Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965

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Background

The terms “postwar,” “post-colonialism,” and “post-communism” describe the cultural, political, and historical conditions under which the world has developed since 1945. As individual subjects of artistic inquiry and cultural analysis, these concepts represent the three-part, long-term research and exhibition project developed by Haus der Kunst and its international institutional partners during the past eight years. The purpose of this project is to bring together leading and emerging scholars, historians, artists, curators, theorists, and students to examine the artistic forces and cultural legacies that have shaped the production of art across the world since 1945. The first part of the project concentrates on art of the postwar era in the two decades between 1945 and 1965.

“Postwar” describes the historical period following the end of World War II in 1945. These years delineate the decisive defeat of Germany in Europe and of Japan in Asia, marking a turning point in global history. The catastrophe and disarray brought about by the war — with whole cities and countries destroyed, tens of millions of people slaughtered, and a massive refugee crisis that impacted millions of stateless people — were cast against the backdrop of the first use of the atomic bomb and a confrontation with the full horror of the concentration camps. The moral and technological legacies of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz came to represent the crisis of humanism.

In the field of art, the postwar period marks a particular historical and cultural turning point, for it brought about...
the waning dominance of Western European art capitals and the rise of the international presence and hegemony of contemporary American art, popular culture, and mass media. This cultural shift, in fact, mirrored the shift in geopolitical power in which defeated Europe acquired and acquiesced to new patrons and protectors. In Europe, as the Cold War divided the continent into two separate spheres of influence—the Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern and Central Europe allied with the Soviet Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries of Western Europe allied with the United States—the state of the arts also revealed a distinct ideological fault line: between communism and capitalist democracy, socialism and liberal democracy.

Informing this simplifying binary, which obscured more complex motivations for artistic production, were the ideological and artistic rationale behind the terms “abstraction” and “socialist realism.” These terms became moral equivalents in the contest for a renewed vision of art after the war.

The same spheres of influence also divided two indomitable competitors in the Pacific: the United States and the Soviet Union. On a global scale, however, several factors complicated this binary—decolonization struggles, independence movements, and anti-colonial resistance in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East—even as the Cold War powers courted and sought control of the new nations. These increasingly independent actors suggested quite different orientations and alliances—including pan-Africanism and the Non-Aligned Movement—in the wake of imperialism and the end of the war. The question was asked everywhere: what would global modernity look like?
Taking these factors as starting points for a major art-historical inquiry, Haus der Kunst has conceived Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965 as an in-depth, global study of the postwar period across the practices of painting, sculpture, installation, performance, cinema, and music. The exhibition will open at Haus der Kunst on October 14, 2016, and will subsequently travel.

With its global perspective, the exhibition shifts the focus away from the Western vantage point and redirects attention to the polyphonic and multifocal examination of art since 1945. Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965 therefore seeks to understand the complex legacies of artistic practice and art-historical discourses that emerged globally from the devastation wrought by World War II. Through the vital relationship between art works and artists, produced and understood from the perspectives of international, regional, and local contexts, the exhibition traces artistic developments during the first two decades after the war by following the sweeping lines of the two oceans across Europe, Asia, the Pacific Rim, Africa, the Mediterranean, North America, and South America. Probing differing concepts of artistic modernity — such as abstraction, realism, figuration, and representation — the exhibition explores how individual receptions and formulations of modernism informed the variant manifestations of modern art. By following these divergent and convergent vectors of influence, the exhibition invites reflection on the development of art that straddles continents, political structures, economic patterns, and institutional frameworks.

If we are to refigure the cartographies of postwar modernism, what sort of methodologies might we deploy? To what extent did the political exert pressure on the
aesthetic, or the cultural on the artistic? In turn, how did artists, critics, and intellectuals negotiate, resist, or even subvert political ideologies? How did artists reapply their practices and aesthetics in diverse political and cultural contexts, especially in response to hegemonic paradigms? Conversely, how did artistic and intellectual movements from the former colonial peripheries impact the terrains of modernism? How, then, did the circulation of art, objects, discourses, and ideas shape the global contours of postwar modernism? What, if any, were the connections between form and content in the postwar world?

