



FOCUS AUSTRIA



l kris lemsalu, lisa kivi, luey imifana dood, photo: niki weitzerl



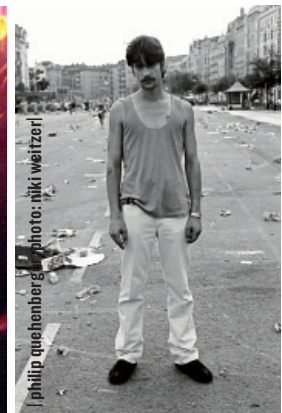
l mario grubisic, photo: markus krottendorferl



l christina egger, photo: maria ziegelböck



l schuyler maehl, photo: ariane reitnerl



l philip quehenberg, photo: niki weitzerl



Cultivated Schmäh

PERFORMANCES OF CULTURE

Diana Baldon

WHILE HOLDING ONTO the unbending social etiquette of Strauss waltzes, for the past sixty years Austrians have had to wrestle with big identity shifts. From the bunkered superpower of the Austro-Hungarian empire, which was a miniature version of an ethnically pluralist Europe expanding to Eastern and South-Central regions, the nation shrunk to what is the truism of an idyllic Alpine country, forcing its population until the fall of the Iron Curtain to disconnect from its Eastern roots.

Since psychology undeniably pervades the existential topography of contemporary Austria, the 'trauma' of these historical facts relapsed in the 2000s in what appeared a second identity earthquake. The first tremor came with the news of the controversial rise and subsequent incorporation in the government coalition of the Austrian Freedom Party, a traditionally liberal party that in the '90s took right-wing extremist overtones under its then charismatic populist leader Jörg Haider. Then in 2006 it was the turn of Natascha Kampusch's escape from a secret cellar after eight years of abduction and, two years later, an even more powerful seismic wave battered the nation with Josef Fritzl's dungeon in his dwelling in Amstetten. Public response to stories of sexual abuse tend to combine moral outrage with a horrified fascination towards facts that the media turn into a freak show; but what many English-speaking media didn't mention is that Kampusch never accused her captor of sexual slavery, and that Fritzl is no social signifier for Austrians.

It is unquestionable that, since the beginning of modernity, sexuality has played an important cultural role in the country. Nearly a *Fixierbild* image, sex has been explored by scientific academia (Sigmund Freud), early feminists (Rosa Mayreder), literature (Arthur Schnitzler and Elfriede Jelinek), cinema (Michael Haneke and Ulrich Seidl) and art (from Egon Schiele to Franz West, which includes the "Orgienmysterientheater" of Hermann Nitsch).

The sexual gaze of being looked at and the intimacy of looking, the audience's voyeurism, gender and role playing, have all been utilized to highlight themes of identity construction. In the experimental videos, installations and per-



formances of the late '60s and '70s by VALIE EXPORT, the postures, images and rights of the female body are used as a critique of male spectatorship — a strategy employed by the younger Elke Krystufek in whose paintings and performances sexual desire is omnipresent. Her work, kicked off with her controversial 'exhibitionist' masturbation performance at Kunsthalle Vienna ("Satisfaction," 1994), has been discussed in relation to '60s Viennese Actionism. Although the latter used transgression and the violation of social decorum to destabilize the social norms and institutions of bourgeois society, Krystufek pursues a personal agenda, critical of the rules and rituals of the art market system in regards to the consumption of art. Gender is one of the concerns also in Dorit Margreiter's artistic production. Her film installation *10104 Angelo View Drive* (2004), for instance, was shot in the Sheats-Goldstein residence in California, which was designed in 1963 by the architect John Lautner. It deals with the modernist aesthetics of this house's famous architecture and interiors to deconstruct the gendering of its spaces. Similarly, the strategy of 'queering' is at the

core of Ulrike Müller's work that employs different media to contradict the gendered and traditional norms of visual strategies in art history, whereas the practices of Hans Scheirl and Katrina Daschner are informed by transexual and queer-lesbian culture and politics.

