

CLIFF NOTES

TALKING ABOUT H. C. WESTERMANN IN THE CONTEXT OF MAINSTREAM AMERICAN ART IS LIKE TRYING TO FIT A SQUARE PEG INTO A ROUND HOLE. OR SO IT MIGHT BE SAID.

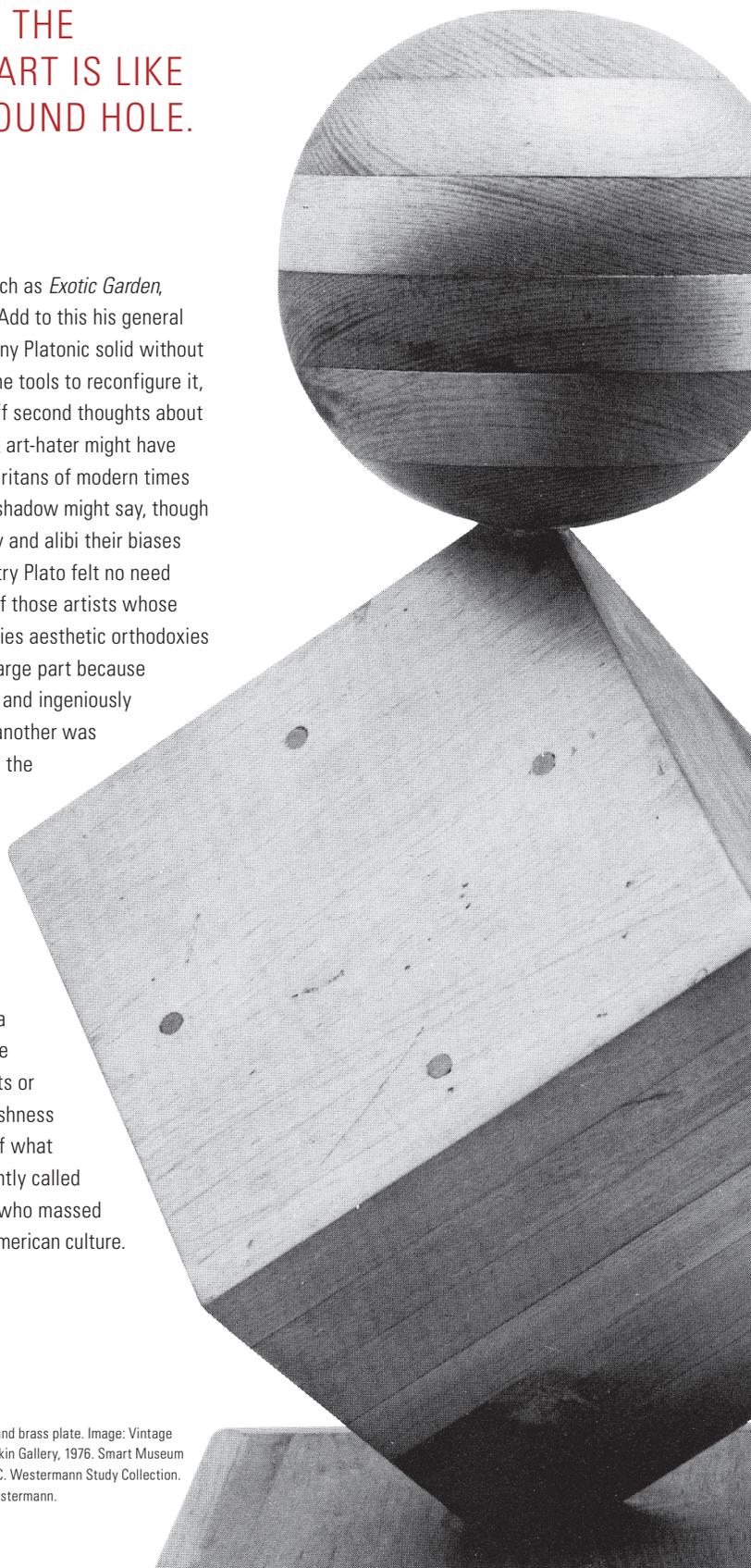
The problems with this particular cliché start as soon as one considers its full three-dimensional parameters and their aesthetic analogs. After all, much of sculpture in the postwar era—and arguably most of the best when Westermann was at the peak of his powers—was Cubist derived and therefore square or rectangular in its basic structural units. Westermann liked right angles well enough, but viewing his work only through the prism of his many boxes leaves us with “talking about Westermann in the context of mainstream American art is like trying to fit a square peg into a square hole”—the only outstanding complication being the size of the hole.

