

Art Controversies

Styrian Positions

1945–1967

15.06.2018–06.01.2020

Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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1945–1967—A time permeated by notions from the past Nazi regime and a sense of departure into new possibilities in art. ‘What is art?’ Artists, art societies, the press, politics and the public argue around this question. At the same time, artists answer with traditional pictures of the homeland, colourful still lifes, cubist planes, abstract forms, Pop Art and Concrete Art. They show us an abundance of perspectives and positions that were and are possible in art.

Unconventional art was often a way of expression by minorities, by people who saw things differently, who had a special intuition or a peculiar view on their surroundings.

The time after the war is still permeated by Nazi terms and values. Not all branches in institutions, such as personnel, have changed. However, art societies are permitted again, artists return from inward emigration or exile and the strict censorship of the Nazi regime is abolished. A variation of ideas, experiments and styles is possible again. Trying things out, developing, critiquing, deconstructing, changing, preserving, admiring and condemning are on the table. Diversity and simultaneity of very different works are characteristic for post-war era art. But, 'what is art?' Artists, art societies, the press, politics and the public argue around this question. At the same time, artists answer with traditional pictures of the homeland, colourful still lifes, cubist planes, abstract forms, Pop Art and Concrete Art. They show us an abundance of perspectives and positions that were and are possible

in art. This new beginning also represents a dialogue between the young and the old; between those who drew on the traditions and experiences from the 1920s and 30s, and the next generation who wanted to experiment. Thus, you can imagine that multifaceted discussion, friction, questions and controversies accompany especially art between 1945 and the late 1960s.

Sezession Graz

Art institutions are essential for many artists, since publicity is a key to success. But who decides what kind of art is being displayed in public and what kind is not?

In the years after the war, many societies and alliances were established or reopened. An important reopened art society is the 'Sezession Graz'. Many artists in this exhibition were members. The Sezession Graz is a good example for controversies. Since its founding in 1923, members, the press, art critics and the public have been debating everything about the Sezession Graz and the works of its members.

At its time of inception and in the early 1930s, the Sezession Graz positioned itself as being open-minded. The goal was to invite the international art scene to Graz and to discuss art and politics at collective events. The members came from different political camps and were highly critical of each other and their art. Thus, the Sezession determined its main principle: 'Strictness with matters of art, objectivity with everything else.'

In 1938 the Sezession was abolished by the National Socialist regime on account of representing 'degenerate art'. After the war it was re-established with Peter Richard Oberhuber as its first president. In the 1950s, Rudolf Pointner and Kurt Weber can be regarded as driving forces of the Sezession.

The discussions did not stop in the post-war era, but shifted towards a conflict of generations; between those who wanted to revitalize the Sezession from within and those who wanted to preserve tradition.

Founding members, such as Alfred Wickenburg, Fritz Silberbauer, Hans Mauracher or Friedrich Aduatz were discussing with Gottfried Fabian and Vevean Oviette. Should the viewer be able to recognise an object? How far is abstraction allowed to go? Often, we only learn from the picture title that the connection to an object, which is indiscernible at the first glance, is still there. Young ensuing artists found their home in the Forum Stadtpark Graz and the Junge Gruppe Weiz. Founding member of both initiatives, Günter Waldorf, was essential in the forming of this young

generation of artists. Another important step for the establishment of these young artists were the 'International Painters' Weeks', an annual event of the Neue Galerie Graz, organised by Wilfried Skreiner since 1966. The International Painters' Weeks were a clear avowal to contemporary art. In 1992, they were superseded by the artist-in-residence-program, which focused on singular artistic positions. The conflict in and around the Sezession is one that also runs through society in the post-war era. It included both proceedings surrounding the prosecution of war crimes and the smooth continuation of administrative bodies after 1945 and everything in between. This adversarial and complex societal situation also became noticeable in art.