Since the '70s, when sexual identities and their representations were being systematically deconstructed through performative agency, there has been a paradigmatic cultural shift from text-based models to spectacle-oriented productions, an influence derived by Austria's long-lasting theater tradition. Literature, circus, music and cabaret have become permeable territories of inspiration for artists like Stefanie Seibold, Carola Dertnig and Tanja Widmann. If in Dertnig's performances and videos the performative is acted out in everyday behavior through slapstick narratives involving, for instance, women stuck in unpleasant situations in public spaces, Widmann's interdisciplinary works, on the other hand, sit between performance-oriented, theoretical and conceptual art to explore language in the conventionality of its use by tracing its leaps, cracks and paradoxes. She has performed in small-scale but active not-for-profit art spaces such as Pro Choice and Ve.Sch-Raum und Form für bildende Kunst. The latter, together with COCO (Contemporary Concerns Kunstverein), functions as a bar and hang out for young artists. Whereas COCO, founded in 2009 by curators Severin Dünser and Christian Kobald, is committed to presenting thematic group exhibitions accompanied by a lively program of screenings, discussions and performance nights, Pro Choice, which was initiated a year earlier by the international artists Will Benedict and Lucie Stahl, has pursued a qualitative program of solo presentations by young international artists.

Theatricality is a leitmotiv in the recent exhibition by Bosnian-born Düsseldorf-based Danica Dakić at Generali Foundation, a venue that last year presented the most comprehensive survey show to date on the work on American artist Ree Morton who, already in the '70s, expressed a marked sensibility in regards to the phenomenological involvement of viewers into her spatial and theatrical installations. A firmly established high-point of the



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| christian egger, alexander wolff, photo: markus krottendorfer |



| ama jermolaewa, photo: markus krottendorfer |



| manfred grübel, photo: maria ziegelböck |



| christian rosa, photo: niki weitzer |



| saragxia, tobias urban, photo: niki weitzer |



| isa schmidlehner, photo: niki weitzer |



| mario grubisic, photo: markus krottendorfer |



| rita novak, photo: niki weitzer |



Viennese cultural calendar is the performing arts festival Wiener Festwochen among whose latest productions included *Europoly–The European Union Identity Trading Game* (2010) by Belgrade-born Vienna-based artist Dejan Kaludjerović.

Described either as a gateway or a place of intercultural dialogue between West and East, for the last fifteen years Austria has nursed its neighboring countries on the basis of common traditions and a shared past. Vienna's geographic position between "old" and "new" Europe fulfills a political vision to make it the cultural heart of Europe, encouraged by ratings that, for two consecutive years, vote the Austrian capital as the city with the highest standard of living in the world. A number of international artists have made their base here, including the Israelis Michael Blum and Martin Guttmann, the American Lisa Ruyter and the Greek Jannis Varelas. Instead, historical comparisons are offered by Anna Jermolaewa, a Russian-born who arrived in Vienna as a political refugee in 1989, and Marko Lulic, an Austrian citizen born from Croatian-Serbian parents whose videos, photographs and sculptures analyze the power and diffusion of national symbols from the former USSR and Yugoslavia.

Despite having participated in several international biennials, Josef Dabernig just inaugurated his first solo exhibition in an important Austrian museum — the Museum of Applied Arts & Contemporary Art (MAK). Now in his mid-fifties and with an internationally recognized career as an experimental filmmaker, over the past three decades he has built an impressive number of excellent pieces. His films and photos manifest an interest in methods of structuralist deconstruction that employ categories of repetition, uniformity and the absence of meaning. Behind these self-imposed rules, meaning and narrative are deliberately kept ambivalent in his films.

Franz West, whose sexual content at times connotes grotesque humor, has left a lasting mark on a younger generation of artists working in the '90s and 2000s. His non-geometric, organic form-giving style has become a model also for younger international artists such as Lone Haugaard Madsen and Søren Engsted, both Danish but based in Vienna after finishing their studies at the Academy of Fine Arts, whose conceptual approaches to sculpture embraces the conditions of making and displaying art.

