

Exhibition Texts

Extreme Tension. Art between Politics and Society

Collection of the Nationalgalerie 1945 – 2000

18.11.2023 to 28.09.2025

Neue Nationalgalerie

Introduction

The art of the second half of the twentieth century is characterised by great contradictions and an enormous variety of media and strategies. At the same time, division, disruption, and renewal marked this era more than almost any other before. The aftermath of the Holocaust and wartime destruction, the subsequent spirit of optimism, emancipation movements, and the Cold War lead to tensions within society and to fundamental realignments in the visual arts. This exhibition focuses on the major conflicts and ideological confrontations between East and West, abstraction and figuration, between traditional artistic genres and experimental new forms.

Here we show central works from the collection of the Nationalgalerie from 1945 to the turn of the millennium.

The title is borrowed from a radical performance by the Viennese actionist Günter Brus from 1970 in which he not only tested his physical limits, but also pointed to strong tensions between society, politics, and art. Thus, the presentation is arranged according to social or artistic themes. It does not provide an art-historical overview, instead addressing relevant questions about art of the second half of the twentieth century from today's perspective. In fourteen chapters, we see how the tension between realism and abstraction, traditional artistic techniques and new technologies, everyday life and pop, the connection between politics and society, or topics such as feminism, ecology, and fluid identities have been negotiated. In-depth texts and historical photographs embed the art in its socio-political and cultural context.

The starting point is the unique collection of the Nationalgalerie, which is marked by the history of divided Germany. During the 40-year division of the country, the Nationalgalerie existed in both the East and the West. Its collection now reflects the different conceptions of art and political value systems that emerged after the end of World War II. After Germany's reunification in 1989/90, the collection of the Nationalgalerie was also reunited. The art and cultural history of the two German states becomes visible in an international context.

The exhibition shows paintings, objects, photographs, and video works from the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, Western Europe, and the United States of America, as well as newer developments from formerly socialist countries. In addition to major works from the collection, lesser-known works are also on display, for example by Horst Bartnig or Bernadette Bour. Loans of works by artists such as Kiki Kogelnik, Maria Lassnig, Ewa Partum, Pipilotti Rist, Cornelia Schleime, and Carol Rama complement the presentation. The aim is a substantial increase of women artists' visibility and the acquisition of the highlighted works for the collection over the next two years. This presentation is curated by Joachim Jäger, Marta Smolińska, and Maike Steinkamp. Irina Hiebert Grun contributed texts. Julia Freiboth and Felicitas Fritsche-Reyrink are responsible for education and outreach.

Additional information on individual works is available via the QR codes next to the exhibition

Room "Abstraction/Figuration"

In May 1945 large parts of the world stand in a state between despair and reorientation. The experience of war, annihilation and terror has left deep scars. At the same time, the political opposition between the Soviet Union (USSR) and the USA leads to major conflicts. The resulting Cold War divides Europe at the end of the 1940s into an authoritarian and socialist Eastern bloc and a democratic and capitalist-oriented West.

This division of the world into East and West characterises almost all social realms and leads to significant ideological appropriation. In the visual arts there is an almost worldwide dispute over which direction to pursue: figurative or abstract? In Western Europe and the USA a young generation of artists turns towards new, abstract forms of expression. Artists like K.O. Götz, Judit Reigl and Wols see abstract painting as a dynamic, corporeal process. Mark Rothko and Morris Louis create large-scale, sometimes monochrome surfaces of colour that lead to a dissolution of boundaries and a spatialisation of painting. By contrast, in East Germany and other socialist countries, socialist realism – a realist method with contemporary subject matter, modelled on the example of the Soviet Union's cultural ideology – is held aloft as an ideal. But the ideological boundaries are not drawn quite so radically in the arts as they are on the political level. Some artists from the USSR and its allied Eastern European states, such as Harald Metzkes or Werner Tübke, break away from the precepts of the

politically stipulated socialist realism. Artists in Western Europe and the USA also continue to pursue figurative tendencies, as can be seen in the paintings and sculptures of Pablo Picasso or Henry Moore.

In-Depth-Text: Socialist Realism

The escalation of the Cold War and Germany's division in 1949 into two separate countries – the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East – have a direct influence on art. Already in the years preceding this division, cultural policy in the Soviet-occupied zone, later East Germany, has a stronger socialist orientation. This is also true for the Eastern European republics forming concurrently, such as Poland and Hungary. In art, there is a call for a forward-looking, realist form of expression in the model of the socialist realism that was already mandated in the Soviet Union since 1934.