The Exhibition
Postwar sits squarely in the tradition of such large, synthetic historical exhibitions as Westkunst that have looked at the social history of art across several geographic regions under the conditions engendered by World War II. Yet in another sense, the present exhibition is entirely unprecedented, in that it examines art of the postwar era from multiple perspectives — East and West, North and South, colonizer and colonized, Pacific and Atlantic — placing regional, national, transnational, and other interests and affinities in dynamic relation to each other. This critical overview also includes relations of conflict — as in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union — and various liberation struggles, from Algeria to India to Nigeria, from the anti-nuclear campaign to the civil rights movement. It also includes relations of connection — the transnationalism suggested by the “between” of the exhibition title — with people and ideas moving across national boundaries.

Finally, for the first time in the modern history of exhibitions, Postwar describes a truly global condition: the increasingly interlocked and interdependent nature of the
The world today as a single entity, as prompted by new political and technological realities. Organized into eight thematic sections, Postwar illuminates these epochal social, material, and epistemological shifts in their full scale and scope through major artworks, ephemera, and documentation.

Sections

1. Aftermath: Zero Hour and the Atomic Era

The postwar era is introduced by the apocalyptic image of the atomic bomb—a new technology that ushered in an era of intertwined beginnings and endings, promise and betrayal. As contemporaneous images of the concentration camps put an end to European aspirations to moral universalism, the bomb and the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki signaled the end of Europe's political power in the world and the opening of an era of American military dominance. This, in turn, prompted a new kind of war: the Cold War and the arms race. While announcing a period of occupation in Japan, the end of World War II also ushered in an era of struggles for liberation and independence in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Ubiquitous both as an image of itself and in the threat it posed to the entire world, the iconography of the mushroom cloud helped to create a new consciousness of the globe as a single, interconnected entity, a new sense of scale emphasized by the space exploration program that would emerge from military technology, affording views of the Earth that reinforced this sense of global integrity and interconnection.

The American use of the bomb represented and enacted American military and economic dominance. American artists such as Norman Lewis, in Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibration (1951), were excited by the wondrous natural revelations and awed by the biblical scale of the
bomb’s power, even as they were skeptical of the U.S. government’s apologetics for its use. The bomb was also, obviously, a Japanese story, told through photography (much of it suppressed, only to be released later) and by such artists as Iri and Toshi Maruki, who returned to Hiroshima just three days after the bombing and decided to begin an ambitious cycle of paintings — The Hiroshima Panels (1950-82) — that would describe the suffering they saw there. In the wake of futurism’s worship of technology, Italian artists were also keenly focused on the bomb. In 1952, Enrico Baj painted the Boom Manifesto, featuring a black mushroom-cloud-shaped head against an acid yellow background overlaid with anti-nuclear slogans and formulas: “The heads of men are charged with explosives/every atom is exploding.”

Photographs and films of ruined cities and of concentration camp survivors were released in the immediate postwar period. The shock of these images, and the full realization of the scale and depth of the horror of the camps, sparked many works, among them Joseph Beuys’s Monuments to the Stag (1949-58), Gerhard Richter’s Atlas (1962-present), and Wolf Vostell’s German View from the Black Room Cycle (1958-63).

2. Form Matters
Materialist abstraction is also accounted for in the exhibition, with work that was grouped under such labels as “art informel,” “abstract expressionism,” and “Gutai,” as well as work by artists who responded to the look of this work but found different and local meanings in the material and how they handled it. Critics at the time emphasized stylistic competition that has often devolved into national competition in historical accounts, pitting, for example, the French artist Nicolas de Staël against the American Franz Kline as a symptom of the official promotion of
American values — individual freedom and democracy — as embodied in abstract painting.

