

Peter Noever
C.E.O. and Artistic Director

Defiant.

On the Uses of Art and Love of Artists

To say that something is in the midst of a crisis at present is basically a tautology. The present is the crisis and to be in the middle of a crisis is to be present in the present.

There is not much more you can say about the present with any certainty and, strictly speaking, that is already going too far. The knowledge that the present is a crisis derives from consciousness of history, a “view from outside” – from an impossible position. Rejecting an “outside” of this nature, as well as its loss, leads to a prolongation of the present. It leads to where the “rest of time” – both the past (history) and the future (utopia) – as well as the other space (the foreign) are superimposed, thus generalizing the crisis. Because of this cultures have always developed multifarious and differentiated techniques in order to make the view “from outside” possible, thereby enabling something approximating standpoints, orientation and the potentiality for movement to enfold.

Art is one of these techniques among others. It is located in the fallacies about ourselves in which we find ourselves, in the contradiction between the sensual experience and the image we make of that experience. And its goal it to bridge this contradiction, with the result that it is a thorn in the flesh of any resignation or any smug assertion that we live in the best of all possible worlds.

Art offers no solutions but every artwork raises an objection. Engaging with it allows the objection to be experienced and thus it becomes a call to begin searching for a possible solution. It lodges an objection against fashionable but arbitrary gestures by articulating potential objectivity and historicity. And it is there, set against the background of the often shameless smugness of this city, that the challenge is to be found to develop a space for art as art.

Art is the location of quality. But something like that, as with the claim to distinctiveness and irreplaceability in general, to quality of content and expression, to criteria other than that of the power and arbitrariness of manipulation, is pure, present, defiance. It is defiant because it recalls what we are in the process of losing. This is what confronts us daily: loss of sensation, dilettantism and bad taste taking over art institutions without resistance.

The way a society and the individuals that comprise it deal with art is thus an indicator of their willingness and ability to accept themselves. Only those who are of the opinion that they no longer need a solution can hold that they no longer need either art or the engagement with what art produces. The rejection of art as living praxis, its reduction to entertainment and a capital asset is simultaneously a rejection of self-reflection and as such is not the symptom of the diagnosed crisis but the cause of it.

Against the background of this diagnosis the MAK’s praxis can be defined as a hot spot. As an art location it is concurrently a place of facilitation, practice and mediation of art that takes no account of prevailing opinion. The MAK considers its task to lie in creating events. What already exists is constituted by artistic intervention in the first place, the “view from the outside” already mentioned, the historical present and thus the time-span of possible human mediation constituted into a critical relationship to itself and its current relevance and enabling its potential for providing a solution to be revealed.

It is not just a question of working against non-risk nostalgia but rather against a loss of room to reflect, room for art, room in which art is created and where it is discussed. Doesn't every artist and every exhibition demand a newly conceived room? Isn't that precisely what is expected from art and culture? And it is here that we, our society, can give consciousness an edge. Yes, we need art. Today more than ever before we need the chance to wander in the unexpected. We need expeditions into the margins. An exhibition about the Wiener Werkstätte which unmistakably involves our consciousness, our historical today, which creates room-punctuating structures, that binds our familiar daily life with an act of all-encompassing, brilliance of will to create is, in a manner of speaking, the defiant product.

The pre-condition is a decade-long engagement and concern with the theme itself but also with an intensive search for a context appropriate to the times. Heimo Zobernig demonstrated this with an artistic intervention that was a guideline for all measures concerning content and presentation. It is the curator, the artist, the graphic artist and the exhibition designer who together create an exhibition which is difficult to surpass in its (defiant) complexity – thinking in space and movement.

Those are the circumstances that are rendered visible as living qualities in all their contradictory intention and self-conception. That includes us - the institution itself, its history and collections – as well as our surroundings. In continuing the MAK tradition – to mention but one example from the recent past, the exhibition “Knots”, a confrontation of the collection of oriental carpets with contemporary art reflections on historical and current Orientalism – the articulation of the necessity of the desire of the present to overcome itself should be encouraged. It is pleasant to know that at the present time two large art institutions in Russia and the USA are preparing a super show for 2006 on the theme of Islam.

“The unexpected” is also the determining element in the work of the artist Otto Muehl. However, in this exhibition the person of the artist will not be up for disposition, thus the theme is not the show or entertainment value of a individual's biography (whatever its course). The goal can only be to meet the requirements demanded by the uniqueness of the artistic experience expressed in such a complex and multi-layered way. Enabled by the work, its connection with Viennese Actionism and the almost twenties years of continual reflection, the concern is to liberate the real, factual content from a fog of gossip and stereotypical prejudice and to position its artistic relevance in the present.

The claim to exceed established boundaries is also contained in Peter Eisenman's work – exceeding traditional conceptions of architecture and thus freeing itself from the historical entanglement in an anthropocentric view of humanity. He combines polemics, praxis and theory like no-one else and in a way making him one of the most provocative of contemporary architects. The exhibition “Aura and Excess” will be opened shortly before the ceremonial handing over of the controversial Holocaust memorial in Berlin. An exhibition with a radical concept that charges the room with energy, creates new qualities and unmistakably demonstrates his position in architecture without the use of superficial representations.

Apart from Peter Eisenman himself, Arundhati Roy, Lebbeus Woods and Rem Koolhaas will give talks in the series of MAK lectures “changing architecture” which has the theme of architecture between war and peace.

Highlights like this define the framework. Of course they do not replace the day-to-day battle for art. We insist that the day-to-day difficulties must not be sacrificed to the difficulties of the ascent, even if this is seen as defiance.