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Vienna Interiorism

ESSAY

Is there such a thing?



Nadim Vardag, installation view, Galerie Georg Kargl, Vienna, 2012. On table: Astrid Wagner, *Untitled*, 2012, glazed ceramic, 16 × 10 × 14 cm (courtesy: the artist & Galerie Georg Kargl, Vienna)

Anyone who has seen work by young artists from Vienna in recent years cannot help noticing a certain recurrence of themes from design and interior décor. Time and

again, items of furniture, tables, chairs, sometimes shelves appear. As do pieces of embroidery. There are the walls, tables and stage sculptures built by Nadim Vardag out of 'E2' table frames based on a design by the architect Egon Eiermann. There are the chairs and benches often set out in the exhibitions of Benjamin Hirte. There are Verena Dengler's embroidered pictures and her steles with painted motifs from porcelain patterns. And finally, last year, at the Austrian Museum für angewandte Kunst/Gegenwartskunst (MAK), Simon Rees initiated a series of exhibitions titled *Sichtwechsel* (New Look), for which a number of young, Vienna-based artists – Dengler, Hirte, Kerstin von Gabain and Kathi Hofer – were invited to use the museum's collection. Hofer showed fake Gio Ponti chairs and simple shelving units.

So is there really such a thing as 'Vienna Interiorism', a continuing tradition of artistic engagement with furniture and interior design? And is there a specific Viennese interest in the dividing line between 'fine' and 'applied' art? Or is all this just a stereotypical (Berlin) view of the art scene in the Austrian capital?

Vardag's solo show at Galerie Georg Kargl in December 2012 featured several round table sculptures, some of them serving as plinths for the works of other invited artists, as well as wall modules and stage elements made out of the Eiermann table frames – standard items in almost every 'creative office' the length and breadth of the German-speaking world. For Vardag, using these tables is partly about the 'modular' quality of the design that uses just four braced elements, and partly about what the Eiermann table has come to epitomize: 'good design' in the classical modernist sense of plain understatement and functional minimalism.



Kathi Hofer, *Flowers*, 2009, and *Small Shelf*, 2012, installation view, MAK, Vienna, 2012 (courtesy: the artist, photograph: Tina Herzl)

It's this 'good design' look that Vardag's sculptures possess: flat, clean and functional. Although use value shines through now and again, it is always undermined by the way the frames are modified, often becoming supports for (often freestanding) wall

pieces (e.g. *untitled*, 2012). The ‘look’ of Minimalism – similarly clean and simple – is combined with the conventions of minimalist design. Both are ‘emptied out’ to leave ‘good exhibition design’. Sometimes, all this is contrasted with sumptuous, brightly coloured items from fashion label Missoni’s ‘Home’ collection: bathrobes, towels, rugs. The overall impression is an elegant but rather hard-nosed withholding: a wall, a table, that’s your lot.

Hirte’s exhibitions, too, often feature pieces of furniture and everyday domestic items. In several shows, he included the same stool sculpture: a conspicuously cobbled together standard model with its backrest sawn off, built out of two different chairs and with a seat cut to match Arne Jacobsen’s Ant chair (*untitled (stool)*, 2010). ‘I really only wanted to build a stool’, Hirte says when asked about the piece. Although his answer evinces a certain shoulder-shrugging inertia with regard to the latest developments – ‘in Berlin people use sneakers or PET bottles, in Vienna it’s still a chair’ – he does have a fairly plausible explanation for the use of simple seats: ‘In this city, you will certainly find a reaction against the omnipresence of the Baroque and the Catholic,’ he says. ‘It’s often meant as a minor affront. If there’s only a chair or a table, that’s simply less pretentious and loaded than what the Viennese usually want – like the omnipresence of Hermann Nitsch, for example. A chair has a simple snide humour to it, as if to say: “that’s all the food you’re getting”.’



Gelatin, *Roswitha*, 2011, mixed media, 55 × 56 × 58 cm (courtesy: Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna)

A generation earlier, this typically Viennese humour – typified by a slightly cruel denial – is found, amongst others, in the work of Heimo Zobernig. With Zobernig's works, Franz West's sofas and chairs, Gerwald Rockenschaub's early museum bench sculptures, Gelatin's sculptures roughly assembled out of old chairs, and Martin Beck's shifting display, it is possible to write the history of recent Austrian art by focusing on interiors. And (excepting certain of Gelatin's performances) this history stands clearly apart – in terms of both content and timing – from the standard narrative of Vienna as a city of transgressive physical performance, from Vienna Actionism to Valie Export to Elke Krystufek.

