

SPRING. SUMMER. AUTUMN AND ART

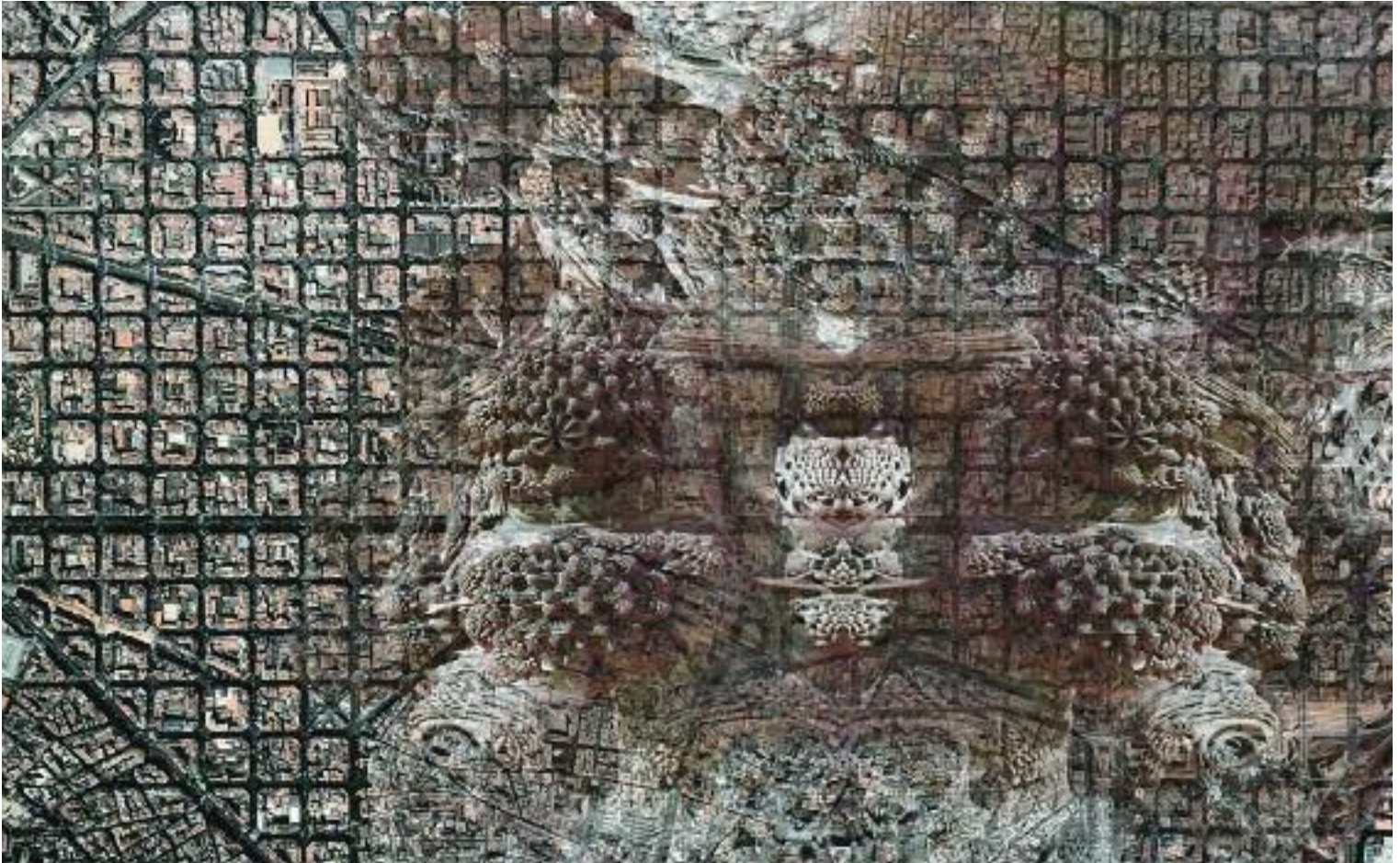
“Spring, Summer, Autumn and Art”: it was this title, belonging to an artwork by Ernst Caramelle, that occurred to me when I was asked to write a guest commentary on the present situation among museums. The banality of a progressing year needs some sort of wedge or stake to break up structures and constricted developments—particularly as educational institutions in general are encountering cold winter headwinds. We need the art of the present in order to sharpen our perception and look today’s deep-reaching problems in the face. Just as an aside: artworks of today that place their fingers on the pulse of the times only carry a reasonable price tag when bought in time. Additionally, our gaze on art of the past is focused only to the extent that the artists of the here and now are able to open our eyes for it. The complementary historical sciences can be learned, but the ability to perceive necessary paradigm changes cannot—for this, art must lead the way again and again, even against stiff resistance.

