

# ON THE ORIGINS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE KUNST- VEREIN MÜNCHEN ARCHIVE JOHANNA KLINGLER & JONAS VON LENTHE

“BECOME A MEMBER OF THE KUNSTVEREIN—Make your own decisions about the Kunstverein’s public engagement.” With this reformist demand, painted on cardboard in capital letters and hung in the exhibition space at an immense height, students of the Akademie der Bildenden Künste München (Academy of Fine Arts Munich) addressed visitors at the 1970 exhibition *Transform the world! Poetry must be made by all!* at the Kunstverein. The call to *Transform the world!* had originally been made by Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where the exhibition combined Russian revolutionary art and Surrealism, as well as documents from the May 1968 protests in Paris. Reiner Kallhardt, director of the Kunstverein at that time, had invited students of the Academy to take part in the Munich exhibition. With their contribution, they raised urgent questions about the Academy’s treatment of former Nazi staff, particularly in relation to Hermann Kaspar, who, despite his previous position as a regime-affirming, commissioned artist of the Nazi-era, remained a professor at the Academy into the nineteen-seventies. An exhibition organized a year prior by the AStA (Allgemeiner Studierendenausschuss, or General Student Committee) on the same matter had led to the student occupation of the Academy and its subsequent closure by the education ministry. Kallhardt had requested documentation of these events as the students’ contribution to the exhibition at the Kunstverein, who, however, made use of the opportunity to go beyond the case of Hermann Kaspar, in order to position themselves against the prevailing practice of keeping on Nazi-era academy staff, and to demand more political as well as cultural participation. The students’ contribution bore the title *The Ruling Aesthetic is the Aesthetic of the Rulers*, and, indeed, they did not have to wait long for a reaction from said rulers: with partial support from the board of directors, and by threatening to cut all of the Kunstverein’s financial resources, the Bavarian State Ministry for Education and Cultural Affairs brought about the early closure of the exhibition. Nevertheless, Reiner Kallhardt’s invitation had indeed turned the institution into a site of political negotiation and aesthetic experimentation, at least for the time that it was open.

The events surrounding the exhibition *Transform the world!* Have since been recounted many times. They are part of the canonical and identity-forming self-perception of the Kunstverein of today, manifested in over 400 high-resolution, digitalized photographs on the Kunstverein’s server and five heavy boxes in the

Stadtarchiv München (Munich City Archive). Few events in the 200-year history of the Kunstverein are documented with such rigor—in view of the fact that, like any archive, the records of the Kunstverein are necessarily incomplete. In every archive’s history, documents fall victim to economic circumstances, or their existence is threatened by damp basements, UV light, and improper storage. More than that, certain documents, due to their seemingly non-representative nature, do not make it past the standard processes of institutional archiving in the first place, or are even deliberately removed, so that they cannot be used as evidence for the institution’s own culpability.

While the Kunstverein’s nineteenth-century history is conveyed in relatively dense form in minutes and account books, hardly any material was retained between 1907 and 1969. York Langenstein’s dissertation *Der Münchner Kunstverein im 19. Jahrhundert. Ein Beitrag zur Entwicklung des Kunstmarkts und des Ausstellungswesens* (The Munich Kunstverein in the Nineteenth Century. A Contribution to the Development of the Art Market and Exhibition Making), published in 1983, offers a significant historiographical contribution, by investigating the material available from that time with extraordinary attention to detail. The dissertation serves as an important foundation for our understanding of the institution throughout that time. By virtue of the meagre cache of documents since 1907, no literature is available on the Kunstverein in the first half of the twentieth century. Documents from that time, reprinted in this publication, originate predominantly from external sources. It was only our predecessor, the archivist Adrian Djukic, who began the work of retrieving and examining the documents from the Nazi period held in other archives. This provided the starting point for a long overdue process of coming to terms with the institution during Nazism, as well as the cultural and ideological continuities even after 1945. They comprise correspondence from the Kulturredaktion (Culture Bureau, or, since 1956, the Kulturreferat, Department for Culture), newspaper clippings stored in the city archive, documents from private estates and the literature archive and historical inventory Monacensia, as well as from the Staatliche Archive Bayerns (Bavarian State Archives), and they form the research basis for Christian Fuhrmeister’s text in this volume. From 1969 onwards, the materials accumulated at the Kunstverein München archive once again, and luckily, contain a relatively comprehensive collection of documents leading up to the present day.

