

warm up

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The muscles are warm, the engine is hot, the tyres have warmed up. After the warm-up comes the actual race, the starting line-up is fixed, the field is all ready, everything is set for the start. (And yet...)

January 1997 was cold in Steyr, an art scene that was virtually non-existent, but it was the weather that was cold rather than cultural policy, which made the purchase of heaters sensible (1)— at least till the end of October / beginning of November – in order not to freeze to death in the hall while projects were going on.

Standing in the flood of warmth from the heaters, questions about why an art centre was being established in Steyr lost their meaning. Perhaps it was a didactic impulse to show the townsfolk of Steyr art that was familiar to only a few people and extend the population's idea of art. Perhaps it was a personal boredom conditioned by the absence of an innovative scene that drove us to bring to Steyr people we found interesting for their ideas and works. Or perhaps it was only the pleasure in designing rooms and exhibitions, or realising artistic projects involving a wide range of artists. Perhaps again it was just a matter of "challenging the separation of artist and curator functions, redefining exhibition spaces and trying out ways of presenting contemporary art". (2) The question as to whether these last five years of artistic effort have been a warm-up for other "higher" aims or a series of experimental exhibitions now over but worth a review is answered neither in this article nor anywhere else in the present catalogue. The ambivalence in this question is part of the system—but the present standstill is all too obvious. In the beginning, i. e. in 1997, there was some 13,000 square feet (1,200 square metre) of empty space in its "natural" state and covered with a generous patina of industrial use. It was divided into three aisles by slender octagonal piers, with old factory windows all round that gave the interior an incredible lightness and transparency. Quite taken by the hall, we "naturally" wanted to fill it with art, not being equally taken by the range of art currently on offer in the town. So we re-solved (3) that here in the former Reithoffer factory we would set up an art centre (Kunsthalle) with a programme of contemporary art, so watering the cultural desert (4), i. e. continuing on a larger scale what Walter Ebenhofer and I had begun with the "zu Tisch" (5) (Mealtimes) project. This would develop ideas about art and space in discussion and collaboration with interesting artists. To our surprise, all the political parties represented on the local council approved, and adopted our project with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm (6). A short extract from the programme drawn up in 1997 (7) for the "Rohstoff Verein" (Raw Materials Association) we set up for the purpose will offer some clarification of the objectives of the scheme: "The Rohstoff Association sees itself as a two-way transmitter. Taking the international art scene as its reference, yet tailored to regional requirements, the Association aims to channel energy from both sides. Subjects that are important for promoting the identity of a region will be treated in the

larger context and thereby internationalised. Conversely, artists who develop works nationally or inter-nationally that are of interest in Steyr will be invited to Steyr to present their work or develop new ideas. We shall also bring artists to Steyr who react well to the powerful effect of the place and want to shape their work in interaction (or confrontation) with the spatial context...” The programme that Walter Ebenhofer and I drew up and curated over the past five years basically consisted of either very work-intensive projects involving a large number of artists, who responded the above criteria in a wide variety of ways, or exhibitions and projects involving individual artists or small groups of artists who inter-acted with the structure of the place in some particular way. Other events we put on included high-quality literary and musical projects. In the flow of exhibitions the place changed radically, though it was actually physically altered for each concept only to a minimal extent.

Direct references to the history of Steyr and the Reithoffer factory were treated in exhibitions called “die Treffsicherheit seit Werndl” (Bang on since Werndl) and “Gummi I / II” (Rubber I / II). From 1865 to 1933, the Reithoffer factory (including the 1912 building that became our Kunsthalle) produced rubber articles all kinds, not least with the “active and cheap” help of the convicts from the prison in Garsten nearby.

“Bang on since Werndl” was an ironic exhibition devoted to the Steyr-based industrialist Josef Werndl. It transposed shooting and the idea of accuracy (Treffsicherheit)—including a shooting range and target handling equipment—into the realm of art. (8) During the “nomen est omen” (9) project, which deserves analysis at greater length, Steyr symbolically became the centre of the art world. Inviting artists unknown to us from European cities to a small town probably unknown to all participating artists turned into an analysis of the art business. Numerous prior selection mechanisms came to light in diverse ironic ways, as did the fact that our own perception was conditioned by the permanent repetition of well-known names. Besides the two last-mentioned exhibitions, Thomas Steiner and Josef Trattner installed their completely different spatial concepts in a virtually bare hall. The first lasting intervention into the spatial experience came with my project “Caput mortuum” on the occasion of the Upper Austrian provincial exhibition “Land of Hammers”, which transformed the whole hall into a walk-in “iron” room sculpture. The dramatic changes in the coloured space resulting from changes in the light at different times of day or under different weather conditions were part of the concept, and were stylised in a two-hour aesthetic experience at sundown called “Contrajour Nude”.