Today it is easier to see the transnational character of many of these artistic strategies, and Postwar emphasizes the affinity of ideas and materials among artists who emigrated to the U.S. from Europe. It also documents the encounters of artists from around the world who gathered in such metropolitan centers as Paris, London, and Mexico City; and reviews the proximity and circulation of art works in international exhibitions and small press publications. Yoshihiro Jiro in Japan, Jean Dubuffet in France, and Avinash Chandra in India, for example, shared a belief in art that is organic, materialist, and vitalist. Others sought to push gestural painting into full-body, performative experiments, including Carolee Schneemann, Hermann Nitsch, Niki de Saint Phalle, Tetsumi Kudo, and Kazuo Shiraga.

This materialist art is typical of the postwar period in its difference from earlier European iterations of modernism, often rejecting geometry in a critique of rationality and science, which were seen as dead-ending in the war and the bomb. Instead, artists favored gesture, raw materials, chance, and physical laws; surfaces are tactile, rough, and uneven. Many artists, including Alberto Burri, Jiří Kolář, Antoni Tàpies, Mohan Samant, John Latham, and Ivo Gattin went further still, to invoke the entropy of matter and, more specifically, the outright destruction related to the traumatic events and lingering ruins of the postwar landscape.
3. New Images of Man

Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Auschwitz laid bare the failures of Western civilization. In the wake of these shocks came ambivalent political attempts to establish geopolitical systems that would be more just, through such new legal forms as the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — putatively global but in fact dominated by Western authority — and the struggles for full citizenship and autonomy of people in former European colonies. Philosophers and artists sought to inquire more deeply into human nature itself, in debates that included the discourses of négritude and existentialism, and the rights of individuals and groups within larger (often oppressive) social and political entities. “New Images” features pictorial versions of such inquiries, in which humans often appear battered, deformed by the horror of modern life, rent by the question of their own value.

These artists often deliberately combined figuration and materialist facture, refusing the choice between abstraction and representation — or between physical and social life, seeing the binary as not only ideologically false but also deeply destructive. In 1950, at a postwar art conference in Darmstadt, Germany, political opposites Hans Sedlmayr and Theodor Adorno found surprising common ground in bemoaning the missing center of contemporary culture: contemporary art seemed unable to appeal to fundamental human concerns, including emotion and everyday life. This concern was echoed by such East German migrants as Georg Baselitz, who eschewed the politically charged choice between abstraction and socialist realism to render individual figures that were severely deformed but vigorously alive. MoMA’s New Images of Man exhibition (1959) gathered examples of contemporary art from twenty-three American and European artists, including Francis Bacon, Willem de Kooning, Albert Giacometti, and
Jackson Pollock. In his introduction to the catalogue, theologian Paul Tillich warned of “the danger in which modern man lives: the danger of losing his humanity,” a danger located both in totalitarianism and in technologically-oriented mass society.

The most significant counterforce to universalist Western humanism came, in different veins, from former European colonies. Leopold Senghor wrote in 1961 of the need to particularize and locate the human being, in contrast not only to modernist (Western) universalism but also to Marxist universalism: “Man is not without a homeland. He is not a man without color or history or country or civilization. He is West African man, our neighbor, precisely determined by his time and his place ... a man humiliated for centuries less perhaps in his hunger and his nakedness than in his color and civilization, in his dignity as an incarnate man.” The laborers painted by Inji Efflatoun, for example, express this specific dignity.

