

MILDRED LANE KEMPER ART MUSEUM

Educator's Guide

Precarious Worlds: Contemporary Art from Germany

September 9, 2011–January 9, 2012

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed as a multidisciplinary companion for educators bringing their students to view *Precarious Worlds: Contemporary Art from Germany*, on view at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum from September 9, 2011, to January 9, 2012. The intent is to offer a range of learning objectives, gallery discussions, and post-visit suggestions to stimulate the learning process, encourage dialogue, and make meaning of the art presented. Teachers at all grade levels should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students.

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ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The world today is increasingly globalized and interconnected, yet also ever more precarious, as old certainties—historical, ideological, and material—give way to pervasive threats of climate change, economic collapse, war, and terrorism. In Germany, these worldwide concerns are compounded by a complicated history, including the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, both unleashing decades of worldwide political and social transformations and inciting unprecedented mobility, migration, and hybridization between cultures, groups, and individuals. Exploring thematic connections between some of Germany's most influential contemporary artists, *Precarious Worlds: Contemporary Art from Germany* showcases a group of important new large-scale acquisitions made possible by a very generous gift from the David Woods Kemper Memorial Foundation.

Wolfgang Tillmans, *Wald (Briol II)*(*Forest [Briol II]*), 2008. C-print, 1/1, 100 1/2 x 67 3/8", University purchase, Parsons Fund, 2010.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts, Art History, European and American History, Germanic Languages and Literature, Gender Studies, Sociology, Philosophy, Political Science, Environmental Studies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore how artists depict and engage with the fragility and instability of contemporary life and how the artworks on view reflect notions of precariousness.
- Students will discuss the impacts of globalization, communication technologies, and the ease of travel on society while exploring references to tourism and travel in the works presented.
- Students will explore how contemporary artists are exploiting and manipulating traditional media, such as painting and sculpture, and nontraditional media, such as found imagery and objects.
- Students will discuss the art-historical references found in some of the works and the significance of such citations.

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BEFORE YOU VISIT

Suggested topics to explore, research, and discuss with your students before visiting the exhibition.

Precariousness | middle and high school level

- Compare the meanings of the words “precarious,” “fragile,” “instable,” and “uncertain.” What types of art objects could be considered precarious or instable? Why? What aspects of everyday life could be considered fragile or uncertain? How do we respond to those uncertainties?

Globalization, Travel, and Communication | middle and high school level

- What does the term “globalization” mean? Explore the history of transportation and communication over the past century. How have new technologies like air travel, smart phones, and videoconferencing changed the ways we perceive space and time? In what ways does an increasingly global culture contribute to conditions of precariousness? In what ways has it made the world seem less precarious?

Found Objects and Images | high school level

- In the early 20th century, several artists began producing art that incorporated everyday materials and found objects. Pablo Picasso is credited with inventing Cubist collage in 1912, which involved pasting materials like photographs, newspaper clippings, and patterned paper onto a flat surface, often in combination with painted or drawn elements. In 1913, Marcel Duchamp began producing “readymades,” or mass-produced objects selected by the artist and displayed as works of art—the most famous being his *Fountain* (1917), which consisted of an inverted urinal signed “R. Mutt.” Do you consider collages and readymades to be works of art? Why or why not? In what ways do artists today continue to use found images and objects? In what ways can these objects be considered fragile or ephemeral? How does the use of found objects alter the effect or meaning of a work of art?

20th-Century History and Contemporary Politics | high school level

- Review the causes and consequences of the Cold War and explore the events that led to its conclusion. In what ways did the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989—a symbol of the Cold War’s division between East and West, and an international sign for the division between communism and democracy—lead to increased globalization, including such phenomena as migration and mass consumption? Would you describe the current economic and political situations in the United States and Europe as precarious? Why or why not?

IN THE GALLERY

Ideas to consider when visiting the exhibition.

Most of the artworks in the exhibition are very large in size. How does this affect the space? How does each piece relate to the others? How are the various meanings of precariousness visualized?

ART INTERACTION Franz Ackermann, *Untitled (yet)*, 2008–9

Ackermann, like many contemporary artists, spends a great deal of time traveling the world. Notions of travel and references to tourism have become a recurring theme in his work. Particularly attracted to architectural elements, spatial impressions, the idea of globalization, and images of urbanism, Ackermann often researches and incorporates local elements found in cities that he visits.