The subsequent transformation of the space into a “neutral” exhibition space in colour terms, i. e. painting the walls white and the floor grey, was a logical consequence. Conditions were now ideal for presenting installations and objects. (10) Because of all the windows and its being divided only by columns, the hall did not seem suited to exhibiting panel pictures or wall-based objects. Proceeding purely intuitively, therefore, Walter Ebenhofer and I tried out various ways of erecting wall surfaces to hang pictures for the “Fotogene” (Photogenic) exhibition that would not impair the lightness and transparency of the hall. The new layout for the hall provided for five cubes each

roughly 13' x 20' x 9' (cf. ill. 1) arranged in the hall by artistic instinct, such that, by some element of chance and randomness, these boxes would engender in the viewer the feeling that they had simply had to be placed thus and not otherwise, that they had taken up their positions with blind unerringness. As many comments by visitors and artists indicated, this ambitious hope seems to have been fulfilled.

The hall functioned perfectly well with this fragile balance of masses until the planning department of the town council insensitively installed a rehearsal room for a future music school (11), an alien feature that irretrievably destroyed the carefully designed integrity of the hall. What with all the building work, exhibitions were out of the question in 2002, and certainly the structural changes at least raise the question as to whether the Kunsthalle can re-start at this site. Thus this catalogue must in a certain sense also be seen as a break marking a transition, a reorientation of place and content.

Five cubes, five artists — a precise formulation that was scrupulously adhered to in the “Fotogene” and “Linz / bilder” (Pictures of Linz) exhibitions. The other exhibitions made use of the walls and surrounding space in the art centre, illustrating how wide a variety of exhibition could be staged here without significantly increasing costs by re-quiring expensive conversion work. (12) “If this exhibition had been in London or New York, I would go home and say I’d seen something really terrific in an old factory there ...” This is the gist of what Gottfried Bechtold said during his visit for the opening of the “Bang on since Werndl” exhibition. It is also “bang on” as a reflection of the problems inevitably associated with running an exhibition centre for contemporary art in the “dreary province” (13). The remoter it is from the great powerhouses of art, the greater the danger it will be ignored by the international media, however high the quality of the programme. This applies particularly if the finance available (14) does not run to taking on paid staff for PR work and looking after the exhibitions so as to increase the organisational capacity of a two-person budget (15). Astonishingly, all major Austrian newspapers and many international periodicals did nevertheless take notice of or review the projects (16). The result was that on the strength of these articles artgoers came to Steyr even from abroad. One example that comes to mind is a Stuttgart couple who followed up a report in the art periodical “Art” by coming to Steyr to visit the Kunsthalle. They certainly ended up in the tourist office’s statistics, like many other visitors to the art centre. However, the core of the Kunsthalle’s public was a steadily growing group of interested and loyal exhibition-goers from Steyr and the surrounding area, Linz and Vienna. Unlike in the great art centres, these visitors were not exclusively a specialist art public, which merely added to both the attraction of the debate and the percentage of the population willing to be interested in contemporary art. Moreover, this circumstance refutes a concern expressed by the head of the town’s Culture Office during a discussion of the cultural development of the town, to the effect that the Kunsthalle and its difficult programme might be in the wrong place here in Steyr and would accordingly be more in keeping with an international city — which of course might well be true, even so.

