

# Kurt Kladler

## **Fusion scene – an Internationale of young art**

The background to the work of the Kunsthalle.tmp Steyr in the 1990s

In what follows, I should like to single out a structure-forming phenomenon of the 1990s and describe it as part of a process of differentiation in the art business. The principal point of interest will be moves to establish local cultural production centres as a complementary structure to the hitherto dominant system of the art market and the exhibition activities of trendsetting institutions. A specific point of reference will be the activities of the art initiative in the small town of Steyr in Upper Austria. In many respects, this was part of a more general development, but conceptually the scheme had quite specific aims. A particularly interesting aspect of its work was exploring the format of exhibitions—challenging the separation of artist and curator functions, redefining exhibition spaces and trying out ways of presenting contemporary art. But it is not only the content of the Kunsthalle's programme that was remarkable. It was the geographical position of Steyr itself in relation to the European art scene in the 1990s that became a key consideration.

## **Boom and crash in the early 1990s**

Undoubtedly there have been decisive changes in the art market and artistic production of the last decade. Aspects of this transformation have been discussed in the art world under all sorts of headings and possible interpretations of it put forward. Naturally, the supposed causes and proposed solutions are themselves often a source of heated debate, because the process of differentiation in the art world has created different interest groups. Thanks to the fundamental dependence of many cultural producers, numerous art institutions and other protagonists of the art scene (freelance curators, critics ...) on state handouts, the debate has raised questions about legitimate claims on the state purse. Even so, these specific problems of the Austrian art scene need not (at least for the time being) hide the international aspects of what was happening. At the outset of the 1990s, the art business was in grave crisis. On closer examination, it turned out to be that the art market was stagnating, which rather forced people to examine their navels and, as it later turned out, set in train a process of redimensioning the way the various art worlds were set up and functioned. The most astonishing change to come to light thereby was a minor artistic miracle. Even while the art business was examining its navel, a group of young but determined artists in Britain, mainly London, started causing waves. The Goldsmiths Generation, as they are known, were the product of Goldsmiths College, one of the best-known hothouses for young artists. It brought artists such as Damian Hirst, Julian Opie and Fiona Rae into the limelight. A graduation exhibition called "Frieze" has since then acquired mythical status as the origins of the phenomenon called Young British Artists (YBA). A spinoff was an autonomous scene of studio galleries run by artists which were actively interested in exchanges with other art scenes ("City Racing", "Bank" ...).

Within a short time, a new generation of artists had gained international recognition and made the YBA movement itself a force to be reckoned with. The art trade leapt in to promote it, and Charles Saatchi backed it with his pocket and his PR skills. Saatchi was head of a leading advertising agency and entered the market as a buyer in a big way, though he also sold off whole groups of works with equal bravura. As a private collector, he claimed the right to create artists, and was for some time one of the principal luminaries pounding the parquet of trendsetting galleries and the floorboards of likely studios. Ultimately, he was able to market the phenomenon of a new generation as a "sensation" in itself, and using this very word as his title put on an exhibition of works from his collection that toured top art venues in European capitals. A success story to encourage us, then? Certainly, if you are prepared to ignore the contradictions inherent in goings-on of this sort. But at the beginning of the 1990s, inconsistencies and the discovery of the rules of the game were the topic of artistic work on the Continent. The terms "anti-institutional art" and "context art" were posted as beacons visible from afar whose luminosity was not wholly dependent on the surrounding gloom of a bearish art-market. Yet while it may be true that criticism of the market mechanism, spotlighting power structures and challenging the art business themselves became art—anti-institutional art—that could be sold in the criticised-

spotlighted-challenged gallery system, the momentum for change also carried over into other media and areas of production.

