

# Universalmuseum Joanneum Press office

Universalmuseum Joanneum      presse@museum-joanneum.at  
Mariahilferstraße 4, 8020 Graz, Austria      Telephone +43-316/8017-9211  
www.museum-joanneum.at

## Art Controversies Styrian Positions 1945–1967

Neue Galerie Graz, Joanneumsviertel, 8010 Graz  
Opening: 14.06.2018, 7pm  
Duration: 15.06.2018–22.08.2021  
Curated by Peter Peer  
Information: +43-316/8017-9100, [www.neuegaleriegraz.at](http://www.neuegaleriegraz.at)

Artists who have followed new paths and taken up new themes and means of expression have always triggered controversies. They have not only reflected conflicting opinions about art, but often also addressed social, political or wider ideological views. This phenomenon can be observed from the beginning of the modern era. From the 19th century on, art conducted in part a public and critical examination of current affairs, developing into a sensitive socio-political observer. The Neue Galerie Graz exhibition examines this polarity, focusing on the period from 1945 to the late 1960s in the region of Styria. Here, in an open field of possibilities, exponents of the avant-garde and “traditional” artists waged what was at times a bitter fight for supremacy in the visual arts.

### 1918–1945: Isolation and regression

The ideological resentments that had first emerged with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, together with the political struggles of the interwar period and their escalation into civil war in 1934, the catastrophe of National Socialism and the range of mentality-specific consequences that followed, culminated in an intense situation in post-1945 Austria. Austrian society was hugely overshadowed by the events of modern and recent history, and suffered from deep divisions. An uneasy attitude towards modernism had already been evident in the reactionary climate of the interwar period. Together with social and political conflicts, the economic crises fostered an emphatic return to traditional values, which manifested itself in extreme cultural conservatism. A down-to-earth notion of homeland coupled with intense religiosity meant that humankind and local nature now became the focus of artistic explorations. Cubism, Surrealism and abstract art were almost unknown. Expressionism, which had still displayed a disturbing intensity during the 1910s, weakened into moderate forms after 1918. Due to its precise representationalism, the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) was appropriated by dominant reactionary notions of art. It was only thanks to the Graz Secession, founded in 1923, that there was, temporarily, increased acceptance of modern trends. This was then cut off by the rise of Fascism.

### 1945: Break or continuity?

In the awareness of the historical burden and the crimes of the Nazi regime, there was an attempt in the visual arts, as elsewhere, to create a new self-perception. The methods adopted, however, were highly controversial. By defending artistic traditions, some artists sought to safeguard those surviving values that appeared irretrievably lost in many other

areas of life. Figurative art seemed to them to be the only way to convey the Christian principles needed now more than ever, following the years of catastrophe. Exponents of contemporary art distanced themselves from the artistic themes and styles of the past, which in their view had been corrupted by the regimes and had furthered the catastrophe in the arts. Figurative art was also included in this, since it had been misused in the ideologically charged Realism of the corporate state and Nazi art. Total commitment to modern and contemporary art also sent a clear signal against the regressive socio-political climate of the post-war period. This was, among, other things, caused by the relatively rapid reintegration of former Nazis into society and administrative levels of the state. At the same time, however, it was accompanied by a prolongation of specific political and ideological values that had a negative effect on the art scene and on the acceptance of current artistic trends. Equally seamless was the integration into the post-war Styrian art scene of those artists who had been Nazi party supporters or, at the least, been compliant with the regime.

Between tradition and the avant-garde – ambivalence, not clarity

The artistic positions of this period provide an overall picture of ambivalence. The exponents of figurative art were in no way on a par with the reactionaries. Many saw the continuation of concrete representation as an art-related issue. Trends in classical modernism formed a link between traditional and progressive forces; these had only been marginally adopted in interwar Austria and disappeared entirely during the Nazi era. Older artists saw this as a way to relate to contemporary art without having to give up more traditional notions and thus representationalism. And yet the focus lay primarily on the latest trends such as Informel, Tachisme and Abstract Expressionism. These years saw, among other things, nonrepresentational works coming up against late-Romantic portraits and landscapes. Typical of this period in general is a permeability between current and traditional trends. Many artists moved between these, seeking to combine modernism and tradition, ultimately exposing themselves to criticism from both sides.

