

A Visit to the Architect's House

The Art Collection of Oswald Mathias Ungers

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¹ The art collection has not previously received full appreciation; for a first look at it in the context of the architecture of Ungers' houses I–III, see Werner Strodtmann, "Eine Privatbibliothek in Köln-Müngersdorf," *Bauwelt*, 82, April 16, 1991, pp. 830–833; Jörg Stabenow, *Architekten wohnen. Ihre Domizile im 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 2000, pp. 188–205. The contemporary art in Ungers' collection was shown in Düsseldorf and Cologne in 1999 and 2000; see O. M. Ungers. *Zwischenräume*, Anja Sieber-Albers and Sophia Ungers, eds., exh. cat. NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft, Düsseldorf, Ostfildern-Ruit 1999, and O. M. Ungers: *Zeiträume – Architektur – Kontext*, Anja Sieber-Albers, ed., exh. cat. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in the Josef-Haubrich-Kunsthalle, Cologne 1999. Some of the works are long-term loans in the Galerie der Gegenwart (built by O. M. Ungers) in the Hamburger Kunsthalle, and other works were borrowed from other exhibitions to which they had been loaned (kindly pointed out by Anja Sieber-Albers, office Ungers, on May 17, 2006).

² Quoted in Düsseldorf 1999 (see note 1), p. 7.

³ The earlier art was predominantly bought from art dealers, at fairs and at auctions, while the contemporary art was purchased from galleries or directly from the artists themselves (conversation with Sophia Ungers, May 9, 2006). The collection has not been catalogued. Documents on the works of art can be found in the Ungers Archive, Cologne. Researching the collection in the sense of a catalogue was beyond the scope and the possibilities of the present article.

A visit to Ungers' house is like an imaginary stroll through the architect's head. The art collection that can be found presented in nearly every room offers insights not only into the individual works and their groupings, but also into their many-faceted connections to Oswald Mathias Ungers' architecture, his thinking on theory, and the other parts of the collections.¹ At this location, his aphoristic dictum that "what matters is the dialogue in the interstices between art and architecture"² has been realized literally. This dialogue is made fruitful from the complementarity of the traditional and the contemporary: in Ungers' collections, the classical-humanist tradition beginning in antiquity meets the art of the twentieth century, with its radical liberation from the object and its reduction to basic geometric forms. Historically, the collection begins with ancient sculpture and sculpture fragments, as well as with casts of important works like the *Nike of Samothrace* and the *Apollo Belvedere*. Paintings by old masters from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth century form a major focus of the collection, with portrayals of architecture in painting, drawing, and graphic arts, including *vedute* and *capricci* alongside designs and architectural motifs by major architects. This group includes Leo von Klenze's *View of the Older Temple of Hera in Paestum* (1859), sketches for designs by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Galli da Bibiena, and Étienne-Louis Boullée, and precisely executed studies for orders of columns and architectural fragments. In addition, the collection contains architectural fantasies, like a sixteenth-century vision of *The Tower of Babel* by Hendrik van Cleve III, and François de Nomé's *Capriccio of Ruins at Night* from 1622. There is a striking number of depictions of Italy, which give expression to the Classicist reception of antiquity, the Romanticism of ruins in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the reception of the art of antiquity since the Renaissance. The collection has strengths which complement one another: modern art with contemporary art since the 1970s.³ In the collection's two main works, Lancelot Théodore Turpin de Crissé's 1804 *View of the Acropolis of Athens* and Piet Mondrian's 1927 *Composition in Red, Yellow and Blue*, there is a sort of summit meeting between one of the key structures of the ancient world, imagined by a painter who was to become a collector