Sometimes, as with Franz Fanon's “new man,” the formerly colonized claimed a moral right to define humanism broadly and universally, a right abrogated by the West with its inhuman behavior in war and colonization. We see this new humanism in the thinkers depicted by Indian artist Francis Newton Souza — colored bodies appropriating the traditional intellectual and ethical prerogative of Western man. South African artist Ernest Mancoba offered yet another restatement of universalist humanism. For him, differences in identity categories belonged to colonialism and underlie the fracturing of art: “In no domain more than in the arts has this systematic dichotomy caused such destruction of the very foundation to the human identity, as both belonging to nature and sharing in the essence of an ideal being.”
4. Realisms
The other half of the Cold War binary is, of course, the socialist realism of Soviet, Chinese, and Eastern and Central Europe. Here, to a greater extent, institutional appropriation came before, not after, artistic production. Nevertheless, accounts of this category, too, can be overly fixed. Even in the heyday of its enforcement, socialist realism was not a single style. Under Mao Zedong, Chinese artists produced large official portraits of the Chairman (Jia Youfu, Marching Across the Snow-covered Mount Minshan, 1965) and scenes depicting model workers, but there was also tolerance of traditional ink painting, with the addition of appropriate symbols of the new order, such as the red flag. In the Soviet Union, art from the 1940s to Josef Stalin’s death in 1953 is primarily characterized by affirmative images of work, especially by heroic images of party leaders (Wassilij Jakowlew, Portrait of Georgii Zhukov, Marshal of the Soviet Union, 1946). During the post-Stalinist thaw, genre painting influenced by the nineteenth-century Russian Wanderers became more prominent, as well as the “severe style,” influenced by Soviet art of the 1920s and early 1930s. Outside of the Soviet Union, because there was considerably more latitude for artists working with official socialist representation, such painters as the Czechoslovakian-born Willi Sitte made works that, while depicting officially sanctioned subjects, introduced personal drawing styles. Along with some works of moderate size intended for museums, this section emphasizes enormous public works, popular prints, and documentation.

“Realisms” also includes the influential Mexican muralist painter David Siquieros; ideologically programmatic art by such U.S. artists as Norman Rockwell, who was associated with realist rendering and popular audiences; and Communist
Party artists working outside Communist-run countries, including Renato Guttuso and Boris Taslitzky.

5. Concrete Visions
While the international abstract style that dominated the postwar world was primarily materialist and gestural, prewar geometric abstraction did persist, albeit with an impetus quite distinct from that of European prewar artists. Concrete art in South America united the vitalism of Joaquín Torres García with European modernism and became an entirely independent phenomenon. Modernist forms were adopted early on in parallel to a nationalist developmentalism that did not simply stand against Western capitalism but figured in competition with it. “Concrete” art in Latin America — by the Madí group, for example, and such artists as Waldemar Cordeiro — was followed quickly by apparently very similar forms made by such neo-concrete artists as Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticica, which nonetheless were quite different in spirit. As Clark said, “We use the term "neo-concrete" to differentiate ourselves from those committed to non-figurative "geometric" art and particularly the kind of concrete art that is influenced by a dangerously acute rationalism ... none of which offers a rationale for the expressive potential we feel art contains.” Instead, neo-concrete art was imbued with an antirational vitalism, made socially specific, physically participatory, and psychologically liberating. In this sense, neo-concrete art rhymes with the non-programmatic, everyday formalism of an artist like Ellsworth Kelly, whose “geometric” art eschewed the rationalism — and still more broadly — the authority and dogmatism of earlier avant-garde movements.
6. Cosmopolitan Modernisms

Part of the alluring romance of modern culture has been the extent to which concepts of cosmopolitanism are often seen from a more elevated realm, as the condition, par excellence, of sophistication, worldliness, openness, and the comingling of cultures, ideas, and populations. But the loss of place for artists who migrate from one culture or national frontier to another casts a deep shadow on the romantic idealism of such worldliness.

Following the massive upheavals resulting from World War II, the terms of cosmopolitanism shifted radically. People were on the move. Massive populations — refugees, stateless people, and diasporas — were moving between continents, countries, and cities, forming dispersed lines of displacement, migration, exile, affinities, and settlements. In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said touches on the dilemma of the exile, observing that “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.” This is a valuable insight into how we might explore not only ideas of cosmopolitanism but also other conditions of being out of place.