The work environments in which these ideas and topics were absorbed and further developed had to some extent come about as a reaction to the weakness of the international gallery system at the beginning of the 1990s. The artists' own activities, the groups they set up, the exhibitions they curated freelance, their fanzines and thematic publications ... resulted in debate and networking going beyond regional confines. A specific additional feature of the Austrian scene was the creation of "federal art curators", who could push forward anything worth promoting and set up major structures on their own initiative.

Yet the much-despised 1980s also played a part in the success of the structural changes. The market grew rapidly over the decade, creating not only monetary value but also wide public interest in artistic activities. Art and lifestyles were mentioned in the same breath, and even at an intellectual level there was suddenly a sort of boom. There were "hypes" — trends talked up on a somewhat larger scale than hitherto customary in the fashion industry, rippling through institutions and as they ebbed away creating further waves in new smaller pools of art. There were biennales everywhere, not just in metropolises such as Istanbul, Johannesburg and Berlin but even in Tirana, Udine, Warkentz and elsewhere. The wide public interest of the time was taken as acceptance of contemporary art, and the excitement value of art events, openings and major exhibitions conferred new importance on public art institutions. It strengthened the latter's position, but also spurred them into undertaking more challenging tasks. Museums, art bodies and galleries caught up with contemporary art and made a public experience of it, giving young curators a chance to make their mark and acting as sounding boards for various voices in the postmodernist fever. In the end, a situation arose in which there was competition for themes and content. The increased pace and extension of activities resulted in a number of new forms and functions within the art business. Private dealing and art consultancy became careers, and new galleries and art museums mushroomed. The situation created a need for intermediary services and writings about art, which spawned new types of job. The breadth and variety of these developments with all their hybrid ramifications not only established the necessary infrastructure basis for the subsequent anti-institutional reaction but also themselves became subject matter for artists. The role and status of artists, curators and critics came under the microscope, the design of artist biographies run through in all their varieties, the spatial organisation of functional units such as galleries and exhibition institutions was appropriated as subject matter and even seemingly god-given hierarchies such as "centre" and "periphery" were challenged.

Having reached this point, it may be justly asked what the connection is between this lightning survey of developments in the major art metropolises and an art initiative in Steyr. It might even be suspected that too much is being made of an international art link for the relatively compact art scene in an Austrian town. The danger of getting carried away with excitement does exist. However, there are reasons for risking a misunderstanding of this kind.

### **Art worlds and local intensities**

Art initiatives in places a long way from major cities face a paradoxical situation. Expectations, subject matter and artistic debate are geared to the international art scene. Artists' view of art derives largely from their own work, of course, though discussion with friends and many other things may add an extra dimension. Yet in exactly the same way as we are born into an existing linguistic environment which determines our mother tongue, every artistic utterance is a statement within a historically and socially established art world. Works of art are articulations. Artistic products (and this also covers curatorial concepts) are conceived basically in terms of their more general appeal in larger (or discourse-specific) cultural contexts. Even if they are developed in a local context and are cocooned in hermetic layers of meaning by idiosyncratic self-references, they are still relevant to what is going on in other art worlds.

Yet self-sufficiency in the soft light of local appreciation means little in comparison with the glaring misunderstandings that may arise and the sheer effort needed to achieve a breakthrough to a wider art public. In this respect, a work must be conceived so that its conceptual framework and how it relates to other works of art can be understood. Access to a wider audience is gained when a work becomes a reference object in a distribution system where it gets reproduced, talked about and written about in publications. As it works its way through this public process, it acquires glosses from the art world establishment that are no longer contingent on friendship and ties of loyalty. In the longer term, the work's success will be all the greater if it creates new categories or new ways of seeing, and works can henceforth be accepted as art which previously would not have been accorded this status. Put somewhat cynically, relative to the work of individual artists, it is not just the quality of the work that matters but how far it is taken up and noticed by influential figures in the international art world. Equally paradoxical is the fact that artistic ambitions, and perhaps even the degree of boldness they involve, have to be geared to how they will be viewed in trend-setting circles, and yet the works will be actually executed in a local context. Thus there is clearly some mileage in the idea of regional art institutions as "rehearsal stages", making it easier to bridge the gap to the cultural "premier division". It is quite legitimate for an artist to hope s/he will be "discovered" and subsequently go on to experience the kind of miracle the YBA pioneered. However, we should not overlook the legacy of anti-institutional debate in this.