Art during the Nazi era

Between 1938 and 1945, during the National Socialist regime in Austria, politics massively intervened in the definition of art. Modern art was labeled 'degenerate' and contrasted with photographs of disfigured people. Taste in art was linked to theories of race by the Nazi regime and thereby seen as hereditary and unchangeable. Good art was supposed to deal with the beautiful and the eternal and it had to strengthen the people's sense of community. Popular motifs at the time were landscapes, nature, rural labor, still lifes, people, industry and animals. In these artworks, the meadows are green, snow is white and apples are red because colours were supposed to be true. Also the pictured motif, the object was supposed to be clearly discernible. The artists' work was strictly supervised by the compulsory membership in the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts. The artists had to submit a proposal, questionnaire, documents and photos of the artwork. They were not only judged by their artistic skill, but also by their political reliability.

How far is art allowed to go again?—Landscape

Landscape painting, next to portrait or still life, is regarded as one of the central genres of painting, and deals with the partial rendering of nature. The understanding of how a landscape is supposed to be painted has changed as much throughout the course of history, as the selected motifs themselves. In the Nazi era, depictions of industrial or agricultural scenes had been very much asked for. Also in the post-war era, a time of rebuilding and 'economic miracle', paintings of industrial scenes were central in order to show the progressiveness of a region. Thus, Franz Trenk painted the transformers building of Elin plants in Weiz and Reno Ernst Jungel painted the Erzberg as an important source of natural resource in Styria. Nevertheless, the paintings differ from each other. While Trenk uses realistic detail, Jungel paints the Erzberg planar and in vibrant colors. At that time, the Stadtpark of Graz served as an urban landscape motif. In 1953, Richard Larsen painted a *Stadtpark Alley* in wintertime with well

discernible trees and white snow. Ten years after, he changed the way he painted trees and in the painting *Autumn Colours (Park Landscape)* they are not clearly identifiable any more and the colours are evocative of the impressionists' depictions of light. Already in 1946, Franz Rogler ventured another step towards abstraction. With his work *White Relief* he tentatively asks the question: 'How far can painting go?' In this nonrepresentational painting, the shapes emerge from the canvas and move towards three-dimensionality. A few years later however, in 1953, Rogler returns to form. In the painting *Winter Forest* the trees might not be immediately recognisable as such and the forms are abstract, but the title reveals the representational intent. Could it be a surreal forest in a dream?

Object

In Austrian cubism, the depicted object is mostly well recognisable. Form is being deconstructed and things are planar and painted in vivid colours. Representing objects from all sides and directions was not all that popular in Austrian cubism. Classic Cubism was strongly criticised and trivialised in a newspaper article entitled 'Children view Picasso'. Picasso was one of the artists who was despised in the Nazi era. The fragile balancing act between object and abstraction can be seen in the art by Emanuel Fohn. The three artworks hanging one above the other called *Still Life with Apples*, *Abstract Composition* and *Abstraction* demonstrate that Fohn was oscillating between representation and reduction, too. The still life is a familiar genre in art history, which is frequently displayed in this exhibition. The still life served as a subject to many artists, such as Peter Richard Oberhuber, Leo Scheu, Karl Stark, or Alfred Wickenburg, and they explored different styles, techniques and interpretations within this genre. Is every-

thing recognisable, or are the colours themselves in the foreground? Can you detect the trace of the brush and is the apple red, or is it blue after all? Peter Richard Oberhuber and Rudolf Szyszkowitz fought deliberately against nonrepresentative art. Szyszkowitz, who was concerned with religious themes, had joined the 'Bund Neuland', a religious association that spread Christian values, already at the age of 15. Next to his passion for religious motifs, he believed that one could not express human issues in nonrepresentative paintings. Friedrich Aduatz would disagree. To him, colour and its effect was an essential artistic medium; the observers are supposed to establish a connection by means of colour and form. Already in the 1930s, he painted nonrepresentational paintings. He wanted to move away from the strict representation of objects and towards curved lines and forms. Aduatz also transformed his style, which was informed by 'advancing', as he put it. Wolfgang Hollegga discovered a completely different solution to paint objects. Hollegga observed and drew the same object for