Styrian Positions 1945–1967

The exhibition seeks to represent these different positions in three sections. The first section deals with the echoes of traditional directions after 1945, beginning with 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century trends through to the reception of the trends of classical modernism. It is this range in particular that encompasses both conservative and more progressive positions. The second section examines the paths towards abstract and non-representational art with geometrical and informal forms, which developed simultaneously and fought for recognition and equality. The third section explores various positions from the mid-1960s on. Here, abstraction discarded to a large extent the radicality of its early days, establishing itself on a wider level. A few artists became involved with a form of representational art that was highly current at the time, Pop Art, while others focused entirely on Concrete Art and Op Art. The *Art Controversies* exhibition ends with “trigon ‘67”, which put forward what was indeed a scandalous statement on contemporary art, yet one which also enjoyed broad recognition. There was definite awareness of the significance of these achievements.

### Contemporary Art Today

References to the present day are allowed. An interested audience's engagement with contemporary art—which in times of economic security and political stability provides a source of enrichment and education—is certainly prone to losing support in a harshening climate combined with dwindling tolerance at various levels of society. Political opinion leaders are once more sounding increasingly radical, inciting general anxiety about the loss of peace, identity and prosperity, and answering the infinitely complex questions of the present day with apparently simple, but no less dangerous, solutions that ultimately lead to the constraint or surrender of the individual's personal freedoms. Now, more than ever, contemporary art has a relevance in its role as a critical social seismograph.

Artists featured in the exhibition include:

Hans Adametz; Friedrich Aduatz; Werner Augustiner; Hans Bauer; Otto Beckmann; Werner Berg; Margret Bilger; Ferdinand Bilger; Hans Bischoffshausen; Günter Brus; Heinrich Charusa; Mario Decleva; Walter Eckert; Godwin Eckhart; Edwin eder; Gottfried Fabian; Franz Felfer; Leo Fellingner; Emanuel Fohn; Greta Freist; Hans Fronius; Johann Fruhmann; Bruno Gironcoli; Roland Goeschl; Wilhelm Goesser; Fred Hartig; Friedrich Hartlauer; Emmy Hiessleitner-Singer; Wolfgang Hollegha; Erwin Huber; Eilfried Huth; Edgar Jene; Reno Ernst Jungel; Willibald Karl; Erich Kees; Franz Koeck; Reinhold Krassnig; Richard Kratochwill; Richard Kriesche; Richard Larsen; Axl Leskoschek; Gerhard Lojen; Paula Maly; Eduard Matras; Hans Mauracher; Ulf Mayer; Friedrich Mayer-Beck; Josef Mikl; Otto Mirtl; Alfred Josef München; Hans Nagelmüller; Norbert Nestler; Siegfried Neuburg; Peter Richard Oberhuber; Franz Xaver Ölzant; Adolf Osterider; Vevean Oviette; Hermann Painitz; Ferdinand Pamberger; Friedrich Panzer; Rita Passini; Pipo Peteln; Josef Pillhofer; Rudolf Pointner; Heinrich Pölzl; Peter Pongratz; Markus Prachensky; Max Puntigam; Arnulf Rainer; Walter Ritter; Franz Rogler; Carl Rotky; Franz Roupec; Luis Sammer; Leo Scheu; Alfons Schilling; Eckart Schuster; Hannes Schwarz; Fritz Silberbauer; Alexander Silveri; Rudolf Spohn; Karl Stark; Hans Staudacher; Rudolf Szyszkowitz; Jorrit Tornquist; Franz Trenk; Hubert Tuttnner; Carl Unger; Erich Unterweger; Günter Waldorf; Kurt Weber; Max Weiler; Franz Weiss; Susanne Wenger; Alfred Wickenburg; Richard Winkler; Wladimir Zagorodnikov; Gustav Zankl, and others.