

Marysia Lewandowska
Welcome

[Sophie Küppers' opening speech]
[00:00:00]

Good evening.

My name is Sophie Küppers and I'm the newly appointed Director of the Kestner Gesellschaft.

It's my great pleasure to see so many of you gathered here tonight. Not only it is an opportunity to welcome you to this special exhibition of Herrn Lissitzky's new work, which my late husband Paul has rated so highly. But also, I wanted to thank those of you who supported me in becoming the very first female Director.

"By standing here today I hope I can demonstrate something else entirely, that you can be a mother or not, you can be a woman or not, you can be well organised, sensitive and caring and wear your heart on your sleeve, you can have all of these qualities and not only you can be standing in front of this distinguished crowd here, but most importantly you can lead"

With such privilege comes a responsibility towards everyone who makes up our community – the artists, our public and our patrons. Seven years ago the Gesellschaft was founded, which coincided with my marriage to Paul Erich Küppers, its first artistic director. The move to Hannover gave us the opportunity to live and work together.

Since the membership of the society has grown and public interest increased under his directorship, our joint efforts could be fulfilled in previously unimagined ways.

We both trained as art historians, under Professor Wölfflin and Dr Volls at Munich University. Before Paul's sudden death in January last year, you all would have been actively involved in making the

Kestner Gesellschaft what it has become today. Professor Bierman, Richard Oppenheimer, Fritz and Elisabeth Beindorff, Herbert von Garvens and Dr Dorner to name those who are here tonight – I am immensely grateful that you have placed your trust in me to take this organisation forward.

For those of you who would have preferred to see Dr von Sydow take charge instead, and insisted that my first duty was as a mother to our two young sons, may this be a turning point; a break with social convention. It is time for me to establish, on my terms, the balance between my young family and my public role.

I hope the current members will join me in building the future Gesellschaft, not only in name but also in reforming the way we might work together - in how we make decisions, challenge divisions, and promote ideas beyond the borders of our country. That way we will have a chance to strengthen our principles of experimentation, and by attracting partnerships with artists, poets, scholars and others from whom we learn and who we serve.

As a Gesellschaft, we are ourselves entangled in the landscape of contemporary art. I am less interested in competing with other cultural players active in our city today, the Kunstverein and the Provinzial Museum, under the progressive curatorship of Dr Dorner, with whom I'm currently discussing ideas concerning new forms of exhibition display. And I'm yet to persuade him to commission Herrn Lissitzky to transform one of the cabinets in the museum. Let the late Romantic idea of a tormented artist, a genius scientist or a lone thinker perish in favor of encouraging what could be named as the "polyphony of voices." Those multiple voices need to be heard! And they might as well be heard here for the first time. Not in competition but in collaboration lies our future, we must pass on the torch not hold on to it.

So here we are, gathered in our magnificent building with its steep roof and elegant façade. Every time I walk up to work, I'm reminded of the house in Paul Klee's watercolour *Landscape with a Rising Moon* which was shown here at an 1919 exhibition. This charming

watercolour, along with the house are gone today but I remember them both, so clearly. It was a time of great expectation. We had only just put the stresses of the Great War behind us and a new century was beginning in Europe.

"We were given an opportunity to invent the world anew, and we wanted to be brave because not every generation has been granted this exceptional chance. Germany could again re-establish contact with the so-called civilised world on the open stage of art." [...] "We wanted to build a new society in which the future would grip us immediately. And we all believed that art would help us build this future, that art would be this society." It is not surprising, perhaps, that artists and writers thought this about art, as artists always do. But they were not alone.

"Paul used to say that art must not simply be there for leisure or amusement but have a provocative or even scandalising effect, if that's what society needed." Here in Hannover you are especially willing to embrace art's provocations face-on. May I extend my sincere gratitude to dear Frau Gerhold, for continually accepting this challenge.

I used to tease Paul that he liked geometric abstraction only because his father was a geometer. I think he truly came to understand abstraction when I purchased Wassily's *Improvisation no 10* – which still hangs in our drawing room – and is one of my proudest possessions. But as the political fortunes turn I may no longer be able to live so closely with the artworks in my collection.

We are already experiencing a deepening financial crisis, the lack of funds has meant that for the first time in our history we will not be producing the exhibition catalogue. Together with Herrn Lissitzky we are planning to release a special portfolio edition, *The Kestner Mapped*, giving you a chance to own his work and to support our future programme.

In a world which is quickly losing its grip on value, art might prove to be the one thing that stands the test of time. I know many of you will

share this feeling with me tonight. This exceptional occasion would have not been possible without one person who we, here in Hannover, owe a great deal.