many days. By means of the repeated drawing and observing, he perceives the movement of a piece of wood, a branch or a stone. When he has internalised the movement, he pours the paint onto the canvas and blurs it with a piece of cloth or the back of his hand. With the help of big gestures he transforms the movement onto the canvas and an object turns into an object's abstraction. Gustav Zankl painted nature abstractions as well. However, at the end of the 1960s, he completely abandons the object. In *Vertical and Horizontal Organization*, Zankl deals with colorimetry, construction and ordering principles. He questions how we perceive warm and cool colours, which order is disruptive and which is harmonious. He itemises, documents and organises these perceptions. The controversial meaning of abstract art in those times becomes clear in a statement by Hanns Koren, Deputy Governor of the Province of Styria, in his opening speech at *trigon 63 (Contemporary Painting and Sculpture from Italy, Yugoslavia and Austria)* in Graz: 'It is not a shame to be puzzled by a non-representative painting.'

Human

The human, with all its emotions and facets was, after the severe wartime experiences, another fascinating subject in the art of the post-war era. Almost simultaneously, Paula Maly and Rudolf Pointner painted a couple of lovers. What are the differences? Paula Maly adapted to the dominant art doctrines during the Nazi era and was shown in a number of exhibitions. In her painting *Lovers*, she depicts two people in realistic colours, who are holding each other in their arms, maybe dancing. Rudolf Pointner, however, followed Surrealism, which originated in the 1920s. Here, contrary to a rational conception of art, the aim was to expand consciousness and reality, also including dreams or the unconscious as subjects. In his painting *Spell of Love*, he dissolves the lovers' bodies into curved forms, paints them and their surroundings in vivid colours and lets them float in an indefinable space. What do you think the artists were saying about each other's painting?

Material

Oil, lacquer, tempera, gelatin silver, ceramic, synthetic resin, tarmac, spackle, ash, wood, sand, linen? Artists freely chose their materials. Rita Passini created for her *Abstract Composition* a ceramic platter on an iron rust. Eckart Schuster experimented with multiple exposures, solarisation effects or photograms. Gerhard Lojen and Friedrich Aduatz both used sand, spackle or other unusual materials and in Hans Bischofshausen's *Musical Score* tarmac emerges together with ash and oil from the canvas. Material is given a central role and after the Second World War it becomes an increasingly conscious form of expression in non-representative art works.

Never ending controversies

Another regained freedom was the orientation towards an international artists' network. Therefore, Vevean Oviette, an artist from Graz, spent several years in Paris and New York. When she returned in 1962, she had gained artistic experience and international perspective. Also, many painters from the School of Paris were invited to Graz and brought along openness, new ideas and inspiration. Next to Paris, there was also a connection to the USA due to an orientation towards Pop Art in the Styrian art scene. Günter Waldorf borrows motifs from advertisement and the every day life of a consumption-oriented society in his painting *Baby Doll*. This orientation towards internationally acclaimed art trends, the proximity to the west, can be regarded as a political statement. Another opportunity for new ideas was provided by the tri-nation biennial *trigon*, which was founded in 1963 and presented current art from Austria, Italy and former Yugoslavia. Since 1965, the Neue Galerie Graz had taken over the staging and prompted a chorus of outrage

with *trigon 67 (ambiente)* that lasted for weeks. The discussions did not stop with the *trigon* exhibitions, quite the opposite. Nevertheless, *trigon* constituted a reference point for all the simultaneously present artistic positions of the post-war era. Still today, controversies around art, its presentation or protagonists are a fixed component of the public discourse, when it comes to deciding who is granted publicity and how one talks about art. What would contemporary art be without questions, networks, critique, subsidies and controversies?

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