Socialist realism follows an easily understandable visual programme with subject matter consistent with socialism's political goals. Expressive and abstract tendencies are increasingly rejected as formalist, bourgeois and decadent. In the "formalism debate" of the years 1948 to 1953 there are tenacious disputes in East Germany about the direction of art. The formalism debate even affects artists who hold a positive view of East German politics. Horst Stempel, for example, sees his mural painting *Clear the Rubble, Rebuild!*, painted in 1948 in the Berlin train station at Friedrichstrasse and highly acclaimed at the time, painted over in February 1951. Even Fritz Cremer's portrait of the miner Franz Franik, depicted so realistically and positively with a helmet and miner's lamp, is criticised because the medal awarded to him is missing from the portrait bust, thus failing to elevate him. East German art is integrated into the formation of a new German culture with heated debates, regulated by the Socialist Unity Party, among artists, the public and state functionaries. Abstract art in the West and socialist realism in the East are set in ideological opposition to one another. After Stalin's death in March 1953, the Socialist Unity Party introduces a "new course" that grants concessions in the arts, which are now once again permitted to change direction depending on the political situation. Socialist realism remains a political and artistic guiding principle until the end of the German Democratic Republic in 1989/1990.

In-Depth-Text: Abstraction as a Universal Language?

Following the end of the Second World War, in Western European countries and the United States of America abstraction is seen as a demonstration of freedom and democracy. In 1959 the *documenta*, an art exhibition held in Kassel that continues to be one of the world's most important, includes almost exclusively abstract works. In addition to Informel artwork by artists like Wols, Hans Hartung and K.O. Götz, or the abstract expressionists like Jackson Pollock, works by artists like Willi Baumeister, Ernst Wilhelm Nay and Fritz Winter are also on display. Their ability to work had been restricted in Germany under National Socialism. After 1945 they are extolled as champions of a new, free, abstract German art. In West Germany after the war, the belief in a "universal language of abstraction" became a great promise: after the experiences of the Nazi regime of terror and the Holocaust, the art world places its hopes in abstraction as a means of cultural renewal. Having freed itself from any visible reality, art can now serve as a model for a new Germany that looks towards the future. It stands for the promise of a new freedom that categorically distances itself from the Nazi past and from the looming socialism of East Germany. Further, the triumph of abstract art in Western Europe is part of a political strategy on the part of the USA. Its promotion is partly funded by the CIA. The goal is to equate Western freedom with abstraction and Eastern oppression with realism. The choice between figuration and abstraction is a political one.

One of the greatest advocates of abstract art as a universal language is the art historian Werner Haftmann. With his pivotal book *Painting in the Twentieth Century* (1954) and the first three *documenta* exhibitions, organised by him in 1955, 1959 and 1964, he establishes this authoritative interpretation of art. In 1968 Haftmann becomes director of the newly opened Neue Nationalgalerie in West Berlin. His understanding of post-war art is still legible in the Nationalgalerie's collection. Haftmann's involvement in National Socialist crimes during the Second World War remains unmentioned for decades. His membership in the Nazi party (NSDAP) and his military deployment against the Italian resistance have only recently been scrutinised. Haftmann's long-ignored entanglement, in particular, highlights the continuities between the Nazi regime and the post-war period. His biography is characterised by the same contradiction and inconsistency that shapes the discussion of abstract art. Art and its protagonists are free neither of their pasts, nor of being subject to new ideological instrumentalising.

Room “Existential Experiences”

In 1945, life is characterised by uncertainty and anxiety. The Second World War and the Holocaust, the systematic annihilation of entire populations by the Nazis, have shown the atrocities of which humanity is capable. The dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the beginning of the Cold War and the division of the world into two political and military power blocs all perpetuate the feeling of existential dread. In their work, many artists react to these traumatic experiences and to the repercussions of violence, leading to a deep sense of insecurity in society more broadly. In his books, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre describes a despair about human existence and speaks of a “burden of responsibility for the future”. Anxiety and inner turmoil are evident in the spindly, elongated figures by Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti. The unfathomable black holes on the sombre reliefs of the American artist Lee Bontecou abstractly embody the feeling of insecurity. The Cuban artist Wifredo Lam and the Chilean artist Roberto Matta respond to the political uncertainties of the time with dark, otherworldly paintings. Taking their personal feelings as a starting point, they grappled with the general situation of the world. The paintings of Harald Metzkes and Strawalde, created in East Germany, also express the fear for one’s own existence through the choice of subject and the subdued colours.

