

THE AUSTRIAN PAVILION — OBSERVATIONS

La Biennale di Venezia 2009

VALIE EXPORT

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In Spring 2009 the Austrian Pavilion, completed in 1934 by the architect Josef Hoffmann on the grounds of the Giardini in Venice, is a studio, artist's workshop, stage, arena of activity, performance venue and partner in dialogue for the artists Elke Krystufek, Dorit Margreiter and Franziska & Lois Weinberger. In their art projects inside and around the pavilion they confront the public space of representation, of encounter(s) and of relationship(s) with the private space of the studio, the workshop, the space for action.

The selection of the artists for the 2009 Venice Biennial is the product of a wide range of considerations that, during the process of making the individual art projects concrete and my analysis of the work, also increasingly impacted on my own focus — whereby an abundance of personal thoughts and observations gradually accumulated.

They are also the product of an engagement with the content that I shall outline here from the perspective of my own objectives as an artist and an interest in current positions.

Venice, Spring 2009: The Austrian Pavilion is filled with scaffolding, ladders, tubs of paint and painting equipment for the expressive murals and wall drawings of Elke Krystufek, who is not only using the existing walls of the pavilion for her passages of text and sprawling drawn and painted portraits of male models that dominate the space. Additional blank walls have also been transported by lorry to Venice, where Elke Krystufek painted them with the impressive and expressive painterly gesture typical of her work, basing her images on photographs of a heterosexual male model taken at one of the artist's Vienna studios.

The image of the naked male is augmented by two pornographic photographs found in Venice of naked homosexual men — in typical 'feminine' poses.

By observing the unclad model Elke Krystufek transfers the historically fixed male gaze of female nudity in a structure of gaze and desire of opposites and contradictions.¹

The male nudes are involved in a dialogue with the smaller painted or drawn portraits of different men — who include Josef Hoffmann, the architect of the Austrian Pavilion, and Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, whose film title *Tabu* the artist has integrated in the title of her own installation *TABOU TABOO* (2009).

Krystufek's painterly interior is a wild and sweeping panorama in black-and-white as well as colour.

The gestural aspect of painting and drawing is expressed in many layers, literally and metaphorically: on the walls of the pavilion, paintings frequently hung or mounted on them and in the artist's rhythm of writing and painting — in a further layer — which links her images and murals.

^{1st} Comment:

It could later be observed that when sunlight floods through the painted glass doors a new virtual level of perception is created, time is present in the images that have been painted and drawn.

Krystufek captures the natural lighting in the pavilion in her drawings, duplicating it. This makes the changing progression of the light outdoors clearly legible as the existing structure of the windows and the structure depicted on the walls and images slowly shift outside or into one another.

TABOU TABOO is unfinished, the project finds itself largely in a process of being designed, and is only a 'complete' work for the duration of the Biennial 2009 exhibition. Individual elements are to be transported elsewhere at the end of the show; although she is leaving the

murals behind, so they will continue to exist as signs even when they are eventually painted over.

For her video film presentation Krystufek uses an unusual spatial element, a sound bowl that links the sound of the video to a particular location within the space — and which could also be an island of sound.

On the outside of the pavilion Elke Krystufek replaces the word 'AUSTRIA' with the word 'TABU'. The pavilion is changing its identity: Krystufek is to mount a panel bearing the word *TABU* (*TABOO*) where the lettering *AUSTRIA* is fixed to the façade — which categorises the pavilion (by nationality). This can be understood as a challenge to, an attack on the historical identity of the pavilion. It is also an allusion to the title of Krystufek's installation *TABOU TABOO* in the pavilion itself while simultaneously referring to the private and public presence and sensuality of artistic work.

2nd Comment:

Krystufek subsequently removed the word 'AUSTRIA' from the façade of the pavilion, and used the individual letters to form the word 'TA U' (the B had to be specially produced), and remounted them in exactly the same position but in blue. The word 'TABU' begins with the 'T' where the 'T' in 'AUSTRIA' had been.

For Dorit Margreiter, in March 2009 the Austrian Pavilion is a film studio, a performance location and a space for exploring the identity of the pavilion and the history of the exhibitions held there.

