

## The Call of the Site Yearning for Art

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For a beginning: an unvarnished insight into reality, into conditions of the naked existence of two artists who, today, are in the center of interest and of recurrent splendid anniversary celebrations. This here is something that people are not so fond of remembering today:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to Franz Hofdemel<sup>1</sup>, Vienna

A / Monsieur / Monsieur de Hofdemel / chez Lui

[Vienna, End of March 1789]

Dearest Friend!

I am taking the liberty of asking you without any hesitation for a favor. I should be very much obliged to you if you could and would lend me a hundred gulden until the 20th of next month. On that day I receive the quarterly installment of my salary and shall then repay the loan with thanks. I have relied too much on a sum of a hundred ducats due to me from abroad. Up to the present I have not yet received it, although I am expecting it daily. Meanwhile I have left myself too short of cash, so that at the moment I greatly need some ready money and have therefore appealed to your goodness, for I am absolutely convinced of your friendship. Well, we shall soon be able to call one another by a more delightful name! For your novitiate is very nearly at an end!

Mozart

Egon Schiele to A. R-r2

10th of January 1911. Vienna, XII., Grünbergstraße 31.

Dear A. R-r!

Is it always going to go on like this? I have not, I could not work for days. I haven't even got wrapping paper, and constantly I have to listen to the damn advice. I've got a headache, I am tied up, is nobody going to help me? – if only I could have an exhibition, I would be free; but no, I can't even draw, so I have to write, borrow money, now during my very best years and days in which I could work. – How mean people are. And they try to annoy me with jibes. Can it go on like this? – You are dreaming of 2000 Kronen – but I can only ever get 800 together; is that something? And for that I gave pictures and drawings away like salt at the grocers. R-r gave me 40 Kronen altogether, I drew him and didn't get anything until today. I gave drawings to Sch., I don't know how many, which ones, I am not getting any money for them even though a single one is worth hundreds. Until today I've got nothing from K. even though he promised 20 Kronen a month – By the way should I look into that? – I of course presume intelligence and noblesse. – No, this is not accommodating the artists. – What times! Should I become a businessman? or a salesperson? – If at least I could exhibit, I'd be fine at Pisko even though I am worth more, I should really get the Secession. But no, it is home to the most disgusting fashionable kitsch! – Who is going to help me? – I can't buy a canvas, want to work, have no paint. A canvas with the requisite trimmings, a frame for a portrait, is going to cost me 40 Kronen a piece. But the people are the most wretched. – Why can't I for once, why shouldn't I get out of this? With 500 Kronen I could do it, I could have an exhibition; after all I need frames, furniture, decorating, letters, franking, invitations etc. Various things, various things. During this exhibition I can paint new stuff for Munich. It is wretched even to think of the next day. – You could see what I'd be able to achieve, if I could work in peace. Exhibition!! Tomorrow is Tuesday, would you like to come with me to Pisko to discuss the exhibition? We could have it in eight days. Do you want to? – And before that

come around to mine and bring me the money for the "Dead Mother"! – tomorrow, Tuesday, before or after lunch. I am ill.

Yours  
E. S.

P.S. At least the artist shouldn't have to concern himself with collecting the money owed to him every month! Whoever wants to meet the artist should at least write. – Why should I shut up about all this? – If the artist invites somebody to be drawn, as I have R-m, why does he not come, who is he after all? – I am extremely sensitive and all these people have no idea how to behave towards the artist. – For God's sake, I am going to get 500 Kronen, aren't I? I am willing to return it after all?! Come tomorrow, Tuesday!

This is a picture that does not at all fit in with an idea of art and culture which takes them to be a pleasant intermission, a distraction from the daily grind, nourishing a myth that utterly disconnects art from real life (the myth of the solitary avant-garde artist etc.)

