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Press Kit
Berlin, 14.2.24



Ewald Gnlika: Hans Uhlmann in seinem Atelier, um 1964
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Hans Uhlmann

Experimental Forming

16.2. – 13.5.24

BERLINISCHE
GALERIE
MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART



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Hans Uhlmann**
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Ewald Gnijka, Hans Uhlmann in seinem Atelier, um 1954
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Hans Uhlmann

Experimental Forming

16.2. – 13.5.24

Hans Uhlmann is one of the most important sculptors and draftsmen of the post-war period in western Germany. His works are represented in numerous national and international collections and his sculptures for ‘per cent for art’ projects continue to shape public spaces in Germany and abroad today. Despite this propagation of his works, Uhlmann is now no longer known to a broad public.

With a selection of roughly eighty sculptures and graphic works as well as documents from the artist’s estate, the exhibition Hans Uhlmann. Experimental Forming provides an overview of Uhlmann’s artistic work from the 1930s to the 1970s. The four chapters ‘Spaces Shaped with Wire’, ‘Dance and Movement’, ‘Transcending the Material’, and ‘A New Astronomy of Space’ guide viewers chronologically through the various phases of Uhlmann’s oeuvre. The three chapters ‘Curator and Networker’, ‘International Success’, and ‘Monumental Sculptures’ present Hans Uhlmann as a curator, internationally celebrated artist, and author of important ‘per cent for art’ projects.

Spaces Shaped with Wire

Hans Uhlmann came to art by a circuitous route. He first studied mechanical engineering at the Technische Hochschule and, after his studies, worked as an engineer. In his leisure time, he tried his hand at sculpture and occasionally participated in exhibitions. In October 1933, Uhlmann, then a member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), was detained by the Gestapo. Due to ‘preparing for high treason’, he was sentenced to one and a half year in prison. During his time there, Uhlmann produced drawings and developed the idea of a ‘wire sculpture’, which he executed sculpturally following his release. His early oeuvre remained very important to Uhlmann throughout his life: ‘As the basis for all my subsequent work, it is the most important period in my artistic development.’

Dance and Movement

After the Second World War came to an end, Uhlmann intentionally decided to abandon his engineering career in order to work solely as an artist. In post-war Berlin, he was also active as an organizer of exhibitions: initially for the district administration of Berlin-Steglitz and subsequently for the Galerie Gerd Rosen. Uhlmann thus influenced the art scene in West Berlin not only as an artist, but also as a mediator. His works from the years after 1945 are characterized by a great pleasure in experimentation, particularly with

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the handling of various materials. Besides solid plaster figures and bronzes, Uhlmann developed his wire sculptures further as well. The fine wire was, however, replaced with thicker iron rods, which the artist warped in such a way that they give rise to figures as if drawn in space. In these works, Uhlmann dedicated himself primarily to the topics of 'dance' and 'movement'.

Transcending the Material

In 1950, Uhlmann began teaching at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (today: Universität der Künste) in Berlin-Charlottenburg. He first took over the preliminary course as an associate professor. The position at the college offered Uhlmann financial security and opened up new possibilities for him. Within the framework of his teaching activities, he had a large studio at his disposal, which gave him very new technical design options. His sculptures consequently became considerably larger. Artistically, Uhlmann's works in the 1950s became more and more detached from representational references. The question of material also seems to have clarified itself for him. For his sculptures, he now used exclusively metal. Thematically, however, he continued to devote himself to the question of representing movement and transcending his material.

International Success

In the 1950s, West Germany strove to present itself abroad as a free and democratic nation. Visual art played a central role in communicating this image. Attempts were thus made to underscore the image of a modern state particularly by promoting modern and non-representational art, which had been defamed by the National Socialist regime as 'degenerate'. Hans Uhlmann also achieved international success in this context. With his abstract works in metal, he was staged internationally as a representative of a young German art. His works were presented at international exhibitions such as the Biennale di Venezia, Biennale de São Paulo, and documenta, as well as at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

A New Astronomy of Space

In the 1960s, Uhlmann worked intensively on the realization of 'per cent for art' projects. These commissions influenced his small-format sculptures as well, which now became significantly more compact. They are also less playful than the wire compositions of the 1950s. Formally, Uhlmann occupied himself in his late oeuvre with the topics of 'tower' and 'column'.

But unlike what the titles suggest, these sculptures are not massive blocks, but instead spaces constructed round an inner life. As in his early oeuvre, Uhlmann was also interested in permeability in his late sculptures. While his early drawings were closely connected with his sculptural works, his late chalk drawings become more and more detached from his sculptures. The drawings of the 1960s thus form their own complex of works. For Uhlmann, the drawings were an important artistic means for expressing himself spontaneously—a spontaneity that was barely possible when working on his rigorously conceived sculptures.

