



WHAT FREEDOM IS FOR ART INDEPENDENCE IS FOR THE ART MUSEUM

PETER NOEVER
C.E.O. and Artistic Director MAK

Unrest is the engine of art, and disturbance its indispensable mission. Friedrich Nietzsche, the artist-philosopher par excellence, put it in a nutshell: “[O]ne must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star.”¹ Unrest, whether individual or institutional, releases creative energy, and brings to dance what is petrified. In the realm of art, unrest is the first civic duty.

The same goes for politics: a lively progressive democracy can dispense with the impulses or the corrective of art only on penalty of fossilization. Art gives a voice to the silent force of circumstances.

Amid all the negative present-day stress factors, restless art unfolds positive potentials, for the individual and for society as a whole. The position that the MAK takes is clear: it stands for critical-emancipatory, nonconformist contemporary art; to the latter, particularly to the avantgardist-marginalized, not easily marketable kind, we have made a long-standing commitment.

In this country, the idea of unrest unfortunately is, in general, negatively connotated. The enlivening forces of cutting-edge contemporary art have not even been tentatively unleashed so far. Everywhere – and notably so in politics – unrest is felt to be disconcerting. And the consequences? Immobility, safety needs, harmony-mindedness, a lack of courage to risk, fatalist indifference, provincialism, conservatism, bureaucratism, just to mention a few. In Austria, a popular joke says, everything that is not expressly permitted is prohibited; in a country, that is, that once was the starting point of art revolutions. Reviving that risk-taking experimental spirit is something that the MAK seeks to actively contribute to.

Not yet domesticated, contemporary art regularly causes irritation; its refractory character earns it all sorts of hostile reactions, which is only understandable, considering its sometimes so uncompromising criticism of the status quo. Nevertheless, this type of art is the salt of society: born out of the will to change the world, it creates counterworlds and utters protest against that which is – which is why it needs to be protected. Wherever there is an issue of defending artistic intentions we are ready to assume the role of a champion of art.

Art as the MAK sees it goes against so-called reality, against the established, the apparently self-evident. What art eventually wants is: to question answers, to enigmatize solutions, to confuse perception, to dynamize the unmovable, to chaoticize order, to anarchize rules, to topple balances, to shift perspectives, to undercut meanings, to revolutionize discourses, to infiltrate complexity, in brief: to unsettle what is settled. Consumerist-escapist attitudes are not in

< Dragan Živadinov, Dunja Zupančič,
Miha Turšič, “Satellite Dvojina SI-7”

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spake Zarathustra” (first published in German 1883–1885), Zarathustra’s Prologue 5.

place here: In art, there is no rest, unless it were an act of resistance against being harnessed for non-art purposes. Art sees nothing but possibilities everywhere, and the human is a grave of possibilities. Artist visionaries keep the utopian alive, the unfulfilled promises of humankind. What is true of art in general is also true of the concrete artwork, provided it has turned out right. It is full of contradictions, both its elements and their relationship with one another stay always in flux. The work of art dialectically reflects the social breaches of its time. Always open for interpretation, it offers itself to understanding only to withdraw from it again. And as long as it manifests equivocality, neither the work of art, nor its recipient, will ever come to rest.

Needless to say that such a notion of art is a commitment; the MAK's exhibition and event strategy obviously gives proof of this. If a museum really gets involved in these different current trends, it automatically exposes itself to unrest.

But the reactive side is not the only one: these days, a museum should actually provoke and promote art and be more than just an interface between art producers and art consumers. The MAK: a fomenter in the most positive sense of the word, a seedbed of unrest on the national and international museum scene. In our labs, we create turbulences, and this is sociopolitically significant: "education" for art by art. Everyone who wants can come and indulge in unrest, with free admission every Saturday.

As a place of the programmatic fusion of tradition and experiment, the MAK is aware of the significance of the cultural heritage, whose cultivation is an essential part of the museum mission. And yet: a museum devoting itself merely to conservation becomes conservative. Without courage for experimentation, no museum will be able to actually arrive in the present.

Museums will have to keep redefining themselves in a process of continual self-reflection; it is only thus that they can continue to be test labs of the future. Historically grown holdings have to be exhibited in a contemporary style, only the most innovative of presentation strategies can come into consideration. After all, thinking about the possibility or impossibility of the museum is what makes the core issue of theoretical, and the propelling force of practical, museum work.