Allowing this to happen requires flows of information and money. As a museum visitor, I am the customer, who as a taxpayer and the one who is “always right” must not merely desire, must not merely demand, but indeed must categorically summon. Someone quite recently remarked that, within Austria’s national broadcasting network (the ORF), radio is of far better quality than television because it is less susceptible to political influence. And there you have it. The present malaise, with its long preliminary history, is the result of a catastrophic ping-pong between politics and the media. By wanting to control flows of information, politicians have themselves become the “hunted.” They govern according to what the tabloids want, but the tabloids often have no real idea of what they themselves want. And if they do happen to want something in particular, then that something is certainly not art. In other words: the tabloid press is against me. I certainly didn’t vote for it, though. At the moment, I couldn’t grant any Austrian party absolution from the charge of having done nothing to counteract this ping-pong. In both politics and business, as well as—above all—in the shadow economy of the Austrian Social Partnership, there presently exists an acute shortage of specialists. People, take a look at your personnel. How is a museum to position itself when even the petits bourgeois are losing their most important characteristic: that of the bourgeois, which—translated literally into German (Bürger)—quite simply means “citizen.” Now, those former petits bourgeois are merely petits—they’re not even “Herr Karl,” Austrian cabaret’s most venerable version of the “man in the street.” One is thus left to imagine a double conférence in which the sole voice comes from offstage.

Information flows are subject to the computer and/or Internet revolution, the conclusion of which—and even more importantly, the global economic interdependency of which—is still a long way from being precisely discernable. Spaces, detached from legal spaces or spaces of justice (and still further removed from non-legal or un-just spaces), are becoming increasingly un-plastic, untouchable, ungraspable. And all the more significant. As a consequence, museums are faced with the challenge of not only exhibiting the visible and tangible object in the most impressive way possible, but also copying it virtually, making it accessible and putting it in service of education, with the possibilities of doing so recently having been augmented by 3D-technology. The gap between the “thing” in the computer and the original object, which significance should be clear even to the blindest dolt when he learns of its price at the next auction, grows ever-wider. And placing it into (possibly) non-legal or un-just spaces is costly in terms of both personnel and administration. It can even happen that this effort incurs more expense than the object itself. But those who do it early enough and in a legally secure manner are in the international vanguard—from which Austria is only barely visible in the rear-view mirror.

In education, which needs all that and much, much more, such elements play an enormous role. If I want to work didactically and—most importantly and above all—interactively, then I have to exploit these possibilities to the absolute limit. In the valley where I live, the rooms of the elementary school are filled with row upon row of computers. That’s a good thing, and it actually surprised me when I first saw it. But even where this is not so, children are introduced to a world in which, even before one learns to read, the screen—but not just the screen—opens up types of access which are global in more than just the geographic sense. Interactivity is the reason. When I went to visit the new museum of science and technology in Granada, the “Parque de las Ciencias,” our young children looked after by my wife and myself alternatively, I was taken aback: both at how much money the municipality and the EU had spent on it, and at how strategically—or as I would put it, successfully—the whole thing functioned. Two to three hours into the visit with my kids—when I wanted leave in time to zip into town for a quick evening errand—I met with resistance. The little rascals just couldn’t be coaxed out of the museum. The museum had beaten the father. And now we even have a season pass. It’s not the dead critters in the nature section that were so attractive, but rather the way things were presented, right down to every last detail: the mixture between the traditional frontal “showing,” which remains as necessary as ever, and the media-based mobilization of the visitors. But this project, as well, requires that tax money be used.

