course of his perceiving it or becoming otherwise acquainted with it, a specific awareness of himself and of the world. Faced with the polyhedrons of Robert Morris and Donald Judd, just as with certain conceptual works of art, the viewer is aware of himself as someone involved in the act of perceiving. Moreover, he is confronted – sometimes as a partner in artistic events, but mostly as one engaged in their reconstruction – with decisive structures and courses of action which lead to a new knowledge of his own physical and social existence, and his surroundings.

So much for America. Certainly, if one compares the two, Beuys lacks the puritanical streak, the element of total spiritual unburdening. In addition, the cited models of artistic emulation influenced him hardly at all. What is of much greater consequence is that Beuys (and, afterwards, *arte povera*) also uses the work of art as an instrument for producing direct experiences.

The viewer must make active use of this instrument, and this explains the problems of comprehension and misunderstanding. Without further ado the contemporary public takes its bearings on signs, for example, from within the finite pictorial world of Paul Klee. In the case of Beuys, one is involved in a different kind of perceiving which is carried out in space and time, and this is experienced by the public as an intolerable strain. The structural similarities in the two approaches, which could provide a point of entry, are consequently overlooked.

Suspended Plastic Load → above ← *Isolation Stand* (fig. 1) may serve as an example. The components, which are evidently coordinated with each other, can be easily described, although one may not immediately come upon an explanation for their relationship. The actual process of observation

commences with a scrutiny of the character of the materials used and their configuration. Hanging down is a heavy length of amorphous, insulating felt material. It is protected by a fine wire mesh, so that this part of the sculpture almost appears to float. One's eye is then drawn to the thin wire connecting the gleaming copper strip attached to the upper part with the heavy sculpture stand below, which distributes weight evenly over the ground. Finally there is a stool, which provides a contrast to the stand and whose splayed legs project towards the floor; the felt bandage on one of the legs demonstrates the need for thermic protection in any contact with the ground. The materials and their configuration serve as plastic equivalents of this transmission, between the two poles of suspension and horizontality. Correspondingly, the connection brought about by the copper, between the spiritual energy contained in the Faraday cage and the 'fixed site' of sculptural realization, could perhaps be interpreted as a model for work on the 'new' sculpture. The stool, which is attuned to the forces of the earth, would then designate the position occupied by the artist. Such an explanation is, however, at the very most just one stage in a never-ending process. The following notes on the content of the works in the exhibition do not, therefore, present final conclusions, but are rather intended as an incentive to further exploration. What really matters are not isolated facts, but rather the

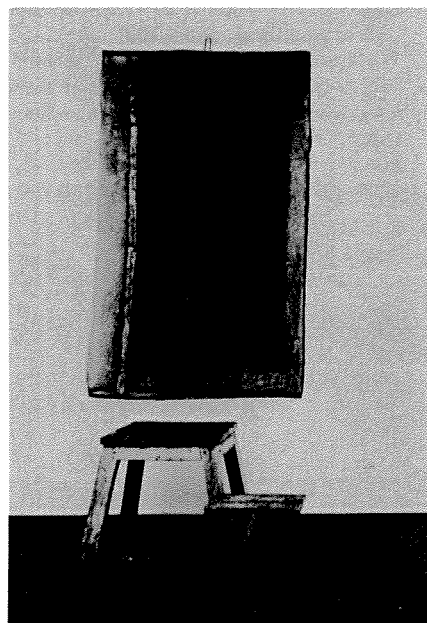


Fig. 1 Joseph Beuys, *Suspended Plastic Load* → above ← *Isolation Stand*, 1960

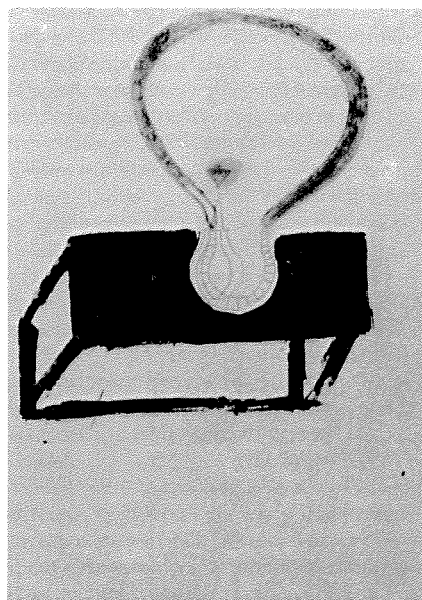


Fig. 2 Joseph Beuys, *Drawing for Suspended Plastic Load* → above ← *Isolation Stand*, 1960



Fig. 3 Joseph Beuys, Iron Head, 1961; part of *Tram Stop*, 1976

open-ended process of a continuous mental experience embodied in images. Evidence of such transformation is also found in the treatment of similar themes in various works. Thus, in a related drawing (fig. 2), the "suspended plastic load" is here represented as a bubble protected with felt which has been lowered into the "isolation stand," whilst in the middle of the bubble a little funnel is placed above the electrical terminals.