The Austrian Pavilion is filled with a 35mm film camera, with spotlights, with tripods and stands for camera and lighting, with camera tracks, camera lenses, light meters, film rolls, sculptures and objects that have been transported to Venice from the artist's Vienna studio.

Make-up spaces, performance spaces, dressing rooms have been created, and transform the venue for days into a film and performance studio. Camera, pavilion and performance artists are partners in a play, a *mise en scène* of the historic pavilion's extended identity.

Margreiter marks the various locations of those objects that are shown in the history of the exhibitions in the pavilion by means of an architectural construction for the takes in her film, so showing imaginary representations of these objects in the film.

It is a process of filmic imagery in the context of a past significance that links the identity assigned cinematically with a new differently constructed terminological identity.

In the film the glamorous appearance of the performance artists in the 'pavilion studio' interrupts the rhythmic composition of the architectural shots.

Margreiter works with a concept combining architecture, representation and the construction of new spatial models that lends the Austrian Pavilion a complex form of expression in her film. The spatial design and the processes of movement that occur for the shots trigger off performative processes and procedures.

The film *PAVILION* (2009), which was shot on location, is being shown during the Biennial in an explicitly architectural screening space. The screening space is a special architectural configuration that incorporates the projector room, the 'film beam space' and the screening area for the film *PAVILION*.

The beam of light from the projector that carries the images on the film through the space as well as the projection itself are protected from daylight by a wall erected in the space. The film room, which is unique in the history of the Austrian Pavilion, is an extended film installation: The projection of the film on the pavilion in the pavilion means that the pavilion projects itself onto itself, whereby the issue of depiction and reality are placed in the same temporal and physical space.

The view from the camera, which is positioned in the centre of its surroundings, creates a distance between the camera and the objects being shot, between the spaces and locations filmed, while also determining the spatial rhythm of the *re*-presentation of the film's location itself. It is a dialogue between camera and pavilion.

Interventions in the solid architectural figure of the pavilion have an impact on the public volume of the pavilion. The borders of the pavilion's image shift with the light, the mirrors and the physical movement in the space, but above all with the projections onto the pavilion itself. The different sequences and spatial arrangements emphasise the overlapping, the penetration of the vocabularies of representation and reality, to demonstrate that there are no identical terms for them.

A further key aspect of Margreiter's filmic piece is the lighting of the filmed object, of the pavilion, which divides its architectural presence into various black-and-white or light and dark segments, and lends the pavilion unfamiliar visual dimensions.

The perception of the static location, the pavilion, becomes dynamic by virtue of the different light structures, the differently arranged projections of light that separate or link locations within the pavilion. Attention is drawn to the encounter of clarity, breadth and seclusion.

The irregular rhythmic dynamics of the movement in the film and the way it has been edited create complex spaces, generating surfaces directly before the camera that suddenly open up into rooms, so presenting the concept behind its design.

Margreiter's filmic vocabulary is subtle and complex. Through separation, partition and the use of layers in the shots, as well as in the editing or in the montage, a dialogue is generated between the pavilion and the camera, between the pavilion as a spatial location and the pavilion as a film location.

All new works by the artists Elke Krystufek, Dorit Margreiter and by Franziska and Lois Weinberger are process-orientated and document the processes of design and depiction involved while emphasising their own site-specific and specific temporal aspects.

What links these three striking artistic positions is also a structural, art-critical engagement in the socio-cultural context, tied-in with an analytical approach and a precise analytical statement.

The artworks by Elke Krystufek, Dorit Margreiter and Franziska & Lois Weinberger allude to a dialogue between the Austrian Pavilion and their own work.

Artistic strategies and the inherent logic of such strategies reflect their place of origin, the organisation of art and the organisation in art.