For example, the hostile politics and constrained opportunities at home had pushed African American writers and artists like James Baldwin and Beauford Delaney to emigrate to Paris as a place of cosmopolitan refuge. So when we think of cosmopolitanism we should also imagine it within processes of change, upheaval, opportunity, fantasy, and as a form of transnational artistic self-fashioning.

“New hybridities,” as scholars put it, have emerged in modernism and contemporary art when citizens of colonies and former colonies studied formally and informally in the West,
or when refugees fleeing oppression and racism left their homelands to find safe places elsewhere. World War II was perhaps responsible for one of the largest and most extensive cultural and artistic migrations. The same is true of empire, with its discourse of "la mission civilisatrice." Thus we can think of postwar art in recombinant terms, as a process of both acculturation and deculturation, whereby artists who combined international-style abstraction with indigenous, traditional, or local imagery fused new aesthetic logics and formal concepts. Particularly widespread was a kind of gestural mark-making ("calligraphic abstraction," in Iftikhar Dadi's term) that was as much iconic as it was indexical. That mark-making invoked identity and levels of meaning through allusion to language and legibility, challenging the universality of the modern. The Arabic calligraphic line was central to such artists as Sadequain and Anwar Shemza, who set the sinuous line of Arabic script in explicit relation to the geometry of the Roman alphabet. Categories including the local, tradition, nationality, autonomy, and universal conflict and combine to make new meanings.

Related situations of diaspora and the various colonial legacies, as well as Cold War funding for exchange, sent artists all over the world to study and participate in centers for the production and marketing of modern art. Furthermore, magazines provided artists with an important source of virtual travel and intersection. As a result of exposure to publications such as Black Orpheus and Middle Eastern art, the work of Ibrahim El-Salahi and others reflects a pronounced set of pan-African and pan-Arabic references (African sculpture, Arabic calligraphy) informed by Western modernism. El-Salahi's cosmopolitanism evidences time spent in London, but also reflects his relations with African American artists and musicians, travel to Mexico and
China, and exhibitions in Nigeria and Senegal. His is a cosmopolitanism not primarily oriented towards the West.

When we consider cosmopolitan modernism, we should think not only of diasporas and exile but also of deliberately chosen affinities. How might our picture of cosmopolitanism change when oriented not toward the lingering end of colonial relations but in dialectical relation to nationalism? A reversal of this dialectic might be seen in extended visits by Jacob Lawrence to Nigeria, under the auspices of the Harmon Foundation. Or in Mark Tobey’s travel to Japan, which inspired him to create calligraphic marks with no semantic meaning, but as a connotative reference to “other” languages and lives.

7. Nations Seeking Form

“Nationalism” is a word that has been in constant motion during the postwar period. In this sense the concept of nation, like nationalism, has generated considerable reflection through which to understand particular formations of cultural and social identity and the political communities in which they are founded. Benedict Anderson has used the notion of “imagined communities” to describe the shifting currents of ideas of the nation and nationalism. In his groundbreaking study on these two concepts, he offers a crucial insight when he asks us to consider “the political power of nationalisms versus their philosophical poverty and even incoherence.” Given the unhealthy history of nationalism in the twentieth century — especially its misuse and abuse in places like Germany and Japan during World War II — it is all the more necessary to carefully consider the figure of the nation in the context of this exhibition section, “Nations Seeking Form.”
Artists in the U.S. and Europe often declined to align themselves with their national governments, which had proven corrupt and militaristic. Nationalism had a different valence for artists in countries that had newly struggled for and won independence, such as Iraq, Cuba, China, India and Pakistan, Israel, Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa. For this reason, those artists sought cultural forms to articulate and represent new national identities.