In-Depth-Text: Response to the Fears of the World – Wifredo Lam

Painted in dark shades of grey, the painting *The Wedding* by the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam is filled with mysticism and symbolism. In the centre stands a bird-like creature balancing on a wheel. The figure’s outstretched arms hold a sword and a three-armed candelabrum. To her left and right are two additional figures, half human, half animal. All three are abstract to the point of becoming emblems or symbols. The scene seems less like a wedding than a royal ceremony in which the balance between war and peace is being weighed. The image is in keeping with the uncertain, perilous period of the 1950s. In 1940, in the midst of the Second World War and after residing in Europe for almost 20 years, Lam returns to Cuba. His return is not voluntary. Like for many other artists and intellectuals, the Nazi occupation of Paris leaves him no choice. Back in Cuba, he is shaken by the political and economic situation there. The US-backed dictatorial regime of Fulgencio Batista is marked by corruption, violence, political intrigue and instability. Especially after the start of the Cold War, the interests of the government become increasingly mixed up with those of the mafia and high finance. The government works to serve US-American political interests by suppressing the influence of the Communists and the trade unions through targeted assassinations and the founding of a pro-government trade union. *The Wedding* is a response to these unstable times. Lam creates a symbolic visual language with masks, totems and animal forms, some of which he borrows from the African-Cuban religion of Santería. He combines human, animal and vegetal elements, in this way creating a dreamlike, ambiguously decipherable world that becomes for him a universal metaphor of an uncertain and fragmented reality.

Room “The Performative Image”

At the end of the 1940s, abstract painting based on elementary forms emerges in the USA. Radically simplified colour fields create an effect that can even ascend to the spiritual. The large-format canvases demand the viewer’s corporeal participation. Painting becomes performative. Mind and body are not seen as opposites but form an experience that is charged with tension. In his painting *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV*, Barnett Newman, one of the main proponents of this kind of painting, intensifies the effect to the extreme. Although the artist’s own statements tend to refer to intellectual and cultural themes, the image’s physicality remains an important aspect for the viewer, whose experience of the visual space changes depending on their position. Franz Erhard Walther continued this approach in *Place*: in this work you, as a museum visitor, are invited to participate in the artwork. In contrast, on K.O. Götz’s canvas, the brushstrokes convey the artist’s movements during the creative process. Carolee Schneemann’s feminist stance shifts the performative aspect of abstract painting even more to the body of the artist herself – we can see its dynamic as she paints.

In-Depth-Text: Feminist and Embodied Painting – Carolee Schneemann

In the 1970s Carolee Schneemann reacts to male-dominated abstract expressionism with a series of feminist performances. Within this art movement, artists focus on the painterly gesture, often with reference to surrealism. Schneemann’s *Up to and Including Her Limits* is a key performance from these years. The artist performs it nine times between 1971 and 1976. In it, she hangs naked from a

tree-climbing harness and draws lines on the surfaces around her. During the action she changes the height of suspension to cover as many sheets of paper as possible with her drawings. With this immediately visible act of painting, Schneemann is responding to the stance of artists like Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly, who never show the bodily act of painting directly. Her performances are, above all, a response to the now-famous method of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. Pollock lets the paint drip freely onto a canvas spread on the ground. In this way, the artist emphasises the dynamics and physicality of his art, called action painting. In particular, Hans Namuth's widely distributed films and photographs showing Pollock at work make this performative character of painting famous. Crucially, and in contrast to Pollock, Schneemann goes one step further. Her body, too, becomes an active instrument of painting. But she leaves the rectangular canvas in order to move forward into the actual space. The painting process – visible through the artist's efforts, documented in the video – places painting's physicality in the foreground. Schneemann thus enters a critical dialogue with male-dominated art with its focus on the finished object. Schneemann, in contrast, is concerned with the process – through the conscious viewing of the female body.

Room “Everyday Life Becomes Art”

The 1950s are marked by a robust economic boom in Western Europe and the USA. More and more goods and products appear on the market, are used and disposed of, creating a throwaway society. The many things with which people, especially in the cities, surround themselves, also change the way culture is understood. Whether in theatre, music or the visual arts, increasing numbers of artists seek ways to integrate the everyday world into their work.