What was true for Mozart in the 18th and for Schiele in the past century also casts a shadow on the existence and recognition of many artists of our day. We should not be tempted to believe that things have changed a lot since then. At the same time, however, everybody is in vociferous agreement today that such wrongs, such disregard, such disrespect of art and the artist, as were common in those backward times, could no longer occur today. For today, in a society that cultivates art, that is familiar with culture and puts art on display as a trophy of its powerful liberality and as the ultimate indicator of its prosperity, there is no room, nor ground for discrimination of art. Even the Austrian Constitution guarantees the freedom of art. With this in mind, it is all the more worth noting that the collecting of art created today is being massively discontinued by the responsible state institutions and that we do not want to become aware of what we should know from our own history, but are, precipitously, sure that it will, and could, not come again.

The crisis of meaning that art is in, of course, affects contemporary art collecting policies. The art boom has left museums aside. A tight global circuit of mega art events such as Art Basel Miami Beach, which exclusively operate on the basis of value-increase rankings and investment safety indexes, art fairs here and there, blockbuster shows anytime and everywhere, they all have had their effects on the remaining, almost exclusively private art collections. Under considerable time pressure, but with an enormous lack of heed and reflection, as good as anything, it seems, is labeled great art, evaluated for marketability, and then hyped up. Assumably, it is precisely this misguided fervor of blind interest and helpless disorientation which nourishes art's crisis of meaning. In the light of media and celebrity events, that long-familiar champagne-fin-de-siècle-Montmartre effect is becoming ubiquitous. When fine art becomes commercial – I know what I am referring to, as do, presumably, the commercial galleries – increasingly replaces the artist, the sine qua non of art. Cultural added value may apparently be on the rise – after all, the number of exhibitions has multiplied by the thousand, more or less –, but good art has become rare in the overheated market. What remains is pre-confected collector's collections. And these are what museums exquisitely present, putting their true function and mission at risk.

The opposite of depression as we all know is vitality, or, to put it in business jargon, upturn and growth. If we may now hope that the Austrian art scene has finally passed the bottom of its depression, we should have reached, theoretically and from an optimistic point of view, an

upward turning point, which shall give occasion here to call to attention again to what this is all about.

A society like ours is unimaginable without art. Art is critical reflection, it enables a differentiating awareness, it is claim and appeal and dissent, all in one, and functions as one of the most important social systems for the development and the generation of new perspectives.

What art needs, unhindered by political justification pressures, financial deadlocks, and curatorial attitudinizing, above all is: free scope.

Living up to its unmistakable identity, the MAK positions itself as a place of active confrontation with, as well as facilitation and application of art. We don't give up the call of the site; already this is a sort of KUNSTSTÜCK. The MAK's intention to provide not only a forum for existing art, but to encourage artists to create new art for exhibitions found an autonomous manifestation in radical interventions by, for example, Magdalena Jetelová, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden or Donald Judd. With its new exhibition format "Factory Presentation", the MAK will guarantee to actively nourish works in progress.

This becomes once more clear in the 2006 exhibition schedule. Elke Krystufek is currently working on an exhibition project entitled LIQUID LOGIC, which will enable visitors to choose their individual level of perception. She will be exploring social norms and conditioned familial behavioral patterns in complex interweaving with themes like art and religion. The MAK collection will, quite in keeping with the positioning of the institution between tradition and experiment, play a special role in the project.

Acting instead of reacting must continue to be the prime goal of museum work. Without venture, without conquering new terrain, without refuting rampant conformism, the experiment of art is doomed to fail. The current art boom does not help museums. The museum is not what it is, and never was. Now, the sole concern must be to meet the need of art of letting art be art. Conditions to do so must be reconsidered and structural deficiencies corrected.

The MAK initiative for a 21st Century Collection at the CAT – Contemporary Art Tower indicates an innovative way of facilitating the creation of art works on site. With the CAT project, a program strategy was developed to promote understanding of what is going on in art today with a manageable expenditure. The project would offer artists a hitherto unequalled forum in which art is not a historical heritage, but a lively presence.