Which symbols of tourism and travel are found in *Untitled (yet)*? What other symbols of tourism would work well? How has the central object of a cable car become lifelike? How does Ackermann's use of bright, garish colors relate to the themes of the work?



Franz Ackermann, *Untitled (yet)*, 2008–9. Oil on canvas, 109 5/8 x 216 1/8". University purchase with funds from the David Woods Kemper Memorial Foundation, 2011.

ART INTERACTION Hans-Peter Feldmann, *Shadowplay*, n.d.



Hans-Peter Feldmann, *Shadowplay*, n.d. Installation with wooden tables, homemade lamps, and rotating tableaux of found objects, dimensions variable. Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York.

In this work, Feldmann comments on popular culture by turning everyday objects into beautiful but fleeting impressions. Movement is an important component of this installation, and, when coupled with mundane objects arranged on simple turning tables, it makes for a thought-provoking and meditative experience.

What objects make up *Shadowplay*? How would the interaction be different if this were a static piece? By arranging these common objects in this fashion, they are allowed to exist twice—once as the actual object and once as an ephemeral trace. If only the shadows were visible, would you recognize the objects? How is *Shadowplay* changing our perception of everyday objects?

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

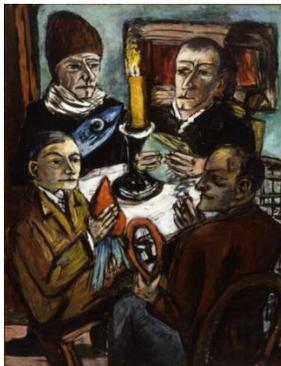
Explore these connections to artworks on view in the Kemper Art Museum's permanent collection.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Choke*, 1964. Oil and silkscreen on canvas, 60 x 48". Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard K. Weil, 1972.

Robert Rauschenberg, *Choke*, 1964

American experimental artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) is perhaps best known for his “combine paintings,” which incorporate three-dimensional items such as stuffed goats, quilts, tires, bottles, electric fans, and clothing. In *Choke*, Rauschenberg combines an Abstract Expressionist painting style with screen-printed images from mass media sources. These disorienting, overlapping images are often seen as reflecting the political and social turmoil of the 1960s. What images and symbols do you recognize? How is Rauschenberg’s *Choke* similar to Feldmann’s *Shadowplay*? How is it different? What objects represented in *Choke* can also be found in *Shadowplay*? In what ways do they both represent precarious aspects of everyday life?



Max Beckmann, *Les Artistes mit Gemüse (Artists with Vegetable)*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 58 15/16 x 45 3/16". Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946.

Max Beckmann, *Les Artistes mit Gemüse (Artists with Vegetable)*, 1943

German artist Max Beckmann (1884–1950) painted *Les Artistes mit Gemüse* while living in exile in occupied Holland. Beckmann left Nazi Germany in 1937 after more than five hundred of his works were confiscated from German museums, and ten of his paintings were shown in the exhibition *Degenerate Art*, an infamous exhibition designed by the Nazi party to attack and ridicule modern art.¹ In *Les Artistes mit Gemüse*, Beckmann depicts himself seated in the lower right corner, accompanied by three other exiles. Each individual oddly holds an object—including a fish, a vegetable, and a mirror—while a fire rages in the window or framed image behind them.² How is Beckmann representing the uncertainty of life in exile? What compositional elements of the painting contribute to this feeling of fragility?



John Baldessari, *Two Compositions (Formal / Informal; Interior / Exterior)*, 1990. C-prints and vinyl paint, 96 1/4 x 68 1/8". Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. University purchase, Charles H. Yalem Art Fund, 1992.

John Baldessari, *Two Compositions (Formal / Informal; Interior / Exterior)*, 1990

Conceptual artist John Baldessari (b. 1931) is known for his work using images appropriated from film stills, advertisements, stock photography, and other mass media sources. In this work, Baldessari juxtaposes two images of group meals, although with very different settings—one is a formal interior dinner party, while the other is an informal gathering by a pool. He transforms these found images by painting over the faces in the upper image and the bodies in the lower image, making the figures anonymous while also drawing attention to their body language, dress, and the objects around them. In what ways is Baldessari’s transformation of found images similar to the technique of Hans Peter Feldmann or Corinne Wasmuht? What elements of this work of art are uncertain? How does the juxtaposition of these two images affect your understanding of the work?

¹ For more on Beckmann’s exile, see Jill Lloyd, “Beckmann: Exile in Amsterdam” in *Max Beckmann*, ed. Sean Rainbird (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), 185–236.