However, even the most cursory inventory of his production reveals the greater difficulties of trying to align him with existing models of formalist art history given his equal affinity for lop-sided planar forms—such as *Pine Construction*, for example—compounded by his soft spot for

the loopy and lumpy—such as *Exotic Garden*, to cite another example. Add to this his general disinclination to bow to any Platonic solid without winking or reaching for the tools to reconfigure it, all the while shrugging off second thoughts about what the grand old Greek art-hater might have said or what aesthetic puritans of modern times mushrooming in his long shadow might say, though they say it far less clearly and alibi their biases with art historical casuistry Plato felt no need for. Westermann is one of those artists whose mischievous diversity defies aesthetic orthodoxies of style at every turn in large part because turning or bending things and ingeniously fitting anomalies to one another was what he was all about. In the strict woodshop sense of the term he was a joiner by trade, and in his time there was none better. Shifting to everyday usage, though, it is impossible to find anyone who was less of a joiner when it came to the ideologies, the movements or the garden-variety clannishness and conformism typical of what Harold Rosenberg mordantly called the “herd of individuals” who massed in the fields of postwar American culture.



Exotic Garden, 1962. Pine, plywood, enamel, and mirror. Image: Vintage photograph, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, The H. C. Westermann Study Collection. Gift of Martha Westermann Renner, 2004.270m.



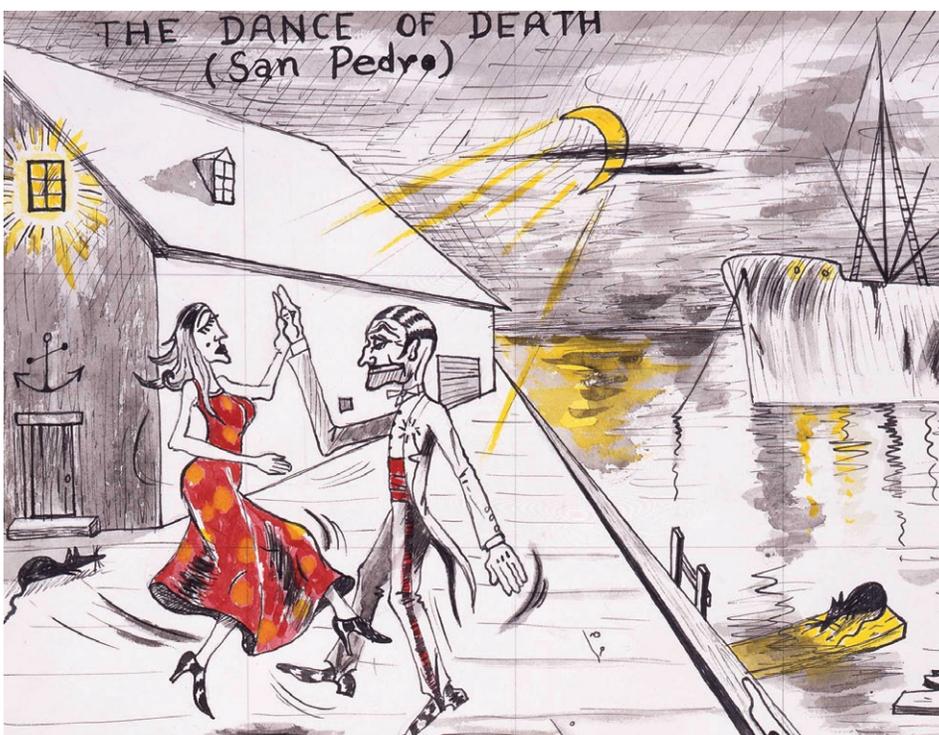
Pine Construction (detail), 1976. Pine and brass plate. Image: Vintage exhibition announcement, Allan Frumkin Gallery, 1976. Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, The H. C. Westermann Study Collection. Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann.

