

November 16, 2019, to
September 6, 2020

Press conference:
Friday, November 15, 2019,
10 am

Opening:
Friday, November 15, 2019,
7 pm



Amédée Ozenfant
Nombreux objets, 1927
Oil on canvas
On loan from the Austrian Ludwig
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Reading Time in Space Modernism at mumok 1910 to 1955

In recent years, mumok's classical modernism collection was shown under ever-changing thematic contexts. This year's presentation deals with the myriad developments of modernism, its chronologies, and various—even contemporary—attempts at historicization.

One of the exhibition's conceptual jumping-off points is the question of how the avant-gardes were perceived in the early twentieth century: Is modernism a historical period? The first documenta exhibitions (1955 and 1959) significantly shaped our view of this time. In 1955, a "cleansed" modernism (Walter Grasskamp) was presented under the slogan "Abstraction as a World Language"—a modernism that, while offering a historical perspective, factored out the historical events that came along with it. The exhibition at mumok counters this with the question: Which view was propagated by artists and curators in the 1920s? Four historical projects serve as reference points. All of them not only strove for an overall presentation of modernism but also posed central questions to art and its tasks as well as to its presentation in the gallery space.

Thanks to an upended Cartesian worldview and trailblazing inventions in natural sciences and technology at the beginning of the twentieth century, modernism can be seen as a turn in virtually all spheres. What occurred in the years 1910/11 was not just a step toward abstraction. Many heterogeneous developments occurred additionally and concomitantly.

In its ability to immediately translate phenomena of simultaneity and montage as experiences of modern life, film, more than any other medium, contributed to the establishment of new categories of thought and perception—categories that nudged avant-garde artists like László Moholy-Nagy, Hans Richter, El Lissitzky, Frederick Kiesler, and Fernand Léger toward an experimental approach and a reorientation of traditional media. Especially photography was given a new task in oscillating between aesthetic and documentary competence. It illustrated the complexity of modernism by tackling the big topics of architecture and urban life, design, and portraiture.

The four reference projects that inspired the new mumok exhibition are: Frederick Kiesler's legendary theater exhibition from 1924; El Lissitzky and Hans Arp's fictitious exhibition project from the same year that reviewed modernism retrospectively from 1924 to 1914; László Moholy-Nagy and Lajos Kassák's *Book of New Artists* (1922), which loosened the boundaries between art and industry as well as architecture and design and erased the last lines between applied and fine art; and finally Hans Tietze's exhibition *Die Kunst in unserer Zeit* (1930), which linked insights into modernism with a look back at the years 1910/11 and concluded that categorizations of abstract and figurative are anything but set in stone.

In 1924, El Lissitzky and Hans Arp published *Kunstismen*. This "last parade of all isms," as Lissitzky called it, could as well be read as a fictitious exhibition. Sixteen concepts sketch the most important modernist movements. Reading the entry on

expressionism—“cubism and futurism were ground up to make mock hare, that meta-physical German meatloaf known as expressionism”—one quickly realizes where the editors’ affinities lay.

In the mumok exhibition the two artists’ curatorial gaze has now been transferred to the collection, pursuing a similar retrospective chronology from 1924 to 1914 that unearths isms as well as simultaneities.

Almost concurrently, László Moholy-Nagy worked on a overall view of modernism, publishing the *Book of New Artists* together with Lajos Kassák in 1922. Here the first attempt was made to verify “the close, mutually supportive connections among painting, sculpture, architecture, and technology” (Lajos Kassák). Painting certainly remains the predominant medium of modernism, followed by sculpture and drawing, but at the same time our attention is directed toward apparatuses and high-voltage lines, i.e., machines and technology.

Translated to the holdings of the mumok collection, this unraveling of categorical orders becomes clear with regard to technology and architecture. Among other things, illustrates. In contrast to the canonical view of documenta 1955, strictly focused on painting and sculpture, Tietze displayed all sorts of objects, from children’s toys to ceramics and textiles, and even included technical appliances. Additionally, he surprised visitors with the statement that, unlike what the first documenta exhibitions postulated, abstract and figurative were not ideologically separate.

In 1924, Vienna became the city of the avant-garde with its legendary theater exhibition. Frederick Kiesler, the industrious organizer, put together the *International Exhibition of New Theater Techniques* as part of the Music and Theater Festival of the City of Vienna. He assembled several hundred theater concepts, stage and costume designs, posters, and models from various countries. Many avant-garde artists were present, including El Lissitzky and Theo van Doesburg or Fernand Léger, whose *Ballet mécanique* premiered on Kiesler’s “space stage.” For this project Kiesler also designed the Leger und Träger display system, a flexible, free-standing structure to position objects and images, a reproduction of which can now be seen at mumok complete with theater models and stage designs from Theatermuseum Wien.

Half a century later, the legendary modern art historian Hans Tietze arranged an exhibition titled *Die Kunst in unserer Zeit*. The difference to documenta 1955 was obvious, as Tietze chose to show a broad universe. Tietze developed a side-by-side appearance of different artists and movements, as the presentation at mumok illustrates. In contrast to the canonical view of documenta 1955, strictly focused on painting and sculpture, Tietze displayed all sorts of objects, from children’s toys to ceramics and textiles, and even included technical appliances. Additionally, he surprised visitors with the statement that, unlike what the first documenta exhibitions postulated, abstract and figurative were not ideologically separate.

Reading Time in Space traces passages of time and artistic concepts with works from the mumok collection (and some loans from MAK, Theatrumuseum, and Leopold Museum). Contemporary works by Ulrike Grossarth and Werner Feiersinger underline this approach. Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch's exhibition design picks up on several modernist formalisms. It takes into account the idea of an expanded concept of art, one that relies on connection and permeation beyond a traditional chronological order—and is a far cry from a sterile, rigid, back-to-back presentation of artworks.

Curated by Susanne Neuburger

We wish to thank the mumok sponsors, Dorotheum and UNIQA, and our media partners Der Standard, Falter, Wien live, and Ö1.