MAK 2010 is a program with the objective of sharpening the MAK's profile and developing perspectives for the future, challenged but not hindered by the fact that the MAK is one of only a few international art institutions that explore new trends in art, architecture, and design. The strategy paper that is currently being generated invokes the model function which the MAK has always had.

On January 18, 2000, the MAK premiered its MAK NITE© series; ever since then, the museum is open until midnight every Tuesday. An experiment: young artists for whom this often is the first public presentation of their work and ideas enable an open and unsparing insight into the in-between spaces of society and thus provide cultural life with a new and not insignificant impulse.

Since 2002, the MAK has been one of few European and the only Austrian museum that has free admission on Saturdays. Now we have real power on our side. The Verbund, a leading Austrian power supplier, will make it possible for kids, senior citizens, homeless people, intellectuals, artists, exotics, and nomads of the spirit to visit the MAK free of charge once a week. These are initiatives that set standards – for a lively dialogue with art, beyond the elitist presumptions of high-brow milieus. For art is radically democratic; it is take it or leave it – and never at reduced prices!

The spirit of the epoch, it seems, seeks historical continuity in conservatism, reducing culture to collecting and preserving with a risk-averse and tourism-optimized conservatory understanding. Only a dead artist can therefore be a good artist, as Death is the Great Ennobler that promotes to eligibility for the conservative canon. Contemporaneity, on the other hand, holds a natural and incalculable risk of subversion and vivid dissent. For the artist is – still – alive. He can raise his voice. He can utter dissent. His voice and his desire are not yet mortified in the museum.

The Council of Curators has not had a chance to neutralize, by historicizing, the contemporary voice. Preserved and “proven” culture, however, is something to rely on; it can be put on display, and gives reason to be “proud,” as an Egyptian of today is proud of the mummies of the Pharaohs. The main “advantage” of the living over geniuses passed away would then, tautologically, lie in the fact that the former are alive. So the culturally interested and sunny-natured man in the street can say to himself that he may not be as much of a genius as Mozart or Schiele, but, after all, they are dead and he is happily alive. It is always easier, and as a bonus, bears less risk to cherish, to devote oneself to, an antiquarian sense of art, all the more so since conductors, curators and the like will be zealous anytime to offer their translating and communicating services.

The true place of art cannot be decreed; it must not be institutionalized but is the place where the dialectic of claim, appeal, and dissent unfolds. “The call of the site” – is the calling of the MAK. In the 19th century already, the MAK, then the Austrian Museum of Art and Industry, was a trailblazer; just think of Alois Riegl, art historian and researcher of worldwide renown, who worked here. The establishment of its own art school – today the independent University of Applied Arts –, the institution’s prominent location on Ringstraße Boulevard, and dialogue with non-European cultures – a necessity in collecting – guarantee the multicultural, polymathic, and global political perspective of the MAK as a special cultural institution with a fundamentally discursive approach. Criticism, theory, practice, and intervention combine at the MAK in a unique way. The museum becomes a citadel of social criticism and the permanent countervision. Our strategy is living that countervision. Our aim is transformation. Ever since 1986, the MAK has stood for a steadfast stance for art.

This call of the site must always be a call to life and never an obituary! Art has its genuine place wherever and whenever experimentation is ventured and something is put at stake. All the rest is consolation and appeasement ideology in the service of the powers that be. Provocation and irritation instead of non-committal information. “Every successful work of art is part of a permanent revolution. There is no such thing as conservative art”, says Alfred Andersch.

That makes a point to start from.

1 Franz Hofdemel (d. 1791), former private secretary to Count Seilern, later a chancery clerk, and fellow mason of Mozart, whom he lent considerable sums of money.

2 Arthur Roessler (1877–1955), art-gallery director, writer. Was the art editor of the “Arbeiterzeitung” and the “Wiener Neueste Nachrichten”, vice-president of the Austrian Werkbund and the Wiener Werkstätte.