

## **Agenda Art 2010 Austria Could Show Courage for Experiment.**

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The “crisis of art” has been obvious for quite some time. Trapped between politics and economy, art is in urgent need of scenarios for a better future, new perspectives as are formulated in the “Agenda Art 2010”, which incorporates contributions from leading visionary thinkers from the spheres of philosophy, futurology, art, architecture, and design. Located between tradition and experiment, the MAK pursues its important mission of preserving the cultural heritage; however, drawing on tradition alone and neglecting vital contemporary art would be fatal: contemporary art is the classical art, the cultural heritage of tomorrow and must not be thwarted. The MAK defines itself as a laboratory of innovative and international art interventions – without succumbing to global mainstreaming, as a place of public discourse and social insight. **THE MAK’S NOTION OF ART IS ADVANCED, AVANT-GARDISTIC, AND SOCIALLY CRITICAL. CONTEMPORARY ART PER SE IS A CRITIQUE OF THE EXISTING, INCONVENIENT, PROVOCATIVE, RESISTANT, UNCOMPROMISING, GOING ALL THE WAY, BREAKING BOUNDARIES OF PERMISSIBILITY.** It is only as a dissenter from conformism, as the thorn in the side of his time that the artist can act in this way, never catering to the wishes of his patrons – it is in fact a sign of un-culture if the state or private sponsors expect the artist to make concessions to them – never backing down in anticipatory obedience to censorship, and be it an internalized one. This Logos is not objectified and instrumental, but emancipatory and progressive in the service of humanism. Critical art unwilling to renounce its claim to truth does not smoothly accommodate to conditions, but keeps questioning them in permanent revolution – not, of course, as the agent of any specific political doctrine which cherishes art only as long as it flatters its ideological interests. The more aestheticized the political, the more depoliticized the aesthetic: to this state of affairs of the present age, art must react with self-repoliticization. **THIS MAKES IT SUFFICIENTLY CLEAR WHAT CONTEMPORARY ART MUST NOT BE: AFFIRMATIVE, CONFORMIST, CONCILIATORY,** in brief, sworn in on the status quo, a moral “correctional facility” in the service of the powers that be. Art is not an exhortation to have fun, let alone a distraction of the kind that industrialized mass entertainment offers; rather, it essentially is a realm of freedom outside the everyday and yet open to the world, functionless, useless, subject to no purpose outside itself: an image of freedom, fulfilling what Stendhal hoped from beauty, to be a “promesse du bonheur”<sup>1</sup>, revealing what could be. But art does not reside in unworldly spheres of aesthetic idealism; rather, it seeks to change practice, for the better, to be sure. An agent of modernization, the artist not only pictures what is visible, but makes visible, thus serving his central function, setting up worlds against the world. He is a contemporary of the future, and on such logic Paul Virilio posits that the MAK must be a “MUSEUM OF THE ACCIDENT OF THE REAL”. In order not to let utopia get out of sight in the possibility-blind morass, in dreary everyday necessity, artists – particularly these days – have a duty to dream.

So much for the vision, the ideal. But how about the reality of contemporary art? Its vital question is: state or private? All around, a creeping retreat of the state can be observed, which increasingly backs out of art-political responsibility. With politics pulling out, another force comes into play: is art only the continuation of business by other means, confined to the scope sanctioned by capital? Is it being sacrificed on the altar of the market?

A noticeable discomfort with the silent adamancy of conditions keeps preoccupying the minds; the concrete life of countless people – not only artists – seems to be dominated by a single fact: the “necessities” of the so-called globalization, that is, the laws of global free market economy with its philosophy of profit maximization, commodification, and exchange value. Success in terms of money seems to justify almost anything these days. And those who fail to accommodate to the conditions of economic success in the “struggle for survival” will never get a foot on the ground. Particularly today, when the pressures of the market are turning out to be an iron cage, **INDEPENDENT ART HAS COME TO BE MORE ESSENTIAL**