For us as archivists of the Kunstverein, *Transform the world!* is interesting for various reasons. It paints a picture of the prevailing social dynamics of the time—dynamics that have an impact on our present situation—which helps us to better understand internal structures and policies in the institution today. Above all, however, this episode represents an opening up of the institution, creating a space where, for a limited time, a negotiation of sociopolitical conflicts became possible. Indeed, just as the Kunstverein München—founded in 1823/24<sup>1</sup> by three court painters, a professor of architecture, and four so-called “friends of the arts,” all of whom were royal confidants, and members of the upper classes or aristocracy—represents a certain continuity and consolidation of existing positions of power, the creation of its structure also uncovered possibilities for community, organization, and discursive exchange.

It is this potential space that interests us in our research and archival work. It reveals itself in different moments of the institution’s history, but still rarely manifests as starkly in the archive as in the case of *Transform the World!*. More commonly, it emerges as a surplus of the main programming itself, which, in the moment, might not have even registered as archive-worthy or even possible to document in conventional ways. Take, for example, the first “Women’s Meeting of the German Women’s Emancipation Groups” in 1973 on the Kunstverein premises, for which the institution was “not the motor but a platform” (Haimo Liebich, former director of the Kunstverein). Or the “political evening events, which were not part of the official program” of the project *15 Jahre 1980* (15 Years 1980) under Helmut Draxler and Hedwig Saxenhuber in 1995, since such things “could not have been sold to the board.”<sup>2</sup> Or the project *Atelier Europa* (2004) by the artist and curator Marion von Osten, who was invited by Maria Lind. Von Osten repurposed the Kunstverein in the service of transnational networking between workers from the so-called creative industries.

The encounters and engagement with such oppositional voices made us aware that documents are always only able to represent their social and political dimensions to a certain degree. They do not necessarily illustrate the methods with which we use structures, capacities, or historical knowledge politically. To paraphrase Saidiya Hartman: the archive is “inseparable” from a “play of power” that merciless-

1 The founding period of the Kunstverein begins with the first constitutional meeting on November 26, 1823, followed by an application for permission addressed to King Maximilian I. Joseph on December 13 of the same year, and finally his permission, granted early in 1824. The official founding date is listed as February 16, 1824. See York Langenstein, *Der Münchner Kunstverein im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich 1983).

2 Helmut Draxler, interview by Laura Ziegler in *die-arbeit.info* (Hamburg, 2021), p. 55.

3 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26, vol. 12, no. 2 (June 2008), pp. 10-11.

4 Eberhard Hansstängel, “Einführung,” in *Katalog zur 1. Jubiläumsausstellung des Kunstvereins München* (Munich, 1923), p. 3.

5 Kunstverein München e.V., eds., *150 Jahre Kunstverein München* (Munich, 1974), p. 3.

6 Press release for the exhibition *Telling Histories*, 2003.

ly pins down that which can and cannot be seen.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we are confronted with the question of how to recognize and learn from precisely those moments in history when a space for self-organized knowledge emerged beneath bourgeois reproduction.

Conversations with contemporary witnesses and an open ear for the concerns brought to us by interested archive visitors helped us develop important ground-work in this respect. If we want to draw from the realization that a purely documentational history is a dead one, we have to make the inferred lacunae of documentation productive and take them seriously as part of the archive. Instead of failing at the point of its reconstruction, we would much rather opt for allowing situations that make reference to omissions and discontinuities: to let the past incite what is also politically relevant today and guide the possibilities for the archive’s expansion.

The act of making public—in the form of presentations, newsletters, informal discussions, or events—is of central importance for us in this context, as we follow our desires to come into relation with others. In the communally generated public, we intuit a potential to break apart the representative constraints and bourgeois interests of the Kunstverein for a moment and to organize the archive, at the very least, towards the illusion of autonomous information production. This accounts for an understanding of research that does not work solely toward hermetically conceived formats but rather the converse: new directions, fusions, and, in particular, a permission to formulate responses to the immediate necessities that arise from economic and political factors and events.