Monumental Sculptures in Berlin

In the 1950s and 1960s, Uhlmann was very much in demand as an artist for 'per cent for art' projects. Between 1954 and 1972, he thus produced a total of seventeen publicly commissioned works, which can still be seen today in cities in western Germany as well as in Rome, Italy. In the western part of Berlin, altogether four large-format sculptures adorn striking urban public spaces: Concerto (1954) in the foyer of the concert hall of the Universität der Künste and the sculptures on Hansaplatz (1958), in front of the Deutsche Oper (1960–61), and on the roof of the Berlin Philharmonie (1963). In the 1950s and 1960s, these works were an expression of the general striving for modernity that characterized West Berlin.

The exhibition is supported by the Förderverein Berlinische Galerie e. V.



Exhibition catalogue

Kerber Verlag, 272 pages, 120 illustrations,
German/English

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Book trade edition: 38,00 €

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Podcast

An episode (in German) of the Berlinische Galerie's 'Art in Berlin' podcast will be released in March to accompany the exhibition. Director Dr Thomas Köhler talks to Dr Ilka Voermann about her first exhibition as Head of the Department Prints and Drawings at the Berlinische Galerie on 'Hans Uhlmann'. The episode deals with Uhlmann's artistic work from the 1930s to the 1970s. The podcast will be available on all the usual podcast platforms and online:
berlinischegalerie.de/podcast/kunst-in-berlin

Programme

berlinischegalerie.de/en/programme/calendar

Press images

berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/hans-uhlmann

Online tickets

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Wed– Mon 10 am–6 pm

Tue closed

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Biography

Hans Uhlmann

27. November 1900

Hans Uhlmann is born in Berlin-Steglitz.

1919–24

Study of mechanical engineering at the Technische Hochschule Berlin, with a degree as a qualified engineer.

1924–26

Work as an engineer for industry in Kiel at the company Neufeldt & Kuhnke. In his first position, he occupies himself with calculating and designing specialized small and medium-size machines.

1925

As an autodidact, he examines artistic topics and makes his first attempts at sculpture

1926–33

Teaching activities at the Technische Hochschule Berlin in the chair for electrical engineering with his former professor Max Kloss.

1929

Trips to Moscow and Paris with a small group of friends, also including the artist Jeanne Mammen.

1930

Solo exhibition at the Galerie Gurlitt.

1933

Loss of his position at the Hochschule, presumably due to his membership in the Communist Party of Germany (KPD Berlin, Southeast) since 1926.

26. October 1933

Arrest and conviction for 'preparing for high treason'.

1933–35

Detention in the Strafgefängnis Berlin-Tegel (Tegel Prison). There, he at times works eleven-hour-long shifts in the bookbinding workshop. It is during this time that he produces sketches of fellow prisoners and designs for his subsequent wire sculptures.

1935–45

Position as an engineer at the National-Krupp Registrierkassen GmbH in Berlin. He works there as a technical draftsman and design engineer and develops a new adding machine. In his leisure time, he produces his early sculptures made from thin iron wire and heads consisting of metal plates.

1942

Birth of his son Hans-Joachim Uhlmann.

1945

End of his career as an engineer and beginnings as an independent artist.

1945–46

As a specialist advisor in the section for visual art at the district office of Berlin-Steglitz, he is involved to a significant extent in rebuilding cultural life in West Berlin.

1946–48

Exhibition manager at the Galerie Gerd Rosen, the first gallery in post-war Germany and an important centre for modern art.

1950

Receives the art prize of the City of Berlin.

1950–68

Professor at the Hochschule für bildende Künste. He first teaches the basic course 'Experimental Forming' for two years and subsequently takes over a class of his own.

1951–64

Participation in the Biennale in São Paulo, Biennale di Venezia, documenta I–III, and two group exhibitions at MoMA.

1952

He is awarded the prize of the Confederation of German Industry (BDI) in the international competition for the monument to the 'Unknown Political Prisoner'.

1968

First extensive retrospective at the Akademie der Künste with over one hundred sculptures and roughly two hundred drawings.

28 October 1975

Hans Uhlmann dies in West Berlin and is interred at a cemetery in Berlin-Zehlendorf.

Exhibition texts

Hans Uhlmann, who was born in Berlin in 1900, is one of the most important sculptors and draftsmen of the post-war period in western Germany. The artist himself only rarely left the city of his birth. His sculptural and graphic work, by contrast, is represented in numerous national and international collections. And his works shape public space as ‘per cent for art’ projects until today.

Even though Uhlmann exhibited internationally in the 1950s and 1960s and his works were widely distributed, he is unknown to a broader audience today. While many Berliners are familiar with the sculpture on Hansaplatz, the one in front of the Deutsche Oper, and the winged figure on the roof of the Philharmonie, only few people are aware that Uhlmann is their author.