The rules of the art business and descriptive models  
If we accept the functional mechanisms of the culture trade without peeking below the surface, we are merely confirming them, and they then seem to be all the more rigid as laws that determine success or failure. Yet it is no answer to reject such mechanisms out of hand, and even scepticism will not disable them. Adopting a simplistic "anti" attitude makes it that much likelier that their effect will be prolonged. The image of a "rehearsal stage" for example and a "premier division" is very seductive. That personal ambitions might become associated therewith makes the thing even more plausible.

We could take a different view, however, and sociology could provide the analytical vocabulary we need to do it. Though this will not automatically rewrite the rulebook of the art business, understanding how the rules work and identifying all the interests, artistic creeds and opposing forces ... involved provide a chance for artists to see their own work within the parallel reference frame of their social import. Within this concept, art is seen as a product subject to the division of labour. It is a co-production by artists, curators, gallery owners, institutions and last but not least public reaction. All these components and players carry different weights depending on their social and financial resources, power and networking capital. In this view, the reaction of many young artists to the weakening of gallery power in the early 1990s can be interpreted as an attempt to set up forums and evaluation criteria of their own, thereby shifting the defining power back within reach of the artists again. To achieve this of course, they also needed new institutional structures to take over functions of the existing system and develop new opportunities. For example: (alternative) exhibition venues (Büchsenhausen, Bricks & Kicks) or artbureaux, fanzines (Artfan) or periodicals (Texte zur Kunst, springer, kursiv), individual forms of presentation (Event by J Quinn) or collective production forms (Klub Zwei, Wochenklausur) ... The sociological notion of the art scene as a partly autonomous social aspect of society (Bourdieu et al.) created a framework for the phenomenon in which it was no longer necessary to think in terms of dichotomous oppositions. Thanks to this sociological descriptive model, it now became conceivable that, though the rehearsal stage/premier division metaphor did provide a seductive model, there could nonetheless be complementary and separate subsections that do not have to be absorbed into this special principle of "rising" within a hierarchy. Within the framework of Bourdieu's approach, any such notion of "rising" constitutes a claim to power protecting an interpretative monopoly. This controls the process of equation that attributes art-historical importance, assures visibility in exhibitions, guarantees mentions in international periodicals and adds monetary value. The sociological view of the art business looks for co-existence, a plurality of cultural part areas and art worlds with differing value concepts, whose frontiers are shifting and whose influence on neighbouring part areas is subject to change. Artistic and cultural work is accordingly oriented towards several focal points and not incorporated directly into the hierarchical relationship of (im-

portant) centre and (less important) periphery. The function of various institutions, therefore, like for example the Kunsthalle.tmp Steyr, is not auto-matically to provide rehearsal stages. Similarly, the overwhelming majority of artists who are not in the capricious limelight of the international art market scene are not automatically relegated to the temporary penumbra of the glamorous excitement society. What they have instead is an independent production context in which specific things are achieved and which is itself the result of formative forces on the international art scene.

### **Fusion scene and art rave**

If within the worlds of art we can now speak of separate production areas shaped by local traditions, temporary manifestations and a fluid institutional set-up, we have described a process in which separate value criteria and specific ideals can de-velop. Instability must be seen as an independent moving spirit within it that gradually forms a surface on which continuity is visible. Temporary constellations in different places, using very differ-ent resources (scholarships, working visits, participation in exhibitions, symposia, catalogues and other services ...), form a network of relationships and are at the same time production resources for the artists in the newly developing subsection of the art world.

