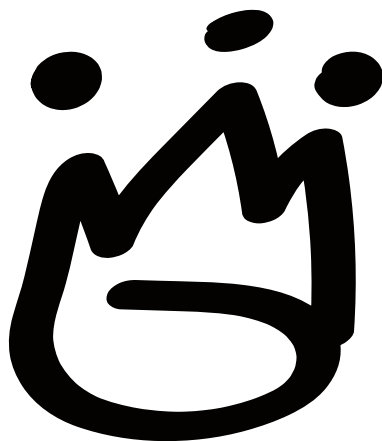


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“von hier aus – Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf,” Messegelände Halle 13, 1984

How might an exhibition succeed too well? Before every mid-sized city got its own Biennale, Kasper König's partitioned, paintingful, and altogether large survey of New German Art set a benchmark for art's appeal as entertainment. Participating artist Marcel Odenbach and Spike regular Hans-Jürgen Hafner discuss.

View of “von hier aus”



HANS-JÜRGEN HAFNER In 1984, you were one of the participants in what many have since called a landmark exhibition: “von hier aus – Zwei Monate neue deutsche Kunst in Düsseldorf” (From Here: Two Months of New German Art in Düsseldorf). The show was curated by Kasper König, who, by then, was already legendary as a curator, or *Ausstellungsmacher* (exhibition-maker). It had an ambitious scenography, with an architecture designed by the Austrian Hermann Czech for the spacious Halle 13 at Messe Düsseldorf, the city's trade fairgrounds. A full-on “town given to the artists,” as the German art critic Manfred Hermes skeptically noted.

MARCEL ODENBACH You had to walk up this huge ramp and got a view over what looked like a model town. But I can't say that I liked the show altogether. All the video works were displayed on a single small TV monitor almost off the parcours, next to the bookstore. The same monitor also played joint works by Marina Abramović and Ulay, and videos by my colleagues and sometime collaborators in Produzentengruppe ATV, Klaus vom Bruch and Ulrike Rosenbach. We were not on equal footing with the painters and sculptors, but were presented as something like an additional program.

HJH I can confirm your impression from the surviving exhibition floor plan: There is indeed one solitary video box placed slightly off-center. How come? And to what extent were you involved with the planning of the presentation? I understand that the “spaces” were designed in collaboration with the artists themselves.



Andreas Schulze, *Untitled*, 1984; Nam June Paik, *TV Trichter* (TV Funnel), 1984

MO I cannot say that I was involved at all! Video art was outdated and literally outmoded by the new style of painting. I remember my participation – really, the general inclusion of videos – was only prompted by an open letter in the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* addressed to König by the wonderful Ingrid Oppenheim, a famous video gallerist and new media pioneer who ran her own production studio. We had worked together from the late 1970s onwards, and she promoted, produced, and collected my video works.

In her letter, she made a general argument about video art and the degree to which it was marginalized within the exhibition practices of the 1980s. Video was suddenly excluded from the notorious *Großausstellungen* (large-scale exhibitions) organized by famous curators. When König [and László Glózer] organized “Westkunst – zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939” (Western Art – Contemporary Art since 1939) in Cologne three years prior, the show went entirely without video. Vom Bruch, Rosenbach, Rune Mields, and I protested the show because of both its title and the underlying art-historical narrative, which ignored not only the art of the 70s, but female artists altogether. As *Videorebellen* (Video Rebels), we made a response, “West Protest,” that

“von hier aus” was unusual, and somehow even unprecedented, in that it was not a museum show.

aired on the ZDF. By that point already, the new art in Germany was all about painting, especially the *Neue Wilde* (New Fauves).

In the end, we, video artists were only invited to “von hier aus” due to Oppenheim’s support. We even found ourselves sidelined in the catalogue! Of course, Nam June Paik was prominently featured. He presented a huge piece – but that was a media sculpture rather than a video.

HJH His *TV Trichter* (TV Funnel, 1984) – a big, ziggurat-like construction of dozens of TV monitors hung from the ceiling – was definitely the show’s signature piece. Of course, Paik was a protagonist of an earlier generation of artists with strong ties to the Cologne avant-garde of the 60s. Other Fluxus artists like Robert

Photo: © Hermann Czech

Filliou and Tomas Schmit were also prominently featured.