For the first time after fifty years, the exhibition once again provides an overview of Uhlmann’s entire artistic career and presents him not only as an artist, but also as a teacher, exhibition organizer, and mediator.

Spaces Shaped with Wire 1933–1945

In the 1920s, Hans Uhlmann studied mechanical engineering at the Technische Universität in Berlin and subsequently worked as an engineer. In addition to this main professional work, he undertook his first attempts at sculpture and drawing and occasionally participated in exhibitions. In October 1933, he was detained on the street by the Gestapo and sentenced to one and a half years in prison for ‘preparing for high treason’ against the National Socialist regime. Uhlmann served his sentence at the Strafgefängnis Tegel. During his imprisonment, he not only kept a journal, but also produced numerous drawings, which he subsequently pasted into three sketchbooks. In his sketches, Uhlmann occupied himself intensively with the notion of wire sculpture, which he realized after being released from prison. Between 1935 and 1945, he produced his ‘wire heads’, only a few of which are still extant today. In the 1940s, Uhlmann began assembling his head sculptures from metal sheeting. This early work remained important to him throughout his life: ‘As the basis for all my

subsequent work, it is the most important period in my artistic development.’

Dance and Movement

After the end of the Second World War, Hans Uhlmann deliberately decided not to work as an engineer anymore, but instead solely as an artist. His works of the first years after 1945 are characterized by a great pleasure in experimentation, which is expressed in particular in choice of materials. Following his work on the wire heads, he returned to his artistic beginnings for a time and moulded solid sculptural works in plaster that frequently call to mind embracing and dancing figures. The drawings produced around the same time are also dedicated to the topics of ‘dance’ and ‘movement’. Besides these almost figurative-seeming sculptures and works on paper, Uhlmann also continued to develop his wire sculptures further. The filigree wires were, however, replaced by iron rods, which he warped in such a way that they look like figures drawn in space. Even though these sculptures differ to a great extent from the works in plaster, Uhlmann also examined forms of movement in them as well: ‘I am working on a “spatial” sculpture that is more than a 3-dimensional one, and in which the material seems to have been transcended, as if one does not notice the pull of gravity and training work in the dancer when he seems to fly across the stage.’

Hans Uhlmann as a Curator

In the first years after the Second World War, Hans Uhlmann was involved to a considerably extent in reviving the cultural landscape in Berlin. As an Advisor on Painting and Sculpture at the district administration of Steglitz, he organized one of the first post-war exhibitions of modern art in Germany in 1945: ‘Nach 12 Jahren. Antifaschistische Maler und Bildhauer stellen aus’ (After Twelve Years: Anti-Fascist Painters and Sculptors Exhibit). It presented roughly 250 works by artists who had previously been defamed as ‘degenerate’ such as Jeanne Mammen (1890–1976), Renée Sintenis (1888–1965), and Georg Tappert (1880–1975). Uhlmann himself showed forty-two of his works, including heads in plaster, wire, and zinc sheeting as well as drawings of his ‘Tegel Heads’.

As of 1945, the Galerie Gerd Rosen—of which Hans Uhlmann became the artistic director one year later—also dedicated itself to a similar program. The first private gallery in post-war Germany opened on the largely destroyed Kurfürstendamm and developed into an important centre for modern art. In

exhibitions that changed on a monthly basis and numerous lectures, the gallery presented art movements that had not been exhibited publicly during the National Socialist period.

Transcending the Material 1950–1960

In 1950, Hans Uhlmann began teaching at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Within the framework of these teaching activities, he was given his own studio, which thus offered him very new design possibilities from a technical perspective. His sculptures consequently became considerably larger and technically more complex. The studio also gave him the opportunity to realize large projects in public space.

In the course of the 1950s, Uhlmann increasingly moved away from representational references. The question of material seems to have been clarified for him as well, since he now produced his sculptures exclusively in metal. The topics of movement and transcending the material nonetheless remained a focus. Uhlmann thus developed various solutions such as the ‘Small Carousel’ or the ‘Steel Sculpture (Floating)’, one of his only two existing hanging sculptures.

Despite his growing success, Uhlmann also experienced harsh criticism and wanted to promote a better understanding of non-representative art: ‘The main mistake: People generally first want to understand, without making an effort to take in what is happening in a picture or a sculpture. But if a person tries to recognize the contents of a picture or a sculpture, this work will also be rewarded.’

International Success

In the 1950s, West Germany strove to present itself abroad as a free and democratic nation. This image was underscored by the promotion of modern and non-representational art, which the National Socialist cultural policy had defamed as ‘degenerate’. Having already become established in Germany, Hans Uhlmann achieved international success in this context. With his abstract works in metal, he was staged round the world as a representative of a future-oriented, young art.