This ongoing archival work is a relatively recent focus of the Kunstverein München. For one, anniversaries simply offer an occasion to look back at one’s own history. Accordingly, for the centenary, just as for the 150-year anniversary, exhibitions took place at the Kunstverein that were supposed to offer “an overview of the association’s history,”<sup>4</sup> although in the second instance, another express aim was “to indicate its self-understanding in the present.”<sup>5</sup> Even *Telling Histories*, the exhibition initiated by Maria Lind in 2003 for the 180-year anniversary, situated itself in this continuity. Here, however, a new conception of institutional-historical practice can be observed: as the title suggests, the focus is directed ardently towards moving methods and modes of the handling of history into full view. In this way, unlike previous anniversary exhibitions, “rather than reconstructing or representing the past, the aim is to reactivate the discussions in a contemporary context.”<sup>6</sup>

Around the same time, the Kunstverein started to make contact with the Stadtarchiv München. This informal exchange over the course of several years culminated in a contractual agreement in 2020, which stipulated that the Kunstverein’s archivable documents should be transferred as a deposit into the City Archive, in order to ensure their long-term preservation. Within this timespan, the Kunstverein had slowly come to the conviction that the archive’s contents were a valuable addition to the core program; a process that Judith Csiki, a former colleague and, until 2022, board member, was instrumental in accompanying and driving forward.

From 2016, Alexander Wagner, who was originally employed by the Kunstverein for the visitor service on weekends, was the first member of staff to take on the task of overseeing the archive. He took over the efforts initiated by Judith Csiki and began retrospectively chronicling historical exhibitions on the website, which continues to this day. A donation from the board member Martina Fuchs made it possible to expand his position, enabling him to conduct this work. Under the aegis of then director Chris Fitzpatrick, whose great interest in the expansion of archival work at the Kunstverein also provided a decisive impetus, Theresa Bauernfeind was responsible for the Kunstverein archive from 2017 to 2019. She consolidated the cooperation with the City Archive, developed the format of the still-extant *Archive Newsletter* with her colleague at the time, Christina Maria Ruederer, and made a lasting commitment to the long-term establishment of the Kunstverein archive. In March 2022, we took over from our predecessor Adrian Djukic, who had overseen the archive since 2020, and who was the first member of staff to occupy the new designated archival position established that year, working thirty-two hours per week. The research and development he undertook, which went well beyond the Kunstverein’s holdings, form an essential basis of our work. In a multi-part newsletter on the concept of class, written for the Kunstverein in 2020/21, for instance, Adrian approached the institution’s history on a structural level, without the familiar affirmative preconceptions that often come with institutional self-historicization. He also established contacts with various practitioners and contemporaries around the Kunstverein, thus transforming the archive into a lively and dynamic place.

Along with the structural organization set up by the director Maurin Dietrich and the curator Gloria Hasnay, the newly created archival position also materialized spatially with the opening of the Archive Space conceived by the artist Julian Göthe within the Kunstverein München as a permanent part of the institution. It houses reference holdings, including printed matter, publications, photographs, and other documents from 1969 onwards. Moreover, the Archive Space serves as a site for public event formats, which subject the history of the institution to critical reflection. A large part of the holdings—correspondences, minutes, account books, photographs, documents around the realization of exhibitions, press material, and so forth—has been stored in the City Archive since the contractual agreement was made in 2020.

In order to continue pursuing our own artistic and independent projects, the two of us decided to apply for the archive position together. But, equally, the suggestion to share the job stems from the desire to be and work in relation to one another. Together, we can develop a dialogic gaze from the first moment of opening up the archive, and thus respond to its conflictual nature. We would like to expand this exchange actively and invite those who are interested to approach us and the archive's stores, not only through memories and documents but also with suggestions and critique. Only in this way can a documentation of the history of the Kunstverein—which, at its point of initiation, only represented the interests of a few privileged men—center those furtive references that point us towards blind spots, resistant conglomerations, or fleeting, emancipatory assemblies in the 200 years of the institution's history.