In Italy, Lucio Fontana cuts up his canvases. The seemingly harmless cut through the middle of the canvas actually represents a radical stress test for art. Suddenly the image becomes an object. Beginning in New York and Paris, and soon in many other cities, artists begin to take an interest in used everyday objects. They visit flea markets, collecting discarded objects and integrating them into their art. In *Pink Door*, for example, Robert Rauschenberg combines a paper collage with the door of a chicken coop. In Paris, Jean Tinguely builds machines from rusty metal. In Düsseldorf, Otto Piene works with fire. In Italy, Carol Rama incorporates old, cut-up bicycle tyres into her paintings, and in Spain, Antoni Tàpies uses earth and cement. Tadeusz Kantor in Poland glues an old leather bag to a canvas. The heavily worn things in these artwork irritate. Some call it anti-art. In fact, the young artists are interested in directing our gaze to the aesthetics of everyday life.

In-Depth-Text: Expansion of the Pictorial Space – Lucio Fontana

Lucio Fontana creates the first composition of his series *Spatial Concept* already in 1949. He pierces a canvas covered with paper, creating many holes in irregular circles. The first cut into the painting's surface follows in 1958. Ugo Mulas captures this spectacular and ground-breaking act of cutting – and the photograph becomes an iconic image in the history of art. Fontana uses special knives to ensure perfection. The paintings that achieve the greatest clarity are monochromatic surfaces featuring a single cut running along the vertical axis. Critics describe Fontana's act as an attack on the tradition of the image and even speak of the death of painting. But by cutting it open, the artist does not seek to destroy the painting. His goal is to expand the possibilities of the image and instead of painterly illusion to open up a dialogue with the real space. In *Spatial Concept*, painted perspective is dissolved through a view into the space that, for the artist, eludes scientific rules. For Fontana, the mysterious effect this creates is equally important. He increases it by backing the canvas with dark, thin fabric behind the cut. This intensifies the contrast between the light-coloured surfaces of the paintings and an unfathomable darkness looming behind the open cuts. The seemingly harmless cut through the canvas has a momentous effect, leading to a fundamental new beginning in art.

Room “Pop and Propaganda”

The 1960s are characterised by stark contrasts: economic boom, sexual liberation, the moon landing, the Vietnam War and student protests dominate everyday life and the mass media. In the USA, Andy Warhol becomes the leading figure of pop art, drawing from the colourful world of media imagery and capitalism. Anything can become art: images of stars like Elvis Presley or President John F. Kennedy are possibilities, just as much as comics, soup cans or dollar bills. The Chinese leader Mao Zedong fascinates in the East and the West, becoming a global topic of interest. The West German artist Thomas Bayrle takes up the theme ironically with his portrait machine, in which the serious portrait of Mao transforms itself into a red star. The striking style and bright colours of pop art permeate art in

vastly different ways and in many countries, including socialist ones. Elements of mass media appear, for example, in Juri Korolov's *Cosmonauts*, painted in the Soviet Union, or in Willi Sitte's monumental *Leuna 1969*, painted in the German Democratic Republic. But in both, the two artists deploy the formal language of pop art to visualise political messages directly and with mass appeal. This art often serves political goals and social manipulation.

In-Depth-Text: 'Pop'-Propaganda – Willi Sitte

Pop Art is frowned upon in East Germany because of its orientation towards the capitalist world of commodities. Nevertheless, mass media finds its way into the arts' visual language not only in East Germany, but also in the Soviet Union and other socialist states. The painter Willi Sitte, who lives in Halle, knows Pop Art well from his many visits to countries in the West. As a celebrated and privileged East German state artist, he has permission to travel there, unlike most of his compatriots. In the 1960s Sitte begins experimenting with advertising design techniques and motifs from everyday life. He uses these as well in his monumental painting *Leuna 1969*. The Volkseigener Betrieb Leuna, a publicly owned enterprise and the largest chemical plant in East Germany at the time, commissions the work. In it, Sitte uses expressive artistic means to create a positive image of the future of the workers' class in East Germany. Arduous physical labour has been replaced by a control panel, manned by a worker who directs the fate of the plant, creating harmony between labour, party ideology and science. To the left and right of this central figure, Sitte depicts the reconstruction of the chemical plant after the Second World War and its modernisation and mechanisation with Soviet help. This progress leads to the cheerfully laughing family depicted in the right-hand half of the image. The political message is clear: East Germany's successful economic policy produces happy East German citizens. Thematically, Sitte thus faithfully follows the guidelines of socialist realism, whereas formally he uses a dynamic, expressive visual language and motifs from mass media, such as the struggle for freedom, mass society and the rainbow symbol. Despite his pop aesthetic, or precisely because of it, Sitte's painting *Leuna 1969* is a propagandistic image. It deploys the means of pop culture to disseminate the political message of socialist progress boldly and vividly. In East Germany, such formal liberties were granted only to those artists who clearly declared their support for the GDR's political programme.