It can certainly be said that humor is a national specialty, something that Heimo Zobernig easily combines with post-structuralist theory. Like Margreiter, Zobernig teaches at the Academy, a university that, under Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen's rectorship, has gained a worldwide reputation thanks to an impressive roster of artists like, among others, Pawel Althamer, Monica Bonvicini, Harun Farocki, Marina Grzanic, Matthias Herrmann, Daniel Richter and Marion von Osten. Zobernig's inquisitive concern with abstract artistic move-

ments and materials typical of high modernism is echoed in the process-oriented approach to painting and sculpture of the younger Roland Kollnitz, Ute Müller, Florian Schmidt and Christoph Meier.

Conversely, Zobernig's questioning of exhibition sites and display systems by means of spatial and optical demarcations is critically revisited by Martin Beck, Mathias Podedna and Florian Pumhösl. These artists' methodologies share a reductive style and reflective attitude in regards to the biased specificity of exhibition spaces, the material condition of art in the sphere of productive labor and the emancipatory utopianism (and failure) of the social modernist project. The legacy that arose from the tension between modernism and modernity, form and content but also the promise of the actualization of a utopian master-plan are carried out also by Klub Zwei (Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser), Sofie Thorsen and Christian Mayer. All these artists employ a research-led approach that frequently draws from the fields of design and architecture, a domain of interest also in the monumental installations of Hans Schabus, another internationally acclaimed artist whose site-specific and spatial re-arrangements recurrently embrace the notion of travel as a metaphor of the transient nature of public space.

The concern with the urban environment and social sphere is a strong tenet in Austrian visual arts that stems from socially-engaged forms of art. One of the figures with the most authority in this area of artistic strategy is Oliver Ressler, an artist and activist whose work is anchored to issues of racism, migration, economy and, more importantly, globalization. His exhibitions, projects in public spaces and videos attempt to reveal the similarities and distinctions of the respective fields of art and activist social movements. The idea of



art production as a political act is the basis of Hannes Zebedin and Anna Witt's interventions, video and sculptural installations in which the interaction between social roles and socially defined spaces aims at deconstructing subjects' supremacist positioning within social systems. In works by Marlene Haring, Adrien Tirtiaux and Leopold Kessler the condition of making art in public takes absurd twists. If the installations by Belgian-born Tirtiaux integrates architectural presets into unimaginable experiential moments, Kessler's pieces appear as unsolicited maintenance work on civic property such as personalizing road signs without seeking permission. Both reveal the gaps that can be found in the organization of social space, unlike Haring who, on the other hand, interferes with the regulations governing the contextual framing of public space as well as organizations presenting art.

It would be hard to map a visual identity of contemporary visual arts in Austria with an awareness of the context of the self-construction of its national identity, without reassessing the cultural features inherited by the imperial failure, the modernist avant-gardism, the desire to recoup a sense of shared communal values or the cultivation of Schmäh (wit). Harald Szeemann had emphasized this aspect back in 1996 with his exhibition "Austria im Rosen-netz" (Austria in the Net of Roses) at MAK, which revealed how the socio-historical events allowing for the development of 'major' European nations like Germany and France would have never have happened without the visionary and dissident traditions of a 'minor' country like Austria. This argument is valid with respect to Austrian aesthetic practices whose influence can't be visibly translated into global artistic contexts. However, a local habitus transcending the opposition between 'micro' and 'macro' is perceivable, one whose repetition of aesthetic and linguistic principles maintains specific social, political and gender realities. This 'performance of culture,' to borrow one of Jelinek's tropes, needs no 'rehearsal' because it takes places inexorably beyond Austrian borders. ■

Diana Baldon is an Italian curator and writer based in Vienna. Between 2007-08 she was Curator In Residence at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

Images: Vienna-based collective Gelitin conceived this special project for Flash Art's Focus Austria.

Special thanks to Florian Reither of Gelitin and Elena Tavecchia from Massimo de Carlo Gallery for their assistance in realizing this project. Below is an excerpt from an email between Florian and Elena.

*"chere e
these are some of the artists, photographers we live and
collaborate with in vienna
or we go see each other's shows
we are friends, not every day, but we are friends.
have a nice day
florian"*