After all, was Westermann not the artist who gave one of the strangest humanoid images of the Atom bomb/science fiction haunted 1950s—the first decade in modern history in which being a forward-looking thinker meant speculating on whether there was going to be any future to think about at all much less transform into Utopia—the colloquially Nietzschean titled *Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea*? And was the basis of Westermann’s fathomless skepticism not that of a veteran who had volunteered not just for one war but for two, certain as he did so that war was not only Hell but delirious insanity? In other words, was he not a non-joiner who joined up in order to confirm his worst intuitions, an anarchist in

uniform whose avowed and quite common-sense fear drove him to act fearlessly and stare down the horrors he foresaw in his mind’s eye and then saw with his naked eye, the most horrible being the kamikaze sinking of a troupe ship commemorated in so many sculptures, prints, and drawings? Perhaps such inner and outer witnessing explains why there are so many unblinking eyes in his art and why so many—like that atop the Cyclop-like *Memorial*—are bloodshot.

In this respect Westermann might seem to belong in the company of such ex-GI writers as James Jones and Norman Mailer, but existentialist chest beating was not his style. In life Westermann was a powerfully built but agile acrobat, not a take-all-comers muscle man. Moreover, his chief alter ego was a comic variant on the Latin lounge lizard with patent leather hair and pencil mustache, who despite his “louche” manner and sinister surroundings—deserted, rat infested docks where listing tramp steamers resembling ghosts of the Sundered troupe ship are moored—tenderly, eternally romances his sweet heart. For like many who whose hearts have been cracked if not broken, Westermann was a chronic romantic.

During the 1950s, Westermann thus embodied an exception to both the masculinity of the corporate “Man in the Gray Flannel Suit” and that of the jeans and jersey wearing Greenwich



Study for The Connecticut Ballroom: Dance of Death, Undated, c. 1975, Pen and ink and watercolor on wove paper, gridded in pencil for transfer. Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann, 2002.182.

Village Bohemian, though arguably Westermann's slangy, sarcastic, streetwise way with words aligns him with the scat-talking Greenwich Village comedian Lord Buckley. Meanwhile, in contrast to Jones and Mailer, Westermann's sardonic "patriotism" matched that of Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, even as his *See America First* themed prints and drawings come close in picaresque spirit to Louis-Fernand Celine's "A Long Days Journey Into Night"—as if such a journey had been in a beat-up convertible on beat-up transcontinental highways.

That Westermann's subversiveness was informed and thoughtful as much as it was whimsical or instinctive is as obvious from his dead on lampoons of "high brow" taste as it is from his occasionally respectful but characteristically tongue-in-cheek nods to others with whom he is not normally associated and who, one suspects, might not have associated with him. Great satire demands intimacy with and understanding of its object. Whoever may be tempted to dismiss Westermann's works as one-liners should first consider how long it took to make each one, and therefore how much time he had to think about whether such exertions were worth the candle or not. On the whole we readily accept the disproportionate investment of skill and energy in a "labor of love," so why not in a "labor of unlove"—hate is too stark

See America First: Untitled #2 (See America First III), 6-11 October 1968, Three-color lithograph (yellow, red, black). Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann, 2002.208c.

a word—given that such an act of disaccord expresses by its tone and the specific exception taken a cherished but opposite value.