Room "A More Beautiful Life"

Dreary or sexy, liberal or severely restricted – the everyday lives of people in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s differ greatly. Depending on their level of prosperity and the political system in which they live, people experience different conditions, values, and perspectives. Many artists address the realities of their lives with a great love of detail, but also with an irony and wit that make their attitudes clear. The sculptor Walter Arnold faithfully follows East German the state ideology of East Germany. His sculpture subtitled *A More Beautiful Life* elevates an unknown woman worker to the status of a monument. Wolfgang Mattheuer, by in contrast, takes a very critical view of socialist society: his *The Distinguished One* shows a lonely woman directed entirely inward in a moment of introversion. Markus Lüpertz and Konrad Klapheck, in turn, mock West Germany's belief in progress and turn ironically against the colourful world of commodities in illustrated magazines. Sigmar Polke, Domenico Gnoli and Franz Gertsch point in their works to the media's effect of the media and the growing significance of lifestyle and fashion. Wolf Vostell reflects much more critically on the effects of capitalist society. In works such as *Mania* he explores the abysses of the new compulsion to consume and of mass communication.

In-Depth-Text: An Uncanny World of Things – Konrad Klapheck

Konrad Klapheck already lays the foundations for his artistic subject matter as a student at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. While most of the artists around him are painting gesturally and abstractly, Klapheck borrows a typewriter from the brand Continental from a shop and depicts it with great precision on canvas. Isolated and slightly off-centre, his *Typewriter* from 1955 shows a precisely painted object, that for the artist, unfolds an uncanny life of its own. Klapheck subsequently concentrates on painting machines, appliances and tools. His images are, on one hand, expressions of the era of the "Wirtschaftswunder", the West German economic miracle of production and abundance, but on the other hand they lack any semblance of a belief in progress. The apparatuses are pictured in an only seemingly realistic way; often they are simplified and represented with distorted perspective. Most of them lack a crucial part necessary for their functioning. In their austerity and isolation, the objects, drawn from mundane everyday life, seem static on one hand, but also uncannily

real and animated on the other. With his ironic titles, Klapheck also suggests a connection between human being and machine, for example when he titles a sewing machine *The Offended Bride*. The artist thus also ascribes stereotypical gender roles to his objects: while the sewing machine assumes the female role, the typewriter symbolises fathers or male politicians and rulers. Klapheck painted around forty versions of each machine. The large-format *The Splendors and Miseries of the Reforms* may be interpreted as a biting allegory with which the painter refers to the social and economic underside of progress. The image depicts a bulldozer with anthropomorphic features: the driver's cab with its waving sunshade recalls a head with flying hair, the steel shield in front the maw of a ravenous monster.

Room "Battlefield Germany"

Great inner turmoil characterises the societies of the two German states in the 1970s. In West Germany, the armed struggle of individual political groups like the Red Army Faction (RAF) leads to widespread public debate. After kidnappings and terrorist attacks, the West German government establishes the GSG 9, a special police unit charged with protection and enforcing order. The artist Katharina Sieverding uses a press photo of the GSG 9 to give it a new and critically charged meaning: in *Battlefield Germany* the police appear threatening, suggesting the process of becoming a state governed by violence. The artist Wolf Vostell, who lives in West Berlin, refers in his work *Endogenous Depression* to a hopelessness coming from within. With his sculpture, he criticises the false promises of mass media. A.R. Penck creates a painting, composed entirely of bewildering signs that is closely tied to his biography: in 1980 he is forced to leave East Germany for political reasons, but initially feels foreign and disoriented in the West. The Leipzig-based painter Hans Ticha, who makes his living primarily as a graphic designer in the advertising industry exaggerates East Germany's military force to the point of the grotesque. This is a courageous criticism of the state, something not permitted in a dictatorship. Ticha cannot exhibit the painting in public for the duration of the German Democratic Republic's existence.

