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Vienna

FROM IMPERIAL STABLES TO AN ART COMPLEX

In 1716, when Emperor Karl VI of Austria commissioned Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach to build the imperial stables in front of the palace gates in Vienna, he could not have imagined that buildings constructed to house horses would later be converted into an art complex that is today one of the largest cultural venues in the world.¹ What was then known as the Imperial Stables is now known as MuseumsQuartier, and it houses a wide range of art museums, such as the Leopold Museum and the Museum of Modern Art Ludwig Foundation Vienna; a contemporary exhibition space called the Kunsthalle Wien; Tanzquartier, a centre for dance; the Architektur Zentrum Wien; and quartier21, which occupies a good portion of the MuseumsQuartier and houses over 35 different art- and culture-based organizations, stores and new-media venues.

With the grandiose architecture that the city of Vienna has to offer, MuseumsQuartier stands out as unique in its approach to combining old and new architecture, from baroque, to modern, to cyberspace. With its many passageways and arches, architects Laurids & Manfred Ortner and Manfred Wehdorn successfully

integrated the art complex into the city, allowing for an easy gateway to culture. While Wehdorn was responsible for preserving the historic framework of the buildings, Ortner & Ortner were in charge of eloquently integrating new forms of architecture within the old stables. By using different materials and forms of design, the buildings also represent the eras of the artwork they house. The Leopold Museum, which is made from white limestone and brass, has a historical collection of important Austrian artists such as Egon Schiele and Kustav Klimt and thus links the museum complex to its country's historical past. The Modern Art Museum, made of grey basalt (lava stone) with very little natural light integrated into its design, and the Kunsthalle, made out of red bricks suggestive of an industrial unit, reflect the contemporary content of what these buildings showcase.²

As the Imperial Stables date back to the 18th century, they consequently hold a structural lineage with the city of Vienna. As history writes it, one wing of the stables was created as residential homes for families to live in. To this day, there are still families living in these houses and who are consequently a part of the MuseumsQuartier. This integration of histori-

MuseumsQuartier, Vienna, Austria. Photo : Ayca Cakmakli.



cal and contemporary forms of everyday life is relevant throughout the art complex. The Oval with its domed ceiling, one of the most interesting examples, was once known as the riding stable and now hosts many new-media-related projects and presentations. Quartier21, an integral part of and reflection of MuseumsQuartier's philosophy of broadening cultural innovations, is a formation that provides support and space to independent cultural organizations. Established in 2002, it currently hosts a range of spaces, such as publishing companies, independent radio/TV stations, venues that present light art/net art and different forms of new media, as well as organizations that are involved with electronic music, comics and game culture. Apart from hosting these cultural organizations, quartier21 also invites artists from around the world under their Artist in Residency program. Artists can either apply to quartier21 independently or be curated by one of its organizations. The duration of the residencies, which typically range from two to six months, also include a studio/living space with a stipend to cover expenses whilst in Vienna. At the end of the residency, artists have the opportunity to share their projects either as an exhibition or in the form of a presentation.³

Montreal, Canada, and Manchester, United Kingdom, based commissioning body C0C0S0L1DC1T1 was invited by Super.net, one of the many cultural organizations under the umbrella of quartier21, for a one-month residency at the MuseumsQuartier. Super.net, situated next to an exhibition hall and broadcasting studio, established itself to create discourse about architecture, media, art and technology. Their philosophy perfectly fits the mandate of C0C0S0L1DC1T1, which for the past five years, has been releasing video and sound work dealing with ideas of dysfunctional and utopian architectures and technologies. Themes that have been apparent in its releases have been surveillance culture, non-places⁴ and conspiracy theories. MuseumsQuartier, from the get-go, has been involved with strong ideas of architecture and, without a doubt, given its nature of hosting big museums and book shops, has dealt with surveillance. *Rounding Error*, the title of the exhibition that C0C0S0L1D1CT1 presented at the Cuisine Digitale project space in the MuseumsQuartier, was a collation of three years of C0C0S0L1DC1T1 projects. The themes chosen dealt specifically with ideas and concepts relevant to both MuseumsQuartier and Super.net. The first group of screenings included *Scalene* and *Parapulse Tuck*, two projects that looked into transient architecture. The second group of work was based on a project titled *Broken Channel*, which looked at contemporary experiences and interpretations of surveillance culture.

The *Broken Channel* video related well with another piece that was concurrently on at quartier21's Electric Avenue by quintessenz. Established in 1994, quintessenz started out as the first e-magazine publishing weekly articles in the German language. Working

out of five continents, its main interests are looking at different terrains of private – and government – initiated surveillance policies and initiatives, the right to communicate as desired, as well as the right to personal-data privacy.⁵ Its main aim is to regain civil liberties that were taken away during the earlier stages of the information revolution.