Nigerian artists, for example, played institutional and governmental roles, through personal commitment to national independence and the role of culture in establishing identity. Ben Enwonwuk and Uzo Egonu represented African masks and instruments in what appears to be a critique of the European appropriation of such imagery. In Egypt, Gazbia Sirry depicted the martyrdom of Egyptians at the hands of the British occupiers, thereby also linking the Egyptian condition to the oppression of African Americans (whose movement for civil rights, informing the work of Jack Whitten and others, could take on a nationalist coloration).

The struggle to define what was truly national in identity, for example, in the debate between those who advocated discarding cultural tradition in the effort to become both independent and modern, and those who saw indigenous identity as central to their new national identity. In Southeast Asia, the choice would be described as one of East versus West, with “the West” representing Europe, the future, education, and technological progress; and “the East” representing indigenous knowledge, non-Western identity, the past, and tradition. While India’s nationalist movement fought against Western colonialism, many Indians saw the same West as the future. How, then, to support locally distinctive cultural self-confidence? Artists in the
Progressives group that flourished in the years after Indian independence in 1947 found different solutions: Francis Souza, who depicted the biblical figures in his works as dark-skinned, even entirely black, achieved success among British critics, who compared his work to that of Francis Bacon. Maqbool Fidal Husain, in contrast, stayed in India as his peers left: “They said you can’t grow as an artist in India, and that I should join them, but luckily I was married, so I think for that reason I couldn’t go! My main concern was Indian culture, so I took that route.” Husain’s work celebrated Hindu deities, albeit in their visual rather than religious aspects.

8. Networks, Media & Communication
At its conclusion, Postwar shifts the understanding of art engaged with mass culture away from the usual focus on consumer goods and the signs, symbols, and logos that advertised them, and instead toward the circulation, distribution, and communication of those signs via technology and broadcast networks. Certainly some artists focused on the power of representation. By means of narrative figuration, artist Hervé Telemaque’s My Darling Clementine (1963) scrutinizes widespread racial stereotypes. Politically oriented critiques more often emphasized a newer capitalism, the cocacolonization that was now not only American-dominated but blatantly global in extent, as in Jirō Takamatsu’s Strings in Bottles (1963) and León Ferrari’s The Western-Christian Civilization (1965). Underlying this extension was the global distribution and circulation of information, invoked in the work of Derek Boshier, Thadeusz Kantor, and Gerhard Rühm that took the airmail letter as its subject.

Communication also underlay the systems theories of cybernetics that appealed to an international array of
artists rooted in a variety of aesthetic and political orientations. It had particular appeal for artists seeking affinities across national boundaries: the New Tendencies exhibition featured works by twenty-nine artists from Argentina, Austria, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia. This new optical and kinetic art, like that of Mohammed Melehi, sought to transmit information on a fundamental, physiological wavelength transcending the cultural specifics of language. Similarly, communication drew artists to new technologies. The British artists in the Independent Group, particularly John McHale, were oriented toward popular culture’s technological, even futuristic aspects, from transistors to robots. Fluxus and other artists—including Lucio Fontana, Otto Götz, and Nam June Paik—experimented with the new medium of broadcast television, aspiring to make art that not only took part in the latest electronic technologies, but could also communicate to an audience beyond the art galleries themselves. All these artists sought an art adequate to a world conceived as a single integrated system or organism: in this way, the paradigm that dawned in the present exhibition’s introduction becomes conscious and fully developed in its conclusion.

There is today a clear connection between the systems theories of such figures as György Kepes, Norbert Weiner, and Marshall McLuhan, and the vision of an interconnected world, one in which relations of information and capital supersede national identities. The concluding section of Postwar, with its focus on communication and circulation, conflict and control, serves as a bookend to the show’s beginning with the technical invention, epistemological shift, and political reordering emblematized by the atomic bomb. Theories of feedback and communication that emerged from the science of the atomic bomb drove the restructuring
of cities around the world, as did the wars in Indochina. And so the end of Postwar looks both backward and forward, to the next episode in this ambitious cycle of exhibitions: Post-colonialism.

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