TO LIFE THAN EVER. Most nations, it is true, have embodied the freedom of art in their constitutions, but what is it worth in view of art's chronic economic malaise? And so countless self-exploiting contemporary artists, considering that their art won't earn them a living, keep asking themselves a legitimate question: IS THERE LIFE BEFORE DEATH? This forces every single artist to make his or her choice: true art, that is, no unconditional surrender to the demands of the market, or commodified art, commercialization. But where unbridled economic liberalism reigns, only the marketable can survive, and soon fashion dictates will take hold; after all, pleasant looks sell. The market for art as a speculative commodity has been up for some time now; big auction houses such as Sotheby's or Christie's regularly make record sales; but unlike private collections, museums did not profit from the gold fever. With their scarce resources, they do not stand a chance against the concerted market power of collectors and speculators, which implies that they are increasingly less able to fulfill their mission of making art accessible to the public. With the piecemeal abdication of the state from its art-political responsibility, public art institutions such as museums are forced to raise money elsewhere. Maximizing visitor numbers is the call of the hour, and so museum presentations are streamlined into a monoculture of mega events, blockbuster shows, "special packages", joint ventures, and mergers. Speculating on mass audiences, however, is fatal for an art institution, since the entertainment spectacle needed to attract the masses turns shows into show biz, which always tends to go along with greater banality, trivialization, and arbitrariness: a downward spiral. Also, art institutions are forced to engage in massive fundraising to gain private and corporate sponsors, who usually expect advertising and image-building effects in return, which generally favors art that is likely to generate media and public attention but remains otherwise harmless. This is what the reality of art is like, no matter how often, in this "cultural nation" of Austria, politicians may give fair-weather speeches declaring their commitment to art and culture, to the "people gifted for beauty" (as the national anthem contends).

So far, we have dialectically confronted what would be theoretically desirable with real-life practice as it is. Can we now identify specific (art) policies needed? What are the practical necessities? Leaving aside the question of whether politics is the art of the possible, one thing is certain: politics must make art possible and not throw it to the market; what is called for is a clear commitment to, mainly, contemporary art; muddling along like before won't do any longer. Policy-makers will have to give priority – which is not harnessing for partisan issues – to contemporary art, notably to the visual arts, literature, music, architecture, and design, as they do, for example, to gender mainstreaming. Proven contemporary art experts should be admitted to governmental power; a first step in that direction would be an "ARTISTS' QUOTA" in parliament and in the administration. Austria could in fact demonstrate courage for experiment and take a pioneering role in this; just imagine: an artist as Minister of Defense! The manifesto "Contemporary ART INTO GOVERNMENT!" of September 2006 (Gerald Bast and Peter Noever) hence demands the establishment of a MINISTRY OF CONTEMPORARY ART; a general-purpose Ministry of Art in which all arts are again lumped together would in fact disimprove the situation, unless the minister would make an uncompromising commitment to contemporary art, instead of giving the usual preference to flagship institutions such as the State Opera or the Burgtheater. This is not a demand for state control or centralized supervision of art (for example, the diversity of the museum scene must be warranted), but for pervasion of the state with (contemporary) art and greater presence of art in the mass media; one important measure in this respect would be a binding mandate for art and culture on public TV, with art-makers involved in the programming. The most important demand to be made to the state is purchases of contemporary art and intensified collecting activities (at present, not a single federal museum in Austria is able to fulfill its collecting mandate). What artists need is financial help to help themselves, not charity or patronizing gratuities; they need backing (also through a greater number of grants, awards, tax reliefs); the rest will happen by itself. Progressive art beyond the taste of the masses needs public subsidization; this is the only way to warrant the quality of art production, since increasing economic and legitimating pressures work in the opposite direction. Eligibility for subsidization should again be decided

by experts, that is, by artists. In his statement, Chris Burden suggests reserving A FIXED PERCENTAGE OF A COUNTRY'S ANNUAL MILITARY BUDGET FOR ART. The fact that in Austria, one of the richest countries in the world, no funds are available for adequate art-purchasing budgets is a scandal. The "Contemporary ART INTO GOVERNMENT" manifesto therefore also demanded the establishment of an Austrian National Contemporary Art Foundation and a "Design Award of the Year", both with adequate endowment. Generally speaking, permissive, trustful, nondomineering and supportive art policies would be called for. What is the use of spending, sometimes, millions for the promotion of prestigious art by established and successful artists when unknown experimental contemporary artists can hardly make a living? In principle, nothing can be said against national self-branding through art and culture which Austria relies on like almost no other country, but capitalizing on a heritage of cultural prestige objects is not enough. Cultural governmentalism cannot produce art; what it takes is a beneficial social climate. From primary schools to senior-citizen education, people should be afforded the intellectual qualification, the artistic capability and skills to live up to their HUMAN RIGHT TO ART; this, however, would presuppose a profound change of social norms and values.

In order for Austria not to become the country of unlimited impossibilities, the MAK demands: "AUSTRIA MUST NOT STAND ASIDE WHEN CUTTING-EDGE ART EMERGES."

CAT<sup>2</sup> is the solution.

1 "La beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur" – Stendhal, *De l'amour*, Paris 1822, 1st book, chapter 17, "La beauté détrônée par l'amour", Gallimard, Paris, 1980.

2 The MAK's "CAT – Contemporary Art Tower" project provides a unique opportunity; it is a seminal focus of the productive force of art which could be created on site by artists in residence, relating to and irremovably integrated with its location. Thus a "21st Century Collection" could be assembled over the coming years.