² For more on this painting, see Sabine Eckmann’s Spotlight Series essay on Beckmann’s *Les Artistes mit Gemüse* from July 2007: <http://www.kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/files/spotlight7.07.pdf>.

IN THE CLASSROOM OR AT HOME

Follow your visit to the museum with one or more of these suggested activities.

- Explore the use of shadows and movement in Hans-Peter Feldmann's *Shadowplay* by creating your own installation of found objects. Arrange your selection of objects in front of a bright light or window, experimenting with the shadow compositions that appear on the opposite wall. How are the objects transformed when viewed as shadows? How does the composition change when the objects or light source are moved?
- Create a work of art inspired by Charline von Heyl's *Melencolia* by combining elements from two iconic works of art.
- Using images from magazines, postcards, online, or your own travel photographs, create a collage similar to Franz Ackermann's *Untitled (yet)* that reflects on your experiences with travel and globalization.
- Explore the mathematics, symmetry, and historical significance of the magic square featured in von Heyl's *Melencolia* and Dürer's *Melencolia I*.
- Review current issues of newspapers online or in print. How many articles can you find that allude to a sense of uncertainty or precariousness?

VOCABULARY³

1. **Allusion** – an indirect reference.
2. **Appropriation** – the use of pre-existing objects or images with little transformation. It is a practice that is often associated with a critique of the notions of originality and authenticity.
3. **Assemblage** – art produced by the assembly of disparate elements, often scavenged or found by the artist.
4. **Contemporary art** – loosely used to describe art that is of the moment or the very recent past, in distinction to modern art, which is a more all-embracing term and is used to cover many of the avant-garde movements of the 20th century.
5. **Ephemeral** – lasting for a very short time.
6. **Globalization** – the growing interconnectedness between political, social, and economic systems beyond national or regional borders.
7. **Heterogeneous** – diverse in character or content.
8. **Homogeneous** – of the same kind; alike; or consisting of parts all of the same kind.
9. **Found object** – an object found by an artist and displayed, with little or no alteration, for its aesthetic value. Found objects could be natural, such as a pebble or a shell, or man-made, such as a fragment of pottery, a trinket, or a common everyday item.
10. **Precarious** – not securely held or in position; dangerously likely to fall or collapse; or dependent on chance; uncertain.

³ All definitions adapted from *Oxford Reference Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed August 9, 2011, through Washington University, <http://www.oxfordreference.com>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- The exhibition catalog is available for purchase in the museum shop: Sabine Eckmann, *Precarious Worlds: Contemporary Art from Germany* (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2011).
 - A number of videos are available online that highlight artists featured in the exhibition:
 - Franz Ackermann speaks about the influences on and themes of his work as seen in the exhibition *Wait* at the White Cube: <http://www.whitecube.com/exhibitions/ackermann/video/53/>.
 - A video shows Hans-Peter Feldmann's *Shadowplay* in motion: <http://youtu.be/Nlgl5YJhmn4>.
 - Charline von Heyl presents a lecture on her work at the University of California, Los Angeles: http://hammer.ucla.edu/watchlisten/watchlisten/show_id/598023.
 - For an explanation of Dürer's magic square featured in Charline von Heyl's *Melencolia*, see Eric W. Weisstein, "Dürer's Magic Square" from *MathWorld*, A Wolfram Web Resource, <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/DuerersMagicSquare.html>.
 - For more on 20th- and 21st-century German art, see:
 - Sabine Eckmann, *Reality Bites: Making Avant-Garde Art in Post-Wall Germany*, (St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007).
 - *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* (New York: Abrams, 2009).
 - For more on artistic reactions to globalization, see:
 - Nicolas Bourriaud, *Altermodern* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009).
 - For information and images pertaining to the Cold War, see:
 - *The Cold War Museum*, www.coldwar.org.
 - For news coverage and videos on the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall:
 - *ABC News*, "Nov. 10, 1989: Celebration at the Berlin Wall," <http://youtu.be/snsdDb7KDkg>.
 - *ABC News*, "Nov. 10, 1989: A Crack in the Berlin Wall," <http://youtu.be/oanmD3HHv4M>.
 - *Time Magazine*, "Why the Berlin Wall Fell," <http://youtu.be/cWN7JlGE6PE>.
 - *Time Magazine*, "The Iconic Photo of the Fall of the Berlin Wall," <http://youtu.be/VkT08ZDcOeg>.
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All artworks are in the collection of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University in St. Louis, unless otherwise noted.