Such themes of polarity and energy are already to be found in *Pt Co Fe* of 1948 (cat. 239), the earliest work in the exhibition. The four barred iron containers are once again to be understood as Faraday cages conserving energy. In one of them a cobalt-coated platinum bar hangs from a hook – hence the work's title. In 1948 Beuys had attached a small head of Mars at this point, replacing it in 1954 by a plaster head of Napoleon. Both emphasized the expressive significance of 'masculine', 'martial' iron. The next objects to be placed in this same position opposed the expressive world of the cage material: in 1958 it was plaster with organic fat and in 1963 a bar of heat-conducting, 'feminine' copper. Not until 1972 did the elements cobalt and platinum follow, ones belonging to the same group as iron and representing for Beuys a higher level of 'masculine' character.

The next two works, in the conventional sculptural material of bronze, belong to another area of meaning: *Sybilla (Justitia)* of 1957 (cat. 240) and *Mountain King* of 1961 (cat. 242) deal with the relationship between Man and Nature. In the first of these one sees the arms of the scales with their spheres as belonging to the head of the sibyl, which is

placed on a propped-up plate and has the moon and sun for eyes. The prophetess thus represents the principle of justice. Yet this holds true only because it agrees with the balance of forces in Nature, with the harmony of the universe. Accordingly, one recognizes the spheres as celestial bodies on a reciprocally stabilized course.

In *Mountain King* human form corresponds to that of the landscape: the arching bronze represents both the trunk of a figure and a mountain. At the same time the work treats Man's dealings with Nature. The hollow enclosed by the bronze shell stands for the space inside the earth, into which Man penetrates in order to seize materials and energy. The head, which is separated from the rest of the sculpture, was compared by Beuys himself with a compass, a gyroscope or a station clock, in other words with instruments needed by Man to help him find his bearings on the earth. But the head is also reminiscent of a crown, so that Man, who works and has control over the earth, becomes a "king of the mountains."

Also in 1961 Beuys modelled the head (fig. 3) which now emerges from the dragon's jaw of a seventeenth-century cannon in the sculpture *Tram Stop*, completed in 1976. Lying next to this culverin are the cast tops of four mortar bombs, as well as a tramline and various rods. Our perception of the work is dependent on a knowledge of its history, for it unites various times and areas of experience. After 1647, as a governor of Brandenburg in the duchy of Cleves, Johann Moritz von Nassau had tried to provide a physical image of his new philosophical standpoint by his arrangement of the gardens with their radial structure. His views thus became

common knowledge. The sole remaining relic of this scheme is a column which stood originally on an axis point. It consists of a culverin and some mortar bombs, and was formerly topped by a cupid who signified the submission of the warlike spirit. Beuys grew up in Cleves, and as a five-year-old he used to wait by the monument for the tram. From that time on he was fascinated by the relic's symbolic dimension, which survived the passage of time, as well as by the contrast to the modern use of metal – in this case the functional tramline. After making a first attempt in 1954, Beuys succeeded twenty-two years later, in the austere main hall of the German pavilion at the 1976 Venice Biennale, in portraying an experience which was of autobiographical significance in his career as a sculptor. In his reconstruction of the monument he included the head, which betokens the overcoming of war and destructiveness, not in the form of a principle (like the cupid), but rather in the form of readiness for action and for suffering.

A tramline, slightly curved both in ground-plan and elevation, leads from the historical site out into the expanses of the present. A few meters behind the monument Beuys bored a hole down to the waters of the lagoon, which could be brought into motion by use of an angled rod inserted into the hole. The rubble was heaped up behind the monument. This firm anchoring of the work in an actual location meant that, in addition to iron – standing for earth – and the cannon – standing for fire – the water of the deep – the liquid element – could be brought into play.

In the exhibition the immediate effect is different, for the parts are spread out on the



Fig. 4 Joseph Beuys, *Monuments to the Stag*, 1982

ground: *Tram Stop* has now become an arsenal in which one can equip oneself for the reliving of past events. Both the deeds of Johann Moritz von Nassau, as well as the artistic path which Beuys followed from his childhood experiences to the installation in Venice, have now become history, and although in reality they cannot be repeated, by reflecting upon them every age can gain new insights.