Of course it’s a different thing when I don’t have the opportunity to establish an entirely new institution on a green field. And it’s obvious that Vienna, with its historic architectural landscape, isn’t an easy place for all actors—this is, in fact, the very essence of its charm. In any event, regardless of location: every institution with collections and temporary exhibitions really does need to be given a new conceptual roof every year in order that any leaks be plugged.



SPAN architecture & design, Architecture and Recursive Geometry (Concept), 2010

It's a good thing when collections grow and even perhaps burst through the roof—but the rain still needs to be kept out. It's not only that the categorization of artworks within the Austrian Federal Museums—particularly in those from the interwar period—needs to be completely overhauled. A complete re-ordering of the urban sphere is also needed. This is a proposition which lets everyone win—even the tourism folks. I do see opportunities, even in the budget crisis. It's precisely this flowing into the urban space, this penetration of everyday life, this coverage of all realms of life, that makes things exciting. Museums and their thinkers need to be supported in the project of finding new spaces in which to live, which induce people to automatically stream back, again and again, into the museum.

When artists have, on occasion, swerved into public space, it has only been to create art as part of the battle against more or less sensible ordinances and—occasionally—against more or less sensible civil servants. In such cases, an “artistic legal space” was born alongside the actual object. In these actions, the whole laboriousness and inhibition of a society are mercilessly laid bare; also exposed, however, is the oft-astounding willingness of segments of the populace to participate—and then, once again, to visit the museum.

Just a minor example (unfortunately not linked to a museum) by way of illustrating what I mean. Rather than the group “Gelitin,” which displays assured mastery of such things and heartens me as an art critic, I will mention the organization “plattform-kunstöffentlichkeit,” which in 2007 initiated the action “transfair”—which at first glance seemed quite simple and succinct. A shingle from Innsbruck's “Goldenes Dachl” or Golden Roof was removed and replaced with a shingle from a hay rack near the community of Vals, which lies in a side valley near the Brenner Pass. The golden shingle was then installed on the hay rack. One can imagine what effort the artists had to go to in order to convince the two communities, all the relevant administrative authorities, and—not least—the Federal Monuments Office. The relationship between city and country, which has changed all around the world over the past few decades due to massive demographic shifts, was one of the themes here—as was, of course, the polarization between the architecture of those who rule and those who merely subsist. I still remember the wonderful landscape with its charming cows, as well as conversations with farmers who explained to me the traditional technique for making such shingles and the beauty of the weatherworn wood's silvery sheen, which then became truly perceptible in light of the disturbance caused by the golden shingle. Even if one or more of them may have thought this to be totally crazy, most people indeed “understood” the image that resulted. After several days—the press work was done well—the gold-leaf-covered shingle was stolen. The thieves were unaware, however, that this was not an original shingle, but rather a replacement shingle from the late 20th century and we know how cheap gold leaf is. In this, a group of artists had not only achieved their goal but also reduced the idea of “art theft” to absurdity and simultaneously expanded the issue of “historicity.” Serves you right!

The independence of the creative must be guaranteed; otherwise, the type of intervention which I demand cannot take place. Under the tandem pressure of personal finances and private galleries, actively creative individuals must work through their most intimate content and formal solutions in a globalized environment while avoiding descent into the commercial. There are fairer and less-fair actors among the various galleries and opinion-leading specialist media; here the museums could wield a corrective influence—but only while taking the risk of displaying a somewhat-less-known name or somewhat-less-popular theme on their banners. In such cases, visitor figures are an anti-corrective. Maintaining the balance between onerous official performance targets and quality criteria is probably one of the greatest current challenges for any museum.