Room "Nature/Culture"

In the twentieth century, drastic interventions in the environment caused by industry, transport and technology lead to widespread destruction across the planet. The idea of nature's invulnerability is shattered, raising the question of what nature actually is. Beginning in the 1960s, many artists increasingly turn to the subjects of ecology, environmental protection and sustainability, or devote their works to the tense relationship between nature and culture. Nature is not only a subject, but also becomes integrated into art using natural materials. Richard Long, Mario Merz and Giuseppe Penone use stones and branches, which they bring into the exhibition spaces in the form of sculptures and installations. With an object entitled *Constricted River*, Hans Haacke encapsulates the tension between nature and culture. Even Günther Uecker's *Forest*, laid out with such aliveness, is an artificially created world. Gina Pane, on the other hand, seems to want to protect the Earth with her own body. The crack in the dry ground in Bettina von Arnim's painting shows drastically where the exploitation of raw materials leads. Other artists depart entirely from classical art genres and work instead with performances or as activists. Agnes Denes sows a wheatfield in the middle of New York, Joseph Beuys plants 7,000 oak trees and Bill Bollinger uses a ton of toxic waste oil as an admonitory sculpture.

In-Depth-Text: Art as Environmental Protection – Agnes Denes

Agnes Denes is a pioneer of ecological art and land art. From the 1960s, in her frequently site-specific art, she investigates human influence on the environment. In her landscape interventions as well as in her theoretical-conceptual works, Denes uses not only artistic, but also scientific, mathematical and philosophical methods. Her best-known work is *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*: in the spring and summer of 1982, she, together with volunteers, plants a wheat field on a former landfill near the financial district in New York City, transforming this barren place into a fruitful landscape within four months. Stalks of grain ripen at the foot of the World Trade Center. After the harvest, the wheat is distributed globally. With her project, Denes draws attention to the injustices of world trade, to hunger crises and to ecological issues. She had already highlighted human-caused environmental destruction in 1968 with *Rice/Tree/Burial*, one of the first performative artworks with an ecological reference. Later she actively fights environmental destruction in *Tree Mountain – A Living Time Capsule*, commissioned by the Finish Ministry of the Environment and the United Nations Environment

Programme to find an artistic solution for an area in western Finland destroyed by the mining of natural resources. The artist has 11,000 volunteers plant 11,000 pine trees in the area, which is legally protected for the next 400 years. With her art, Denes seeks to galvanise and create change. Her projects encourage collective reflection on sustainability, environmental protection and the common good. Today they are more relevant than ever.

Room “Analogue Systems”

In the 1960s the everyday world in industrial countries undergoes significant transformation. Mass-produced serial items largely displace handmade objects. The aesthetics of uniform structures and patterns also shape modern architecture, as in the form of skyscrapers and highways. Mathematics and physics gain new attention through ambitious technological goals like space travel. The first computers are used in science and industry beginning in 1960.

Many artists are fascinated by these technological and serial systems. Their artworks are composed of repeating identical or similar elements. In the USA, with his prolific series *Homage to the Square*, Josef Albers creates a prime example for artistic thinking in modules. Bridget Riley's and Victor Vasarely's austere, poetic compositions of flickering lines or grids, derived from observations of optical phenomena, are ground-breaking. Wojciech Fangor's closely juxtaposed coloured rings and circles have a spatial and psychedelic effect. The serial designs of Zdeněk Sýkora and Horst Bartnig are already based on computer programmes, though still painted by hand. Their works are analogue systems on the threshold of the digital world.

In-Depth-Text: The Computer as a Medium – Horst Bartnig

When the computer emerges in the 1960s, it is a great innovation. At first, only few people have access to the expensive calculating machines. Nonetheless, artists, too, soon begin using the new technology. In 1964 Horst Bartnig, who lives in East Germany, begins making paintings of pure, unmixed colours and geometric forms. In 1972 he starts using computer technology in the production of his increasingly complex image series. Together with a physicist, Bartnig develops a mathematical key that calculates all possible variations of form and colour for his abstract groups of works. Beginning in 1979, together with two scientists from the Zentralinstitut für Informatik und Rechentechnik (Central Institute for Computing Science and Computing Technology) in the Berlin neighbourhood Adlershof, he enters this variable system into the Soviet mainframe computer BESM-6. With help of the computer, he can now generate hundreds of graphics. Bartnig uses these as a basis for developing his pictorial ideas, which he then transfers onto canvas with brush and acrylic paint. His paintings are concerned with the artistic interpretation and visualisation of methods and systems. Bartnig categorically excludes chance and the personal hand of the artist, which were considered essential artistic criteria for so long, especially in abstract art. Mainframe computers serve artists like Bartnig in realising an idea that they then transfer to canvas by hand. Unlike today, when the artistic process of digital art takes place on the computer, the paintings by Bartnig look digital but are ultimately produced with an analogue technique.