Lightning of 1985 (cat. 244) stems from *Monuments to the Stag* (fig. 4), the work which Beuys carried out in 1982 for the 'Zeitgeist' exhibition, held in the vast courtyard of the Martin Gropius building in Berlin. On the diagonal of a rectangle, somewhat displaced from the centre, stood a huge steep cone, just under 5 m high and made from lumps of brownish clay, whose bulk half concealed a narrow work bench at its base. On the same diagonal a group of other work tables, various utensils and sculptural working material could be seen. Nearby was a battery covered in earth, held together by pieces of wood and metal, stone slabs and a walking stick as well as a vertical pole with a sausage which extended above a black and white wooden cross to the level of the second storey. Work implements and objects with particular expressive potential served as working material, and in fact on two occasions Beuys had already exhibited accumulations of these: in 1961 as *Scenes from a Stag Hunt*, using a wooden cupboard divided into ten compartments, and in 1967 as *Barrack D'Dull Odde*, where the objects were displayed on an open rack. Objects and implements embody plastic energy, and so the assembly becomes in a metaphorical sense an 'accumulator'. This is also the case in *Monuments to the Stag* (and in a different way in *Capital*). The stag, which has now featured in two titles, symbolizes for Beuys the supreme life-force to be found in the material world, transforming the latter by its spiritual powers. The clay cone in *Monuments to the Stag* is the most fundamental expression of the material state in which the 'incarnation' should take place. The theme of the new work, *Lightning* – a bronze cast of one sector of the clay cone, from its vertex to its base – is the translation of this elementary substratum into movement. The earthiness, still perceptible in the bronze reproduction, recalls *Mountain King*, with its archetypal image of Man as a being still at one with Nature. On the other hand one experiences

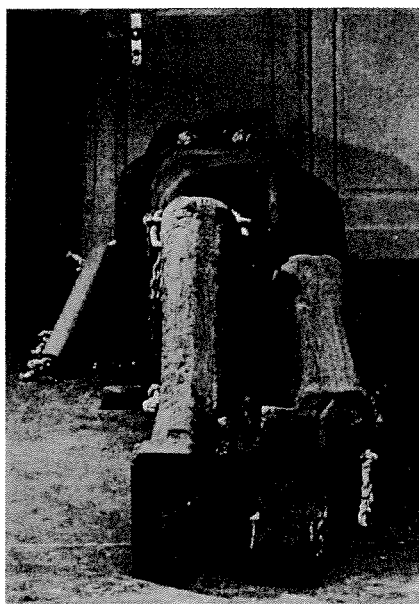


Fig. 5 Joseph Beuys, *Virgin*, 1961

the bronze ribbon darting down from the sky and widening into a broad tongue as a release of energy, as a penetration of cosmic force into the material state. It is an image comprehensible as a "flash of lightning."

Wet Washing Virgin (cat. 243) is the title of the latest work in the exhibition. The huge half-cylinder of a tree trunk suggests the arched torso of a reclining woman. Attached to it are two square-shaped vertical pieces of wood. Their outsides are roughly hewn which makes them seem like the cracked soles of gravel-worn feet, indicating the figure's connection with the earth's interior. *Virgin* was the name of a work created in 1961, the same year as *Mountain King*. A giant figure of a woman, its torso consisted of a square-shaped block and its limbs of round columns, square pillars and simple round pieces of wood. On its original site – a school playground – the parts were held together by ropes (fig. 5), but these were severed by a caretaker who wanted to get rid of the sculpture. Beuys accepted the fact of this destruction of the external form and, since then, has regrouped the blocks and pillars in such a way that their juxtaposition activates the mythical potential still more powerfully (fig. 6). The work of 1985, *Wet Washing Virgin*, unites the effects of both 'states', combining the expressive dimension of the earthy stretched-out figure with the open, sign-like

character of the free-standing blocks reminiscent of prehistoric monuments. The "wet washing" of the title points to another layer of meaning. This was also the name given to a work created for Vienna in 1979. At the time of the controversy surrounding the loan of works from the Ludwig Collection to this city and the choice of the Palais Lichtenstein as the Museum of Modern Art (where *Wet Washing* is now preserved) Beuys produced this representation of washing, the primal domain of women who, for thousands of years, have been removing traces of bodily secretion, blood and everyday dirt. One is inclined to think that the cleansing process which in 1979 related to the world of art, is now intended to make good the damage Man has done to Nature since feminine elemental force has been deprived of its power, though rooted in myth and a direct influence on life.

Ten years ago the use of traditional sculptural materials – wood, stone and bronze – found in Beuys's work up to the early 1960s appeared as a self-contained period in his *œuvre*. It seemed to have been replaced and overcome by the use of more strikingly symbolic materials such as felt, fat and pure metals, by the 'action', with its inclusion of the experiential dimension of time, and finally by theoretical, educational and political work in accordance with an extended notion of art. In works like *Lightning*, *Wet Washing Virgin* and *The End of the 20th Century* (stone; 1983) Beuys has returned to traditional materials. Returns of this kind, each of them completing a circle, are to be found time and again, and on all expressive levels, within the continuum of Beuys's *œuvre*. As in the 1960s and 1970s, a dialogue with the time plays a part in this. Thus one may understand his (by no means exclusive) use of traditional materials at present as a response to the style of the time, as an answer to the trans-avant-garde.

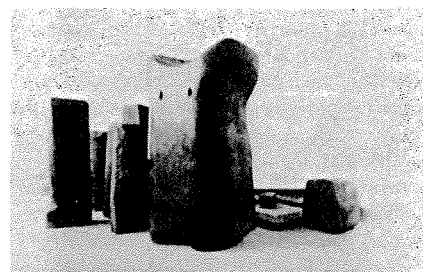


Fig. 6 Joseph Beuys, *Virgin*, details, 1961