A typical behavioural feature in which artists' new view of themselves is manifest is active networking on trips abroad. Travel grants are used not just to go to the great galleries or museums to be amazed by important artworks in the original at last. They do that as well, but they are more interested in the works of artists of their own generation, talking to young curators and mutually participating in what is going on. A very active new "Internationale" of young artists is developing. A radical movement based on informal contacts between artists and curators has established new role identities and categories. It has set up links and made it possible for works to circulate or be created on the spot. It has generated a curatorial freedom that knows no institution-specific bounds, and manifested itself in unusual exhibition venues and presentation styles that startle for their settings.

This scene appeared to be a collective subject, a "fusion scene", while the activities are a kind of rave, since the social components, the visits, counter-invitations and temporary living together have also been used as a medium of self representation. The sampling of artistic forms at parties and ex-hibitions more resembling festivals, where the entertainment structure itself could immediately be set up as art, were conceived and implemented as consciously designed aesthetic surfaces and forms.

To some extent, this movement has taken on institutional forms which go back to the development dynamism of the 1980s. In Austria, the activities of the federal art curators, who between 1991 and 1999 had a sum of 30 million Austrian schillings to spend every two years, constituted an ideal starting situation for a broadly diversified social and artistic field of experimentation. Within this, a very wide variety of artistic activities and intellectual demands took shape, genres frontiers (e. g. between original artistic activities and film, theatre, science and literature ...) were pushed back and crossed, and not only artists but also art writers and curators were subsidised as part of the art co-production business. The great variety of freelance art projects and above-mentioned dynamism also became institutionalised at european level. Manifesta developed and established a type of exhibition oriented to local scenes and young artists. In a two-year rhythm, a team of young curators is charged with identifying current trends, setting focuses of content and presenting them in exhibitions.

Summing up, it can be said that in the course of the 1990s specific cultural production contexts were tried out and consolidated that were to a large extent shaped by the autonomous activity of a young generation of artists and curators. Within this partly autonomous areas of the art scene, role concepts of artists, curators and art writers were re-dimensioned, art itself became a subject as a division of labour process, and experiments with forms of exhibitions were carried out. This process created new identity forms for the producers and the intrinsic value of an art scene which is oriented to the ideals of an international art market. The institutional network of art bodies, galleries, art

initiatives, temporary exhibition venues, biennales and symposia provided continuity and enabled exchanges at international level. This parallel level to the market-led art scene has numerous points of contact with other dynamic areas of cultural production. The art product that is produced in these product contexts does not consist of works of art alone. The spoken and written debate and catalogues, the social activation of the local visitor environment, controversies and eulogies in the media, the contact with curators and fellow artists — these are all inputs that were worked out in this zone of intensities and will continue to be so worked out. The art initiative in Steyr established a node in this network of decentralised art locations. The situation outside the art metropolises with their rather overwhelming range of cultural offerings was an advantage for the content of the work in Steyr and — paradoxically (?) — also for the perception of it in international art circles. The big centres were occupied by the dominant institutions anyway, and the output of these cultural production areas was in many cases foreseeable. The proliferating activities of a fluid scene developed in an exciting and challenging way, its innovative capacity gradually interesting even the art establishment. Out of the way art locations and the work of young artists and curators moved within the ken of an expanding art public, thus setting the traditional value hierarchies in motion as well.

What the work of art initiatives like that in Steyr has achieved, along with upvaluing the periphery and establishing appropriate work contexts thereby, was the re-dimensioning of artistic work. It has changed both the way artists see themselves and how the public sees them. A not negligible by-product thereby was the development of cultural competence for everyone with an interest in their own contemporaries and contemporary art or in maintaining the diversity of artistic activities. This diversity relates not just to the individual artistic works but is conceived structurally as a complementary development process balancing rectifying market forces and thematic fashions of the dominant exhibition business. Locally networked production locations like for example that in Steyr have created a structural diversity and corresponding potential for change, both of which constitute essential resources in our societies.