And so, on the one hand, we have the well calibrated counterpoint of his 1966 drawing *Great Culture Explosion* which cartoonishly renders the Machine Age elegance of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye complete with joyously vulgar and graphically amplified captions. A balloon lettered "PHOOEY!" is the most prominent. (Notwithstanding the fact that Mies van der Rohe was one of his first collectors, Westermann's feelings about modernist architecture appear to be equivalent to those voiced by Tom Wolfe in *From Bauhaus to Our House* but they are untainted by Wolfe's twee, tiresome, retro-chic



H. C. Westermann with *The Big Change* (1963). Photo by Lester Beall, Connecticut, 1963. Image: vintage photograph, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann.

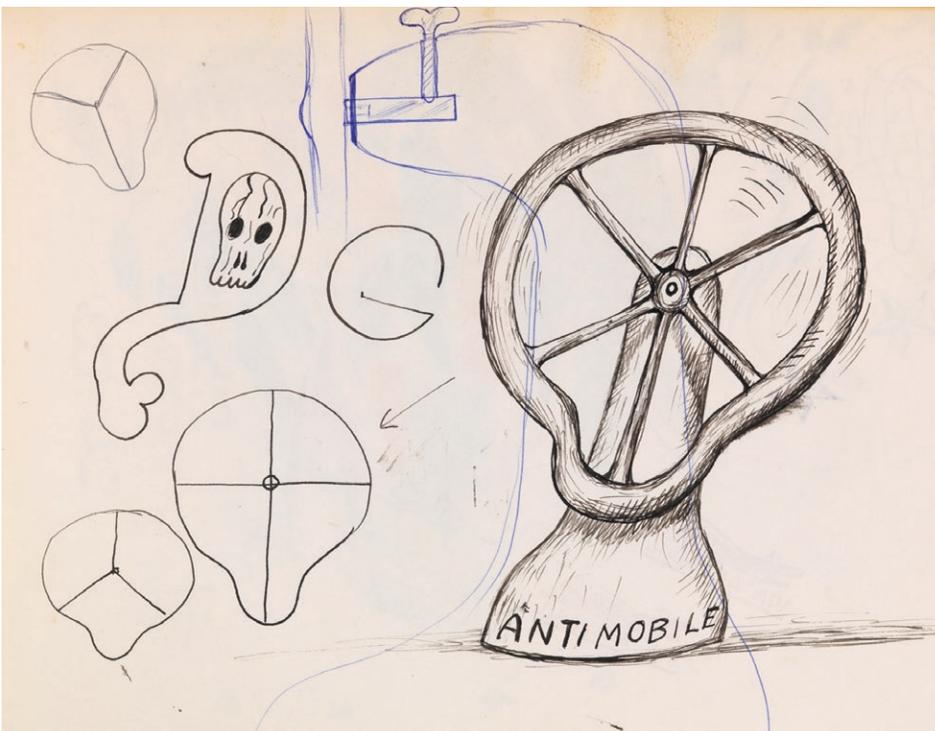


smugness.) On the other hand, Westermann's oddly forlorn and inertial *Antimobile* (1965) is the homage of a craftsman to a "bricoleur"—Alexander Calder—a gymnast who nevertheless felt the weight of the world to a bear of a sculptor who was nonetheless determined to defy gravity. (This connection qualifies another detail in the *Great Culture Explosion* in which we see the "T" of "ART" being shoved down a man's throat and next to it the text "EAT IT BABY, EAT IT RAW," since Calder was among the artists whose works frequently decorated such modernist structures.)