"Flowing places" as "remembering places", as Franziska and Lois Weinberger once formulated it, are also represented by their works.²

Venice, April 2009: Part of the working studio for the artists Franziska & Lois Weinberger is to be seen on the left flank of the grounds outside the Austrian Pavilion. Carpenter's tools, craftsman's tools, measuring equipment, surveying equipment, wooden panels to be erected, timber beams for a roof, blue plastic sheeting reminiscent of water, electrical installations as well as structural drawings and building plans fill the two artists' open studio. The flanking open room between the pavilion and the metropolitan waterway of Venice is both a studio space for the artists and the venue for showing the object *LAUBREISE* [*Laub* = foliage; *Reise* = journey].

The object is a designed architectural space, it is a solid cube comprised of grasses and long branches. *LAUBREISE* links the Austrian Pavilion with a Venetian waterway, i.e. with the urban part of Venice.

"This artwork is tied to the 'Biennale time', the process stretches from the beginning to the end of the exhibition and confronts the visitors with the progression of time."³

Moving within the space for this *LAUBREISE* one is surrounded by a very special and intense smell of nature: sweet and steaming, it surrounds the visitors and is intensified by the broken coloured light coming in from outside through the blue plastic sheeting of the roof. The light falls on the monumental sculpture and forms a light space of its own around the cube. The overpowering cube of vegetation becomes a partner to my inner voice, my inner monologue, a monologue that is transported outside by the twofold physical perception of the living work.

As its title implies, the object is a mobile piece that moves from one place to another, not only undertaking a journey but itself being a journey.

Perhaps this cube is the *atopon*, the non-space, the travelling object or, as Weinberger says, the "remembering place"? Weinberger also thinks: "the more unfamiliar the surroundings [author's note: the setting of the journey], the more autonomous the artwork becomes". And furthermore: "As many constructions [author's note: journeys] are possible as he [Lois Weinberger] has power".

The power of definition lies in the alternating multiplicity of the work: nature, culture and civilisation, the journey, the mobility, the movement reflected in all of these phases of this planet, in the imaginary journey, the real journey, the local and temporary journey, the *foliage-journey*. There are countless associations with the phenomenon of travel. The journey as an instrument of movement, of conception.

The other artist's studio, the Weinbergers' other space for artistic production, is the municipal public space on the Lido: the wasteland of the abandoned factories, the gaps in this urban diversity. But the Giardini also provides the artistic material, the grasses, the foliage, the plants. The working material for the art project is the mowing machine, the scythe, or the means of transport that connects both of the outdoor artist's studios on the municipal waterways and the artwork through the personal artistic engagement with the place that remembers.

The outdoor work by the Weinbergers is a reflection of Venice. A Venetian sculpture is being produced that remains in Venice.

A selection of works can be seen in the pavilion exhibition space that address the relationship between nature and culture: *Untitled, 1976*, the body of which consists of a potato, i.e. the fruit of the earth, adorned with feathers which teach this fruit to fly — or also two flycatchers, another *Untitled, 1976*, arranged in the shape of a cross on which the flies from one summer adhere.

The flycatcher is framed and presented behind glass, i.e. it is surrounded by a frame and so separated from its 'natural' environment. It is a surreal object with a simultaneous suggestion of both the blasphemous and the archaic.

The early drawings, objects and sculptures in the exhibition space present themselves as companions, as artistic accompaniments that frequently touch, meet, come together, go apart, just as light often falls on dark mysterious 'corners'.

The works by Elke Krystufek, Dorit Margreiter, Franziska and Lois Weinberger are tied to the duration of the Biennale di Venezia 2009, and may only be experienced directly in their specific forms in Venice.

For the duration of the exhibition their installations inside and outside the pavilion transform the pavilion into a place of temporal and spatial memory.

1 The gaze as a membrane that is both image and sign is also a membrane that links the exploration into the intimate with the exploration of the inconsistent and split identity. Eye contact is a ritual of confrontation, whereby the physical distance and the time between the rituals opens a space of resonances.

2 During a conversation with Franziska & Lois Weinberger held in their studio on 6 April 2009 the author took the word *erinnernde* (remembering) for the word *rinnende* (flowing).

3 Excerpt from an interview with Johanna Schwanberg held at the Kunstmuseum Lentos in Linz on 24 February 2009, published in *Parnass Kunstmagazin*, issue 2/2009, May–August

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