Room “Shouting to the Point of Exhaustion”

In the 1960s, ideas and thoughts increasingly become an artistic priority. Both the West and the East witness the emergence of conceptual art. In a way, conceptual art is anti-art because it focuses on the ideas and the creative process rather than the material result. The processual nature often leads to an exploration of resilience and the limit imposed by physical exhaustion. These artistic strategies are characterised by seriality and constant, exhausting repetition. The boundary between art and life is suspended as the artists view their ongoing works as long-term activities. Their own lives become art. In the mid-1960s Roman Opalka makes a radical decision and begins his conceptual project *1965/1–∞*, which is to last for the rest of his life. Opalka's goal is to paint the duration of a human life. Each number is a trace of passing time. Bernadette Bour creates an illegible script whose rhythm is determined by letters, numbers, scribbles and marks of threads and wire. The artist visualises the physicality of the writing process by repeating her gestures – like Jochen Gerz repeats his shouts – to the point of exhaustion.

In-Depth-Text: An Unjustly Forgotten Conceptual Artist – Bernadette Bour

During the 1970s, the French artist Bernadette Bour develops a conceptual process determined by repetition and variation. Her series *Index Cards in Process* consists of 42 works divided into five

stages, according to their display on the exhibition wall. The first row, referred to by Bour as “analogue carriers of sculpture – of writing – of painting”, carries out a “working process through subtraction” in the second row, a “contraction and stretching” in the third, the “use of sewing machine on paper” in the fourth and an “addition” in the fifth. This rules-based process incorporates a variety of techniques and materials, such as a net formed of wire, holes punched into paper with a needle and threads sewn onto fabric. Many pages of grids show rows of numbers written in pencil, simple arithmetic steps, hatchings and lettering. These handwritten signs – created according to a strict, repetitive system in a persistent process that plays through variations – betray a connection to the art of Hanne Darboven, who at the end of the 1960s invents her own writing and arithmetic system, leading to an overwhelming volume of drawings. Whereas Darboven is primarily interested in the representation of time, Bour also invests her concerns – which at first glance seem purely formal – with meaning, for example when she defines sewing with the contrasting pair “liberating threads: art vs. constricting threads: the social”. By seeing the technique of sewing, traditionally associated with women’s domestic work, as artistically worthy, and integrating it into her practice, Bour performs an act of feminist liberation – an approach that Rosemarie Trockel further develops in the mid-1980s with her knitted paintings. Whereas Darboven and Trockel are internationally recognised today, Bour’s oeuvre is largely forgotten.

Room “From the Factory”

In the early 1960s, American artists like Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Dan Flavin are fascinated by serially manufactured products from factories: fluorescent tubes, metal boxes or building materials that always look the same. They adopt the seriality and flawlessness of these machine-made everyday objects in their art. After making his first boxes out of plywood and other materials by hand, from 1964 onwards Judd commissions the family business Bernstein Brothers to produce his works industrially. Thanks to its cool elegance and the lack of any emotion, this art soon receives the label “non-art”. It is, in fact, a new artistic stance that pays special attention not only to the neutral object but also to the place where it is shown. Even if the works of German artist Charlotte Posenenske initially appear to be similarly minimalist, she deliberately departs from this sobriety. Beginning in 1967 she develops the series of square tubes, simple components of metal or cardboard that can be assembled in very different ways, resulting in changing forms and structures. In contrast to rigid and distanced minimalism, her work emphasises one’s own action and participation. The sculptures placed here in the room are therefore also reconstructed several times during the exhibition period.

Room “Freeing the Body”

In 1975 Marina Abramović executes her performance *Freeing the Body*, in which she explores her own physical limits: she dances naked to the rhythms of a drummer while her head is wrapped in a black cloth. After about eight hours she collapses from exhaustion. With this performance, the artist reflects how women are degraded to objects in a male-dominated society. At the same time, the physical experience of pushing herself to the limit represents an act of liberation for Abramović. *Freeing the Body* is part of the feminist art emerging in the 1960s that shifts attention to the female body. Women artists address experiences of exclusion, repression and violence on one hand, but on the other their works bring about emancipation. The naked woman in Rebecca Horn’s video *Unicorn* is laced up in bandages – a symbol of the social restriction of the female body. But Horn’s protagonist is also furnished with a bodily extension: she wears a long stick on her head and strides majestically and self-confidently through the landscape as a hybrid being, thus figuratively liberating herself from all restraints. Roughly twenty years later, Cornelia Schleime’s photographs of laced-up heads and torsos also protest the lack of freedoms for the female body. In addition to being a feminist protest, her experimental bodily actions can also be read as resistance to the lack of freedom in East Germany.