Space does not permit a detailed description and analysis of all the ways that Westermann

gave incongruous form to his contrarian spirit, nor is there room to list and comment on all the so-called mainstream "isms" that had no room for him. Yet one of those tendencies—or rather a fellow artist who tried unsuccessfully to invent a movement around his interest in an eclectic group of eccentric practitioners—cracked the façade of monolithic high modernism that dominated the horizon of postwar American art. The degree to which it has remained fractured ever since despite numerous attempts to patch it up and the extent to which the fissures have spread and invaded the foundations of the whole edifice leaves open the possibility that Westermann's contribution will, disparate as it is, sooner rather than later break through entirely and assume the prominence it deserves. The unwieldy name of the tendency that initiated this disintegration was "Specific Objects." Ironically, its theorist was the box-maker supreme Donald Judd.

The idea Judd proposed was simple, though one needs to retrospectively impose the template of formalist dogma according to which painting and sculpture were wholly separate enterprises for it to make any sense today. Fundamentally, "specific objects" were works of art that were unclassifiable by conventional modernist standards, objects whose categorically "neither/nor" or perpetually "in between" status arrested one's attention and held it not only because of their inherent distinction but also precisely



Untitled [sketch for *Antimobile*], circa 1965, In *Sketchbook #10*, folio 49r, black and blue ink and watercolor on wove paper. Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, The H. C. Westermann Study Collection, Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann, 2002.323p.



Installation view, "H. C. Westermann: New Sculptures and Drawings: 1978–1981," Xavier Fourcade, Inc., New York, 1981. Image: Vintage photograph, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, The H. C. Westermann Study Collection. Gift of the Estate of Joanna Beall Westermann.

because they demanded that such standards be rethought from their basic premises up. On that score, parenthetically, it is important to note that Westermann conceived of his work holistically from the base up, sometimes using slyly labeled packing cases as plinths thereby upsetting the hierarchy that places the useless above the useful, the explicitly artful over the deceptively artless, with Richard Artschwager's recent crates-as-sculptures being a salute to Westermann on the order of Westermann's salute to Calder in *Antimobile*.

Other artists Judd supported as a critic and gathered into the fold of "Specific Objects" included Yayoi Kusama and Lee Bontecou—to his credit Judd was an advocate of women artists (as was Sol LeWitt) in a period when there were relatively few—and if we add their names to Westermann's and then check this short but easily extended roster against the record of museum and gallery activity over the last two decades as well as the index of art magazines, one can readily make out the changing texture of art history.

While Westermann the carpenter was careful not to go against the grain of the wood he tailored and while in many ways his commitment to hard work and plain talk was in the grain of traditional American culture, in most other respects he found himself working against the grain of his times and milieu. In part this resulted from changes in the country that distorted what he understood to be

its core values; contrary to the assumption that World War II and Korean War soldiers favored the Vietnam War he was opposed to it and contrary to the notion that "progress" (a.k.a. a quick buck) trumped all other concerns he was appalled by the rape of the land and the monstrosity of the cities. In part, it issued from the galling exaggeration of cultural ideas that had gone from being the cause of embattled creative enclaves to the arrogant assumptions of powerful elites. But circumstances have caught up with American hubris, just as they have with modernist zealotry. The so-called "Triumph of American Art" of the 1950s and 1960s left out a host of men and women whose achievements are as essential as those who were, for the most part deservedly, included in the original canon.¹ And as Judd and others recognized, Westermann was one of the most radical of these independents. A do-it-yourselfer who actually did everything himself from building his own house to editioning wood block prints by hand, Westermann also carved out and paneled his own niche in the Pantheon so that next to marble, bronze, and steel figures of familiar notables we now find one less familiar that is made of knotty pine, birch and maple with brass hinges and clasps. Getting to know him better is a key to getting to know modern art and America all over again.

Robert Storr

1. *The Triumph of American Painting* is a seminal book on Abstract Expressionism by the distinguished art historian and indefatigable chronicler of the New York School, Irving Sandler. The chauvinistic title was chosen by its publisher and cannot be blamed on the author. Sandler's *American Art of the 1960s* includes references to and appreciative commentaries on Westermann, and it like his other books, gives signal attention to many artists ignored by the majority of mainstream scholars and critics.