

Kunsthhaus Graz

Press

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Azra Akšamija Sanctuary

Kunsthhaus Graz, Lendkai 1, 8020 Graz

Opening: 04.07.2024, 6 pm

Duration: 05.07.2024–06.10.2024

Curated by Katrin Bucher Trantow, Alexandra Trost

Location: Space01

Information: +43 316 8017-9200

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What really matters to people? What are their rights, their obligations? And what does 'belonging' mean in a world shaped by cultural transfer, inequalities and migration? *Sanctuary* represents the first major exhibition in Austria of the artist and architectural historian Azra Akšamija, who was born in Sarajevo and grew up in Graz. Hosted by the Kunsthhaus Graz, the show explores various aspects of the term 'safe haven'. The theme of protection can be experienced by visitors in space-filling installations, in which she focuses on life in the global community as interdependence between people and their cultural imprint, located between the drive for economic efficiency and protection of the environment.

'Protective spaces' turn the gaze on social, ethnic and ecological sustainability

Azra Akšamija opens protective spaces of the most varied kinds and on different levels in the Kunsthhaus Graz. In her search for traces of the conditions and possibilities of conciliation and understanding, she re-contextualises signs and places of human co-existence into site-specific installations. 3-D glasses that could derive from various cultural contexts are arranged in the form of rose windows and filter daylight in the Needle, acting as harbingers in the Kuppelraum (Domed Room). Akšamija, who is closely involved in research into the repurposing and individualisation of the existing, drapes the space with textile strips made from cut-up, discarded T-shirts. In the middle, an individualised UNHCR protection tent for refugees offers a spot for reflection, listening and self-discovery, while the communal reworking of recycled textiles into new patterns on the large *Sanctuary* work table allows exhibition visitors to work and chat together. Using digital AI tools, Akšamija designs culture-spanning wearables for the present and future using AI tools, creating fashion that joyfully appropriates, while at the same time exploring appropriation as an instrument for (critical) reflection on one's own position. The works, which range from textile through digital pieces to illustrated instructions on how to build your own protective space, are also concerned with the representation of Islamic

identities in the West and cultural education through art and architecture. Sustainability is meant here in the ethical, social and ecological sense.

Akšamija poses critical questions about an overflowing consumerist economy, directing her gaze expressly at clothing and fashion. Entangled conflicts of interest throughout the world are revealed in the production and disposal of textiles, for example. Fashion as a cultural form of expression and a receptacle of knowledge is also shown as a place where belonging and protection (or a protective covering) manifest themselves. The trained architect gives us tools in her exhibition – occasionally not without a dose of self-irony – with which we can become active through open-minded repurposing and productive appropriation. ‘My art examines how alienation can turn into empowerment,’ as Akšamija describes her own art in 2018.

In keeping with the opening of different protective spaces, *Sanctuary* is dedicated under the dome to sacred space, the realm of education, and to the museum itself, too. Besides a place of communal participation, the individual works thematise such concepts as authorship, identity politics, authenticity and aura. Its approach consistently interdisciplinary, the exhibition scrutinises the potential in art and architecture to facilitate the process of transformative mediation in cultural or political conflicts. It thus creates a framework for investigation and analysis of, and intervention in, an increasingly crisis-ridden social-political reality.

A plea for global solidarity and a diversity of voices

The Kunsthhaus Graz is dedicating a solo exhibition to Akšamija that is broadly concerned with the theme of protection, addressing questions of demarcation of the self from the general and conditions of coming together. *Sanctuary* makes a plea for a form of global solidarity that goes beyond the demand for sustainability in our dealings with joint resources and that defends respect and basic diversity of voices in terms of identity politics.

The exhibition has been created in collaboration with local initiatives (Caritas and others) and invites active participation by means of a permanent intervention and various workshops taking place over the summer.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue that includes essays and research material on selected projects.

About the artist

Widely known for her socially critical and participative works addressing constructions of identity, Azra Akšamija is Professor and Director of the Art, Culture and Technology Program at the MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her works were shown at the Venice Biennial and the Sharjah Museums, and elsewhere. Having fled the Yugoslav war with her family, the artist grew up in Graz among other places, and has shown her works in situ, too, at institutions such as < rotor > or the Forum Stadtpark. Her committed, socially-critical and participative works have taken her to museums, as well as mosques, churches and refugee camps with specific site-works. She exhibited in the *Faith Love Hope* show in the Kunsthhaus Graz in 2018 and 2019, and in the exhibition titled *ART ↔ CRAFTS* in 2019. The artist then received the Art Prize of the City of Graz in the same year.