In-Depth-Text: Feminist Interventions in Socialism – Ewa Partum

Ewa Partum is one of the first artists in Poland to create feminist art. Although socialist countries pay lip service to women’s equality, reality looks different. Partum fights for women’s emancipation in her works and in the spring of 1980, a Warsaw gallery exhibits her series of photo collages *Self-Identification*. The artist shows her naked body in Warsaw’s public space: in front of the seat of government, in front of the traffic police on the street or in a queue in front of a grocery store. Several photo collages are censored shortly after the exhibition’s opening. During the exhibition the artist reads a text titled *Self-Identification*, in the nude, for the assembled public. In it, she explains that she

will continue to make nude appearances until the position of women artists on the art market and in museum collections is equal to that of their male peers. After reading the manifesto, Partum steps nude in front of the gallery and confronts a pair of newlyweds just leaving the adjacent registry office. The artist develops this motif further in *Women, Marriage Is against You!*. In this 1980 performance, she wears a wedding dress that she cuts into pieces, in the end presenting herself nude before the audience. It is a courageous attempt to denounce traditional values. In the socialist countries, nudity is considered an antiauthoritarian, anti-system gesture as well as a form of resistance to prevailing social mores and Catholicism. Through the liberation of the body, Partum connects additional political themes with feminism. This was unusual in Poland at the time, where the opposition itself was often linked to the values of the Catholic Church.

Room “Extreme Tension”

1965 sees the founding of the Viennese actionism group, which becomes famous for radical performances. Günter Brus is a part of it. The starting point of his work is the traumatic experience of the Second World War and his own despair when faced with ossified post-war society. In increasingly extreme actions, Brus attacks his own body, which he sees as representing, by proxy, the average Austrian and all human beings at the same time. From his perspective, humans made themselves suspect through the war, dishonouring themselves. In the action piece *Extreme Tension* the artist injures himself with a razor blade. He is dressed provocatively in women's underwear, urinates onto an open wound and inflicts pain on himself. Brus's intention is to test the limits of the human body's resilience. He believes that such an extreme act can change people's attitudes. Brus conceives of the self-injury as a political statement, but simultaneously elevates it to an art form. For him, *Extreme Tension* is linked to an existential question about the future: to continue and possibly kill oneself or to change the art form? Brus decides in favour of the latter and henceforth concentrates on the creation of literary texts and drawings. *Extreme Tension* is still considered one of the most radical actions in the history of art.

Room “Fluid Identities”

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by major political and social upheavals. The loosening of structures of power and values, protest movements and the dissolution of the Eastern bloc lead to changes in culture and the global economy. The speed of information exchange also increases. In fashion, music and art the free combination of highly varied styles prevails. People become more flexible and more mobile. Fixed social roles are questioned. Identities are redefined and seem malleable. These processes seem naturally linked with political emancipation. Many artists of the period turn to questions of identity. Jürgen Klauke and Cindy Sherman show how rapidly roles can change and what social stipulations are associated with them. Sherman is not alone; Candice Breitz, in particular, also intervenes against sexist representations of women. In the politically confined space of East Germany, Angela Hampel draws from images of mythological heroines to indirectly criticise the socio-political system. Clemens Gröszer's work represents the “off”-scene of East German society. The works of Pipilotti Rist are characterised by a liberated view of femininity.

In-Depth-Text: Rebellious Self-Stagings – Sarah Lucas

In the 1990s, British artist Sarah Lucas creates a series of photographic self-portraits. Each of the twelve staged photographs shows the artist in a provocative pose generally considered more typical of men than women. Lucas stages herself as a macho and a hooligan. She wears heavy boots, jeans and leather jackets. She adopts a self-assured attitude and looks directly at the viewer, as if to challenge. In this way the artist questions traditional gender roles and their representation. She adopts the position of a tough and rebellious woman who makes no attempt to please her audience. Lucas wears no make-up and her hair is demonstratively unkempt. She thus creates an image of herself that is diametrically opposed to the beautiful woman whose appearance is supposed to fulfil male expectations. The artist also shows herself on the toilet, half-naked and in a wrinkled and oversized t-shirt, breaking with stereotypical ideas of women as sex objects. She poses with fried eggs on her breasts or while eating a banana, satirically playing off the visual imagery of pornography. She humorously defies the traditional role of the female seductress. Lucas constantly restages her identity, making it mutable and fleeting. The artist herself decides who she will be. But each photo is about a rebellious identity that breaks social norms. The series of self-portraits exemplifies the themes of her entire oeuvre, in which she frequently appropriates male constructions in order to deconstruct them.