He has been liberating us from prejudice and narrow-mindedness while encouraging new attitudes in the shape of *The Holy Affliction*, while his publishing of the *Porno-graphic i-Poem* has secured as many sympathisers as enemies of his art.

My dear Kurt, your and Helma's openness of heart, your sharp humour and infectious energy is injecting a new spirit into our city. Your legendary Dada evening last year will be remembered by many, and for me it carries a personal relevance for our gathering here tonight. It was there I met Herrn Lissitzky in person for the first time, after seeing his work in Berlin last year. My sincere thanks go also to Otto Gleichmann and his wife Lotte for hosting the artist whose work we are celebrating tonight.

"Art is also a prospect and I will happily face this prospect with you today, your faith alone in what the Kestner Gesellschaft has become could have carried this community on its wings."

Our plans are as audacious as they are revolutionary. I am very happy to welcome you today to the very first exhibition of my tenure as the Director presenting the works by the artist El Lissitzky who some of you may not yet be familiar with. He is in Germany to promote the avant-garde practice of pure artistic feeling, pioneered by him and his colleagues in Vitebsk. Herrn Lissitzky's work proposes a radically new approach not only to art but to the world. His paintings and designs are not expressions of life but they produce new forms whose relationships we have to discover and describe using a language we are yet to invent. In the words such as UNOVIS and Proun, he is attempting to capture the tension between the body and space. In his writing he talks about "the invention of a mind where rationality is fused with imagination, the physical with mathematical!" According to him "it is the irrational space independent of our power of visualisation, as it cannot be represented or materialised" and he claims that "a man can die before he was even born".

These ideas flourished during teaching a course on Architecture and Monumental Painting at VKhUTEMAS and an intense involvement with artists such as Malevich and Rodchenko. As you will encounter in many of the works shown in this exhibition, "the illusory body floating in infinite space is so perfectly balanced that it maintains its balance and supports itself with every turn"

I am very pleased that Herrn Lissitzky has promised to spend some months here in Hannover, becoming our first artist in residence, occupying the top floor of our building. He is such an intriguing young man, reminding us that "there is no revolution that does not produce a new body."

So, ladies and gentlemen. We must be absolutely modern. "This is our task today. Once we have integrated art into our industry and industry into our culture, we all share the responsibility for nurturing this originality and making it so 'beautiful' that even the modest tax collector could absorb every day all the tonality, all the taste and all that indefinable charm, spread like a silvery net over people and things."

Thank you Lucia and László for reminding us about beauty. We must ensure that the net is never tightened to suffocate our endeavours. There is always a risk and a danger that the art we live so closely with, the art we supported and nourished could one day be banished, lost or burnt.

"And today, we can count art's true friends on the fingers of one hand. And the others? They satisfy their cravings through illustrated magazines and cinema. Short, fast sensations, rapid releases, no more immersion, no more quiet enjoyment. What is our task now that we know that art can no longer keep up with the pace of our time, has it run out of breath?"

Let me end on a more positive note reading from a poem written three years ago and recently published in Berlin by Herrn Lissitzky's close friend, the poet Marina Tsvetaeva, whose writing tests everything that has been said of art, life and love before.

I was baptised in the sea's foam – and in flight – I am eternally breaking! Through every heart, through every net, my headstrong will must penetrate. With each wave – I shall resurrect!
Long live the foam – the playful foam.

I thank you!

[Duration 00:15:47]

Marysia Lewandowska
Welcome

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Sophie Küppers performed by Medea Stabbert

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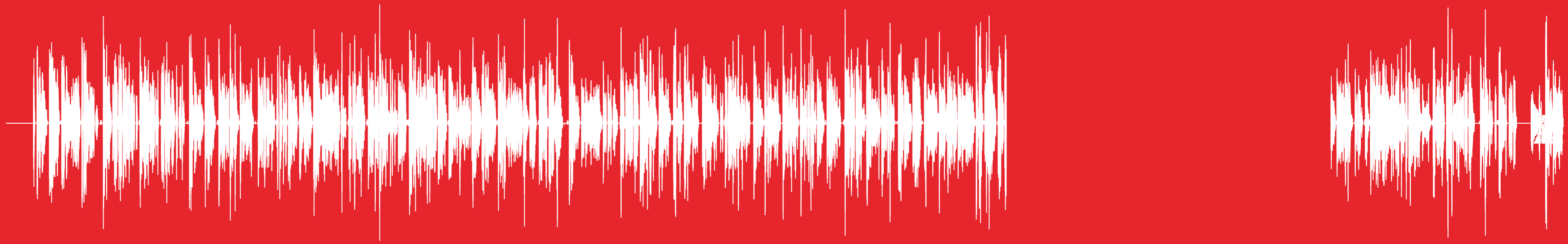
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