The letter you mentioned was re-published three months after the opening in Germany’s then-leading art periodical, *Kunstforum International*. Addressing not only König, but also other star curators like Harald Szeemann and Edy de Wilde, Oppenheim diagnosed the *Ghettoexistenz* (ghetto existence) of video art, including new media more widely. Yet, I suppose the standard “black boxes” and large-scale projections available in any exhibition today were rather unusual in the early 80s?

MO True! In the two editions of documenta he curated, in 1977 and 1987, Manfred Schneckenburger included video and new media on a large scale. But in 1984, nobody cared – everyone was after the new painting. And let’s not forget performance, which had no representation whatsoever in “von hier aus.” Projections and large-scale video installations only became popular in 1992, following Bill Viola’s famous presentation [*The Arc of Ascent*] at Jan Hoet’s documenta IX.

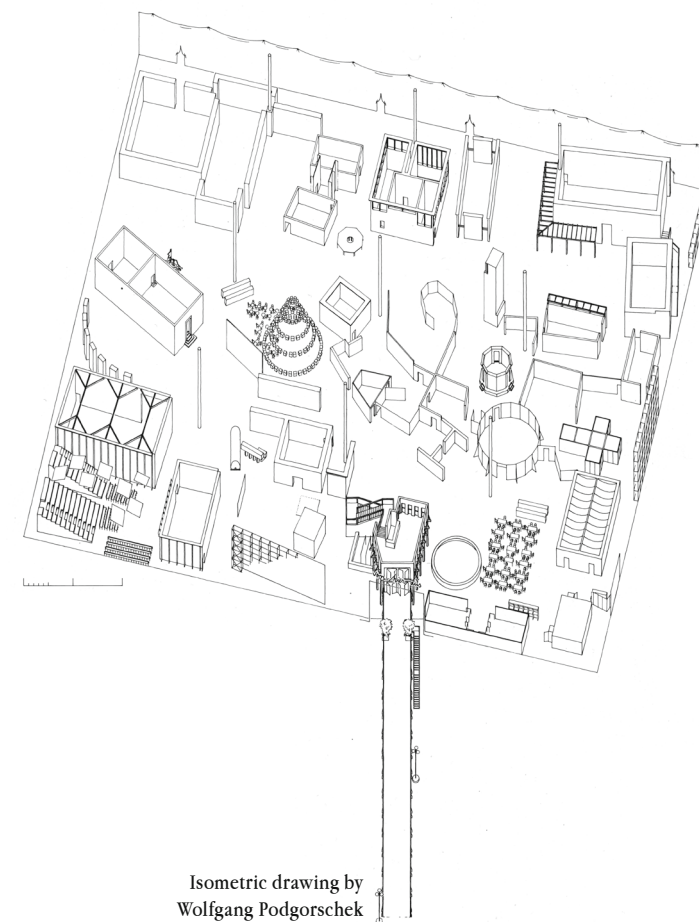
HJH How would you describe your experience of the exhibition and its display?

MO Like “Westkunst,” “von hier aus” was unusual, and somehow even unprecedented, in that it was not a museum show. In a way, both exhibitions indicated a rupture: The art of the 70s was widely based on the concept of site-specificity, and thus, on the importance of the institutional white cube. But by the 80s, artists had returned to their studios and were again producing objects. In the case of “von hier aus,” I see the architecture as a consequence of this development; it had started to look like an art fair.

HJH Compared to the usual exhibition displays, Czech’s architecture, with its individually designed pavilions, temples, and arenas, was a really unique example of exhibition scenography in the 80s. König himself spoke of the exhibition as “postmodern.”

MO Of course! Postmodernity was the big thing then, and brought with it a new focus on design and architecture. Gerhard Merz was a typical example. Combining architecture and sculpture, I believe his work was – in italics – *pathbreaking*. The new art of the 80s wanted accentuation. Everything was produced in costly ways and at large scales, and thus required a new presentational form.

Think of the moderate sizes of German galleries at



Isometric drawing by
Wolfgang Podgorschek

that time. Unlike in the US, Philomene Magers, Konrad Fischer, and Gilli and Diego Stampa all operated out of apartments in old buildings. But by the 80s, this had become inadequate for the new art.

At the Messegelände, there were these huge walls with dozens of square meters of spectacular hangings – painting was everywhere! Salomé, whose works were all about fucking, and Rainer Fetting came from Berlin. There were the guys from Cologne: Mülheimer Freiheit, Walter Dahn, and Jiří Dokoupil. Jörg Immendorff from Düsseldorf was in. And there was the spectacular piece by A.R. Penck, who had arrived only recently from the GDR, along with a lot more Neue Wilde stuff.