In 1954, he was given a solo exhibition at the German Pavilion of the Biennale di Venezia. There he showed seventeen sculptures and twenty-one graphic works, his most current works at the time. The US-American curator Andrew C. Ritchie (1907–1978) saw Uhlmann’s presentation in Italy and

subsequently invited him to participate in his exhibition ‘The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors’ at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. As the sole German sculptor, the artists exhibited three sculptures there next to paintings by Theodor Werner (1886–1969) and Fritz Winter (1905–1976).

A New Astronomy of Space 1960–1975

In the 1960s, Uhlmann occupied himself intensively with the realization of ‘per cent for art’ projects. These commissions also influenced his smaller-format sculptures. They became more compact and less playful than the wire constructions of the 1950s. In his late oeuvre, Uhlmann was concerned formally with the topics of the ‘column’ and ‘tower’. Unlike what these titles suggest, these sculptures are not massive blocks, but rather structures constructed round an inner life. The sculptures of the late oeuvre differ to a great extent optically from the early wire heads. With their permeability, it is, however, also possible to recognize a parallel to the early works. ‘With their transparency and thus comprehensibility at the same time, they give rise to a lively, alternating play of a very different sort: a play of overlappings. They are sculptures structured from the inside to the outside in an architectural-constructive manner.’

Monumental Sculptures in Berlin 1954–1963

Between 1954 and 1972, Hans Uhlmann realized a total of seventeen publicly commissioned works, which are still located today in cities in western Germany and in Rome. In Berlin, four large sculptures stand in striking urban public spaces: the sculpture ‘Concerto’ (1954) in the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin (today: the Music Faculty at the Universität der Künste), and the sculptures on Hansaplatz (1958), in front of the Deutsche Oper (1960–61), and on the roof of the Philharmonie in Berlin (1963). Nearly all the sculptures are connected to ambitious building projects. Uhlmann designed the work on Hansaplatz for the sculpture competition on the occasion of the International Building Exhibition (IBA) in 1957. Its form calls to mind a model of an atom. They make reference to the surrounding architecture and stand in general for a striving for modernity. The position of the sculpture on the roof of the Philharmonie, designed by Hans Scharoun (1893–1972), is similarly striking. It is oriented towards the north in the direction of the Reichstag and Brandenburg Gate—both of them symbols of the divided Berlin.

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Exhibition catalogue

Published on the occasion of the exhibition
"Hans Uhlmann. Experimental Forming"
(16.2.–13.5.2024) at the Berlinische Galerie.

The metal sculptures and drawings of Hans Uhlmann (1900 –1975) shaped the image of German postwar modernism. Arrested by the National Socialists in 1933, Uhlmann sketched filigree wire heads during his incarceration. He went on to realize these pieces following his release. In the 1950s, his figurative forms developed further into abstract compositions. With around eighty works, the exhibition at the Berlinische Galerie traces Uhlmann's creative periods from the 1930s to the 1970s and explores not only his drawings and sculptures but also his role within the West Berlin art scene. This is the first comprehensive retrospective of his work in more than fifty years.

Editors

Thomas Köhler and Ilka Voermann

Publisher

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Sophie Angelov, Luise Budde, Dorothea Schöne,
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Hans Uhlmann, Weiblicher Kopf, 1940 © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024

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Every Sat, 4:15 pm

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60/90/120 minutes, 60/85/110€
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concessionary rate)

Tours can also be booked in German and French,
plus foreign language charge.

Booking and further details:

Museumsdienst Berlin

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More information

berlinischegalerie.de/en/education

Programme in English

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Hans Uhlmann, Ohne Titel, 1947
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024, Foto: Anja Elisabeth Witte



Hans Uhlmann, Gruppe, 1951
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024



Hans Uhlmann, Stahlskulptur, 1951
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Hans Uhlmann, Vogelwesen, 1952
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024, Foto: Kai-Annett Becker



Ewald Gnlika, Hans Uhlmann in seinem Atelier, um 1954
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Hans Uhlmann, Stahlplastik (Bogen), 1954
© Galerie Michael Haas, Berlin / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024, Foto: Lea Gryze



Hans Uhlmann, Ohne Titel, 1956
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Kunstbesitz der Landeshauptstadt Hannover / Aline Gwose, Benedikt Werner



Elsa Thiemann, Eisen- und Stahl-Plastik von Prof. Hans Uhlmann im Hansaviertel, Berlin, um 1958
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Hans Uhlmann am Modell zur Plastik im Hansaviertel in Berlin, ohne Datierung, Foto: Ewald Gnilka
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Hans Uhlmann, Endgültiger Entwurf zur Skulptur auf dem Hansaplatz, Berlin, 1958
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024



Hans Uhlmann, Ohne Titel, 1963
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Hans Uhlmann, Kopf-Fetisch II, 1967
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