If art initiates processes of perception, then that fact—alongside much else, such as “beauty,” to put it loosely—embodies a criterion of quality. Art needs people who will commit it. But they have to be good at doing so. And in this regard, museums must give acts of intervention, of interference, access to the entire realm of everyday life. If education remains as limited as it is today, and if the tacit agreement to balance interests between the generations continues to be so obviously violated as is now the case, then the coming generations really only have the option of suing for justice using the money that is being denied them by the present generation(s). In that case, museums, schools and universities should really be filing suit on their own account. That would be rich!

Ever since it was founded, the MAK has been directly or indirectly “appended” to the University of Applied Arts—less to the professors than to that institution’s students, to the young artists. It is heartening to observe by just how much the number of young people at the MAK Library, located adjacent to the University, has grown over the past two decades. When a student snatches away a book you’re reading, it can at first be quite annoying; but on second thought, as a professor, I’m cheered immensely that it does happen: they are “On the Road.” Synergistic effects have always been sought out, and sometimes they’ve been found, sometimes they haven’t. Organizationally and financially, this represents a huge challenge for a museum: but the general path chosen has at least been the right one. And the proverbial “Road” is, as we well know, its own reward.

The whole thing about so-called independence, including that of museums, just won’t let me go. Why did the Republic of Austria have its universities become independent without also ceding to them their real estate? In the USA, at least, university real estate is actually owned by the universities. But now, the Republic of Austria gives its universities money so that they can pay rent to the Bundesimmobilien-gesellschaft (Austria’s Federal Real Estate Company), which in turn transfers this rent to the Republic of Austria. Which means a doubling or tripling of effort. This is, in Robert Musil’s words, “Kakania”—Imperial Austria’s version of bureaucracy gone mad. And then we have the “Performance Agreements.” Question to the lawyers: what do you call an agreement to which only one of the two sides must adhere? Feudalism? I demand that all so-called “Performance Agreements” be made accessible to the press.

If they’re to be “independent,” then make them truly so! But we will probably see no lawsuits ... instead, there will be just more of the same muddling along. Either I manipulate, or I am manipulated. I commit an act, or I am myself forced to commit one. Austria manages to have its cake and eat it too, on both counts and always in the same direction; this is actually Austria’s most significant use of its intelligence, and the reward is intrigue of the most intricate variety. Only thing is, no progress at all is made on actual issues themselves. How to defend oneself against this? In the crisis and its mitigation—which of course costs time and political effort, we’ll concede that—the two-decades of educational reform backlog grow even more obvious.

When two federal ministers from different parties finally decide to do something about a situation for which they bear no responsibility, and are then more-or-less explicitly told “no” by small-time tabloid-pandering politicians and unions (for whom I didn’t vote) who will then, later on, accuse said ministers of having done nothing, then one does indeed ask oneself just how one’s interfering should look. Resentment is growing. And one thing is now certain: the next election will not provide any solutions. Just this alone shows us the magnitude of the problems at hand. A stronger show of unity by museums, universities and schools will be necessary, but certainly not expressed in its usual form, this being the Social-Partnership-based calculus of money-destruction. The only solution is to break up and dissolve structures. Here, the museums could indeed drive a stake into the heart of this insufferable lethargy. Even from their financially dependent position.

I listen and I hear that, finally, a very important group shares my regret. It is commerce and industry. If desperately needed assistance, non-controlling despite perhaps being ideologically motivated, were to come from this quarter, then museums and the MAK in particular could at long last resume working towards the core objectives of their overall mission—namely to uphold art and its history (including the present) as a starting point for constant innovation. Certainly, Austria’s insular soul-searching process cannot mean stasis in education. We don’t need a disruptive revolution—we’re in Austria, after all—but there will certainly have to be *some* sort of revolution.