HJH You’re suggesting that the artworks demanded the specific architectural form, rather than it being imposed onto the art by a curatorial decision?

MO Right. But this was also a reason why video art was neglected. You couldn’t go big with the technologies available then. It was just not interesting enough from an architectural perspective.

HJH There is a full issue of *Kunstforum* (September/October



Georg Baselitz, *Untitled*, 1982



Olaf Metzel, *In die Produktion* (In the Production), 1984; A.R. Penck, *Ich bin D-(West)* (I Am G-[West]), 1984

1984) dedicated to “von hier aus,” which is very helpful for those of us who were too young to see the show. There are some remarkable sections of abstract art, like *Konstellation* (Constellation, 1975/84) by Imi Knoebel, with its patterns of bright red shaped like canvases. And Gerhard Richter presented a new and complete series explicitly titled “Abstrakte Bilder” (Abstract Pictures, 1976–81). In later years, Richter would always emphasize that “von hier aus” was a turning point in his career – that is, a boost to it.

Given that the show was an image campaign for Düsseldorf’s profile as a *Kunstmetropole* (art capital), I find it surprising that so many artists and galleries from Cologne were so prominently featured. Michael Werner obviously brought all his gallery stable downwards the Rhine: Immendorff, Georg Baselitz, Markus Lüpertz, Marcel Broodthaers – who had lived in Düsseldorf but died in Cologne – and even Per Kirkeby were all on board.

As for the “new German art” coming out of Düsseldorf, König put an emphasis on the so-called *Modellbauer* (model builders), a group of up-and-coming artists whose new style became such an artistic asset to the city: Katharina Fritsch, Reinhard Mucha, Thomas Schütte ...

MO We progressives used to call them *die Bastler* (the tinkerers). It gives you a good impression of how market-driven this whole project was. Whereas video art never sold: Oppenheim had to quit altogether at some point.

When I was preparing for our conversation, I read about the rivalry between Cologne and Düsseldorf as a motivation for the show. But back then, I didn’t take much notice of that background noise.

HJH In 1984, the old Kunstmarkt Köln rebranded as Art Cologne, most likely to give it a more “international” feel. During the 80s, the literal “New Spirit in Painting,” and especially the Neue Wilde, drew a lot of artists, dealers, and collectors to the city, which was bad news for Düsseldorf. The local officials there were desperate to catch up to Cologne again, not only art-wise, but in terms of its profile as the capital of the Rhineland. I think that’s why “von hier aus” was backed by the city with a budget of 3.5 million D-Marks, which is an amazing figure. Compare that to documenta 7 (1982), where Rudi Fuchs had only twice as much to spend, despite the fact that documenta was already well-established as both the most successful signature exhibition in Germany and a national brand.

Photos: © Harald Schönfellinger

Great national survey exhibitions were unheard of, and when they happened, they regularly attracted large audiences.

MO The big buzz in Cologne was linked entirely to the art market. Before the Neue Wilde rose to such prominence, the scene there was quite different, and far more experimental. With the return of painting, the art scene suddenly divided into two scenes.

In the 70s, we used to go to Düsseldorf a lot. The art scene there was much more concise, and Conceptual art was very influential. But the Düsseldorfers somehow missed the boat. Polke moved to Cologne in 1978, Richter followed him five years later, and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf underwent a difficult phase of re-organization. Really, that process started in 1972, when Joseph Beuys was sacked from his professorship. The spirit was gone.

HJH In 1985, König came to Düsseldorf as a professor of “Art and the Public,” which was quite a new discipline. I

can’t help understanding “von hier aus” as his introduction to the city. How do you feel about the “New German Art” branding, which was very useful as something like a quality seal in promoting Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer, and their like internationally?

MO “von hier aus” was actually both a continuation of and a reaction to the “Westkunst” exhibition in 1981. It was still a time when there weren’t that many biennales. Great national survey exhibitions were unheard of, and when they happened, they regularly attracted large audiences. Such exhibitions have certainly contributed to the enormous expansion of the circle of people interested in contemporary art since the 80s. At the time, we found it shockingly market- and success-oriented, and I believe that it was formative for the situation we have come to see as normal today. Things come and go. Nevertheless, you felt compelled to take part. Looking back, it’s hard for me to understand that, but maybe it was important back then to start a controversy. —

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HANS-JÜRGEN HAFNER is a Berlin-based author, art critic, and curator.