Last July, one of the quartier21's organizations came to Canada. Monochrom, a prominent institution of quartier21, gave a presentation at Zeke's Gallery in Montreal. Monochrom, established in 1993, is a group based out of Vienna that defines its projects as "an unpeculiar mixture of proto-aesthetic fringe work, pop attitude, subculture science and political activism."⁶ It has realized several politically and culturally driven projects in Austria and abroad, and in 2002 was invited to represent Austria at the São Paulo Biennial. As it refused to participate as Monochrom – due to reasons ranging from ideas of representations to nationalism – it insisted that its members decide on another artist to represent Austria at the Biennial. Its request, creating much uncertainty and appraisal, was approved and avant-garde artist Georg Paul Thomann was chosen. The catch was that Thomann did not exist and was a fictional artist created by Monochrom. This fact, though, was only known by artists of Monochrom. Members of the group flew to São Paulo as Thomann's "technical staff" and installed the work for him. When asked where Thomann was, the group simply shrugged and said he was watching pornography in his hotel room. Prior to arriving to São Paulo, Monochrom prepared extensively to quell any doubts people might have about Thomann's existence. It prepared and published a 500-page autobiography of his personal life and work. It presented its publishing project as "a probe to explore the art, pop and social history of the last 40 years. He [Thomann] was a docile assistant in analyzing and reviewing the various processes in this broad field, be it a replica of Martin Kippenberger's sexist raptures during the 1980s, on the national-fantastic contents of Austro pop, the foreign policy of the United States, or cyber punk-science fiction theories. Thomann became a fat, bloated context-canard, crammed with references and sub-fakes and thoroughly roasted by us."⁷ Monochrom's approach to the biennial created much confusion in both the Austrian and São Paulo press. Journalists wrote articles that talked of Thomann and his approach to his artwork at the biennial. However, later, when





they found out they were mistaken, and the artist was fictitious, journalists had to rewrite many articles, pretending they actually knew what was going on from the start of the project and had decided to play along with Monochrom so as to not spoil its project. As Monochrom invented the artist and his autobiography, it also had to invent and create comments and answers for interviews and texts for press releases, journals and newspapers. The end result of its creative efforts was the loss of 35,000 Euros, for which it was sued, and because of certain fictional comments that were targeted by Franz Morak, the conservative Austrian State Secretary of Art.⁸

In the last century, the overall conservative nature of Austrian politics has resulted in a series of cultural groups invested in challenging conventional thinking about society, music and the arts. The Viennese actionists of the 1960s offered one of the most radical cultural visions of artmaking in the 20th century. Coming together to react to social and political undertakings by the government, the main protagonists – Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Shwarzkogler – were known to produce work that went against standard Austrian morals of everyday life. Above all, violence, destructiveness

and the image of the naked body were used countless times in their projects. While Mühl served a one-month prison sentence due to a public event titled “Art and Revolution,” in 1968, Brus served a six-month sentence for his actions of “demeaning signs of the state.”

Current projects of Vienna-based art group WochenKlauser are perfect examples of the dedication and involvement of current Austrian artists trying to improve the mental and physical conditions of the social and political landscape of Austria. Since its establishment in 1993, WochenKlauser, a collaboration of artists, has worked on projects that have dealt with drug policy, integration of refugees into Vienna, labour-market policies, social situations for elderly people, deportation-detention facilities and voting systems. Its earliest project, named Intervention to Aid Homeless People, was a project that dealt with the health-care system in Austria. As homeless people do not have any insurance, they do not have access to doctors. With the help of sponsors, WochenKlauser was able to create travelling clinic named “Louise.” It converted a bus into a functioning clinic and had a doctor aid the homeless for any kind of medical care that was needed. Since its creation, Louise has

Monochrom's installation at the São Paulo Biennial, São Paulo, Brazil, 2002. Photo : Monochrom.



aided over 700 patients a month. Other projects of WochenKlauser have included establishing a shelter/counselling centre for drug-addicted female prostitutes; English learning centres for Macedonian refugees; work permits for illegal immigrants in Vienna; and improvements in the way detainees are treated in the Salzburg detention centre, the largest detention centre in Austria. Its work has been exhibited, and projects have been commissioned in various cities, galleries and biennals. WochenKlauser's work has always dealt with issues of deficiencies, and, as the collaboration put it, "they are invariably translating socio-political proposals into action, artistic creativity is no longer seen as a formal act but as an intervention into society."⁹

With the rise of conservative politics in many nations, and with international losing its dominance over combat in the past couple of years, we have seen more politically charged exhibitions, projects and biennals in cities around the world. Viennese artists and

cultural organizations such as WochenKlauser and MuseumsQuartier are perfect examples of how the boundaries between political activists, social workers and artists are becoming blurred.

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¹ MuseumsQuartier, The Architectonic Concept for the MuseumsQuartier Wien, MuseumsQuartier, Vienna, 2001.

² Ibid.

³ To get more information about this residency, visit http://quartier21.mqw.at/basicinfo_en.html

⁴ In his 1995 book, titled *Introduction to the Anthropology of Super Modernism*, Marc Augé defines a 'place' as relational and concerned with identity, and a 'non-place' as a place that cannot define itself by and identity. The eight non-places that Battery Operated recorded were: the airport, convenience store, hotel, train station, gas station, casino, bus station and gym.

⁵ <http://www.quintessenz.at/>

⁶ <http://www.monochrom.org/english/monochrom>

⁷ AC institute website, <http://www.artcircles.org/id69.html>

⁸ <http://www.monochrom.at/thomann/georgpaulthomann-monochrom.txt>

⁹ http://www.wochenklauser.at/projekte/menu_en.htm