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Polish Abstract Art in West German Art Discourses of the Late 1950s. A Historiographical Test Case

In the late 1950s, contemporary Polish abstract art came to play a distinctive role in the highly polemical, ideologically charged debates about abstract art in Western Germany. The presentation analyses this peculiar, and so far unresearched, role and will draw some methodological and historiographical conclusions that both confirm and challenge current research perspectives.

In the course of the so called *Polish wave* (*Polnische Welle*) of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Western Germany, contemporary Polish abstract art – epitome of the post-Stalinist “thaw” in Poland – attracted particular interest among Western German art critics. Within their ongoing controversy about abstract versus figurative art, it immediately became a polemical point of reference. While the proponents of abstract art celebrated it as triumph of the “free West”, leftist critics condemned it as a betrayal of socialism and a symptom of westernized decadence in Poland.

The talk will argue that, first, this debate was not so much a debate about Polish abstract art, but, like the debate about abstract art in general, primarily figured as a proxy debate reflecting fundamental political, social, as well as generational conflicts within Western German post-war society. Thus, rather than being the subject of interest, Polish art served as a rhetorical instrument in the polemics between competing ideological camps. Second, due to this specific constellation, the debate missed the chance of replacing dichotomous clichés of (art in) East and West by a more sophisticated and nuanced perspective; while Polish abstract art would have provided a perfect case in point here, it was paradoxically interpreted in a way that cemented, rather than challenged, the simplistic bipolar picture.

From the analysis, some general conclusions can be drawn. For one, the reception of Polish art in Western Germany confirms the multileveled-multipolar perspectives on East-West relations stressed by current research. Notably, it reminds us that aesthetic and ideological conflicts existed on both sides of, and not only along, the Iron Curtain. At the same time, the case provides a warning against romanticizing and overemphasizing – as recent studies in cultural East West interactions have tended to do – the aspect of “overcoming” ideological barriers by culture. Biased and driven by internal animosities, the protagonists often reiterated rather than undermined the ideological fronts. Moreover, the Western German discussion about Polish abstract art can hardly be analysed without taking into account the specific social and political settings in Western Germany at that time; the example may thus pose a test case for current transnational accounts that question the methodological and historiographical significance of national categories.

Regina Wenninger graduated in philosophy, art history, and Nordic philology and received her PhD in philosophy from the University of Göttingen. She is staff member at *Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte* (ZI) in Munich and has held fellowships at the *International Cultural Centre* (ICC) Krakow and *Deutsches Polen-Institut* Darmstadt. Her research interests include art discourses of the post-war era and Polish-German relations. Funded by the *German Research Foundation* (DFG), she is currently conducting a research project on exhibitions of Polish art in Western Germany 1956–1970.