When taking up new trends in art architecture, design, etc., the MAK seeks to facilitate deconstructive interventions in museum structures. What does it mean for an institution to consciously incorporate genuinely artistic practices? Well, for example the following: the advanced, open work of art that transcends rigid work notions and breaks down genre boundaries has its counterpart in the open museum – for instance, in the MAK as a place of a wide range of discourses about research, literature, film, music, etc. A museum scene with rigid divides of genre, epoch, and the like, would not be state of the art anyway. Besides: what freedom is for art independence is for the art museum; otherwise, its many different tasks could hardly be coped with.

The museum policy of complex interventions also entails that artists get involved in our house in that they rearrange collections or create works that relate to the location.

The MAK's CAT – Contemporary Art Tower strategy for the conversion of the Arenbergpark Flak Tower provides an adequate solution for the requirements of contemporary art production beyond traditional museum work: an artists-in-residence program is intended to provide the basis for the establishment of a "21st Century Collection" with a unique identity; the artists invited will implement their ideas on site in dialogue with the public and relating to the specificity of the historical location.



Franz West, "Eo Ipso", 1987

The MAK acts as a catalyst of urban transformation outside Austria, too: with the help of a 410,000 dollar subsidy that the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs spontaneously awarded to the MAK Center Los Angeles, a program could be launched that will set new standards: the MAK Urban Future Initiative (UFI). The home base and studio of the planned fellowship program will be – thanks to the generous donation of Russ Leland to the MAK Center – the Fitzpatrick-Leland House, built by Rudolph M. Schindler in 1936 and now restored to its original state.

The MAK has been the starting point of numerous artistic interventions in the public realm and has regularly hosted artists of worldwide repute: Jenny Holzer, Donald Judd, Vito Acconci, Richard Artschwager, Anish Kapoor, Lawrence Weiner, Franz West, Chris Burden, Walter Pichler, Magdalena Jetelová, and many others.

However, what counts in the end is content. The decisive thing is not size or runtime of an exhibition. Two or three pieces, presented at the right time, may have an amazing impact, as is demonstrated by the MAK NITE® (with the museum open from 10 a.m. till 12 p.m.) on Tuesdays: here, young artists (architects, designers, musicians, or fashion-makers) are given a one-time opportunity to present recent projects, often for the first time and for a few hours only. The other extreme is comprehensive exhibitions like "COOP HIMMELB(L)AU. Beyond the Blue", which take years to prepare, although here, too, the focus is not on glossy surfaces, but on the underlying idea, as, for instance, on the decades-long struggle of COOP HIMMELB(L)AU for the cause of visionary-experimental architecture.

The MAK motto is transformation, which will be exemplified by the upcoming exhibitions of two former Schindler Artists and Architects in Residence (MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles), Andreas Fogarasi und Dorit Margreiter, who both make critical-analytical mixed-media interventions in places, spaces, cultures, conventions, institutions, and so on.

The fact that we do not shy away from taking a risk was demonstrated 2007 in our first exhibition ever organized in cooperation with a business corporation, "HELD TOGETHER WITH WATER". The decisive factor here was a convergence of interests, for instance, for contemporary feminist art.

The principle of unrest also informs our penchant for crossovers, such as between art and architecture, as happened between the artist Kasper Kovitz and the architect Andrea Lenardin Madden in an exhibition entitled "Sunset: Delayed".

Art is a struggle against the gravitational weight of that which is: this counterforce is metaphorically visualized in the project "Postgravity Art – ORBITA NOORDUNG. Dragan Živadinov, Dunja Zupančič, Miha Turšič", which will be shown at the MAK Depot of Contemporary Art Gefechtsturm Arenbergpark: an art-loaded satellite prototype illustrates what happens if the Sputnik connects to the space-technology ideas of the visionary pioneer Hermann Potočnik (whose pen name was Noordung).

One of our core competences is contemporary architecture: and in this field, we succeeded to achieve something unparalleled worldwide, namely, to bring an elite of architects to the MAK within a couple of months – and several generations at once: Hernán Díaz Alonso, Frank O. Gehry, COOP HIMMELB(L)AU; moreover, the MAK developed together with Ross Lovegrove the SOLAR TREE, a prototype was installed in fall 2007 in front of the MAK building.

In a social climate in which everything happens according to preformed concepts there is an urgent need for perceptively functioning institutions; hence the MAK specifically embarks on ambivalent, controversial, non-domesticated events.

Although we cannot complain about a lack of international attention, getting maximum publicity can never be an end in itself.

What remains in the end? Staying on one's course. Everybody interested to know what this means should come and see the lifework of Padhi Frieberger at the MAK Contemporary Art Collection.



Julian Opie, "Shahnoza with nose stud", 2007