To us, at any rate, the location of an exhibition hall with a claim to international quality appears

absolutely necessary for developing the image of a town like Steyr, which in cultural respects is happy to rest on the laurels of its architectural charms and “generally hits the headlines only when the Enns overflows”. (17)

Empty factories need filling with contemporary art — young, uncompromising and radical art. Steyr has incomparable premises. There is no exhibition space remotely comparable with the Kunsthalle.tmp Steyr anywhere in Austria, with the whole building a place of art, an urban centre of creative innovation with a long-term effect in the realm of image-development. And, if you like, a tourist attraction. The work of convincing the powers-that-be in the town is yet to come. The virtually unchanged smell of provincialism can be perceived on reading the excerpt from the play by Johann Nestroy printed in this book. The sociological components of shifting and decentralising artistic activity and the presentation of art in recent years and the associated changes in the art scene have been excellently described by Kurt Kladler in his essay in this publication. Talking of the Kunsthalle.tmp Steyr, he calls it an “independent production context in which specific things are achieved and which is itself the result of formative forces on the international art scene.”

There has been approval and praise for our programme from all sides. Time and again, the importance of the Kunsthalle for the town has been emphasised in interviews. Despite this, lasting disruption of this specific production area of contemporary art cannot be prevented. The disruptive installation of a rehearsal room for a future music school has already been mentioned above. But after all, anyone who does not have a mind for the arduous business of learning an instrument could, after sampling a bit of art, immediately sign up for driving lessons in the forecourt of the Kunsthalle, thus symbiotically linking things that were better kept apart. (ill. 2).

(1) frame, no. 10, 02

(also: “warm-up” catalogue, page 2)

(2) Kurt Kladler, “Fusion scene — an Internationale of young art”, in the “warm-up” catalogue (Steyr, 2002)

(3) Kunsthalle.tmp Steyr was founded by Johannes Angerbauer, Walter Ebenhofer and Reinhold Rebhandl.

(4) “... professionally, Steyr is at best a desert for artists, ...”. Quoted from my speech “Hommage à Klaus Hirtner” on 9 th, January 2002 in the Old Theatre in Steyr.

(5) “zu Tisch” project with Iris Andraschek, Gottfried Bechtold, Sabine Bitter / Helmut Weber, Gunter Damisch, Robert Mittringer, Manfred Wakolbinger — curated by Walter Ebenhofer and Reinhold Rebhandl, Atelier Ebenhofer / Rebhandl, Kunsthalle (Krems), Klängen Museum (Solingen), Interieur 96 — Stedelijke Musea (Kortrijk/Courtrai), 1994–96.

(6) I should particularly like to mention BM Hermann Leithenmayr in this context.

(7) Cf. Reinhold Rebhandl, Programm der Kunsthalle.tmpSteyr, 1997

(8) Cf. “die Treffsicherheit seit Werndl” catalogue, ed. Verein Rohstoff (Verlag kursiv, Linz, 1997)

(9) Cf. "nomen est omen" catalogue, ed. Verein Rohstoff (Steyr, 1998)

(10) E. g. for the exhibitions "Lösungen" (Solutions) by Michael Blank, "Act 99" and "objekt linz"

(11) The conversion of the building and situating of the music school had been planned for 2004.

The construction of a rehearsal room in 2002 was therefore a great surprise to us. Moreover, in my view a redesign of the building, dedicating it to art of international quality, and a totally new building for the music school would have been more sensible and in keeping with the times, as far as marketing a town as an innovative centre of economic creativity is concerned. Proposals and ideas to this effect have so far not been accepted by the relevant bodies in the town.

(12) This refers basically to the exhibitions "case aspects", "really", "Malerei II" and "retrospektiv".

(13) Cf. the excerpt from Johann Nestroy's play "Umsonst" (To No Avail, in: the "warm up" catalogue, ed. Verein Rohstoff (Steyr, 2002). My thanks to Hannes Krisper for drawing attention to this reference.

(14) The Kunsthalle received financial support from the Federal Chancellery, the Upper Austrian government and (over the last four years) from Steyr town council as well. Individual projects were also supported by the city of Linz, private sponsors (e. g. firms such as Rika, Tischlerei Wieser, Malereibetrieb Seywaltner) and the Steyr Tourist Association.

(15) Walter Ebenhofer and I were responsible for drafting projects, setting up exhibitions, writing the introductory speeches at openings and the texts of catalogues, press relations, washing glasses, keeping the loos clean and any problems that arose. The input of Michael Atteneder was indispensable, designing all invitation cards, posters and publications. Johannes Angerbauer organised our website and supported us in setting up Rohstoff Verein, as did Gabriele Angerbauer and Christa Eckhard.

(16) Cf. the bibliography at the back

(17) Alexander Pühringer, "nomen est omen", noema art journal 47, April/May 1998