If in the 1970s West and Zobernig's work began dealing with turning the inside outwards, it did so without the taboo-breaking pathos of total physical presence. Instead of blood, guts, masturbation and breasts, their work dealt with a sublimated form of the parlour itself, with interior design elements like couches and chairs; with stages, walls and displays that turned the exhibition space into a prop-filled theatrical space. However, West and Zobernig dispensed early on with the utopian, world-improving gestures often associated with the stage sets and participatory sculptures of Jorge Pardo, Liam Gillick or Andrea Zittel, whose concerns came out of the Relational Aesthetics of the 1990s.

West's chairs and sofas would just be; his *Adaptives* (which he began in 1974) would be carried around for a while and then put down again. Both of these possessed an almost insolent directness that sometimes resulted in them actually becoming objects of everyday use. Likewise, Zobernig's stage sets and display designs since the 1980s serve as a mean functionalism marked more by ironic emptying than by hopeful anticipation of anything world-altering taking place on them. In material terms, Zobernig's work is shaped by cheap standardized elements, most famously the chipboard panels that the artist either leans against the wall or turns into tables, plinths, benches and simple shelving units. In conceptual terms, the focus is on a kind of deliberately lousy pragmatism: think economically, use the simplest means, use whatever comes to hand, then reorganize a bit, turn the bench into a plinth, the plinth into a bench, done. Minimalism as the art of minimum effort. Tried and tested elements could be kept and simply used again, arranged, positioned and placed to furnish the white cube.



Benjamin Hirte, *untitled (stool)*, 2010, combination of three chairs, 45 × 40 × 45 cm (courtesy: the artist & Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna)

With questions of the distinction between ‘applied’ (contractual) and ‘fine’ (freely practiced) art being discussed in the city, both Adolf Loos and the Wiener Werkstätte still cast long shadows. For her *craftivism* show in the *Sichtwechsel* series at MAK, for example, Hofer took her cue from Loos’s theories: ‘I was interested in the opposition of applied and fine’, she says, ‘less in terms of aesthetic and formal traditions and more in terms of an approach to my own practice’. While the Wiener Werkstätte of Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser propagated the complete penetration of all areas of life by art by applying the spirit of the total art work, Loos advocated the separation of art and life. A life that is supposed to become art contrasts here with an art that is supposed to serve life. The debate ignites along the line of distinguishability – the identification of different fields of responsibility. Loos had a positive, non-hierarchical understanding of the autonomy of craft, arguing that one could not expect every craftsman to become an artist. Every profession has a right to be appreciated on its own terms.

‘I found that interesting from today’s point of view,’ says Hofer. ‘At a time when creative work is spreading further and further into all areas of life, this makes the scope for self-exploitation ever greater, in the sense that “you don’t have to be able to do everything”, “you don’t have to achieve everything”.’ For her MAK exhibition, she had two sets of shelves made by the museum’s workshop that were then transferred to her own apartment as normal furniture after the show – literally taking them out

of circulation. ‘As well as the line between public and private space,’ she says, ‘I was also interested in the different roles: MAK was actually my client here, and I turned that around. There are always clients – even in the free practice of fine art.’

The question of applied art and its potential uses in fine art is also present in the work of Verena Dengler. She claims to be interested in craft to a certain extent. ‘I often make embroidered pieces, and I also use dyed wools in which the pattern is predetermined, like Hundertwasser wool based on motifs from pictures by Friedensreich Hundertwasser.’ In Dengler’s works, references to specifically Austrian applied art are hidden among a plethora of allusions: from social-democrat adult education programmes from 1950s and ’60s Vienna, to local retail chains like the Humanic shoe stores to Austrian pop culture. Some of her embroidered pictures, for example, feature a small ‘Art Deco’ logo (e.g. *Art Deco – Wiener Festwochen – 20er Haus – Arena Wien*, 2011). And in her *Fantastic Socialism* show at Vienna’s Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (mumok) in summer 2013, on and between freestanding display modules, she showed a series of plinths and steles painted with a grey-green spiral pattern – the trademark of the venerable Austrian ceramics company Gmundner (e.g. *Gmundner Keramik + Rosa & Grau*, 2012).



Heimo Zobernig, *Untitled*, 1993, mixed media, installation view, Kunsthaus Graz, 2013 (courtesy: Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna; photograph: Foto Archiv HZ)

None of this appears chic or overly safe in historical terms. ‘Modernism *per se* doesn’t interest me,’ Dengler says: ‘When an applied work is a hundred years old, it becomes precious again. Added to which, it’s common for women to attempt to distance themselves slightly from the art market via applied art. That’s not my thing.’

Dengler's references can be almost obscure, and certainly deeply embedded in a local culture that is hard for outsiders to decipher. 'The local is very important to me', she says. 'With no place and no history, one can easily be colonized and exploited. I was born and grew up here, but I have to achieve this sense of place for myself afresh, again and again. I don't want to be just "Viennese" – because if the local is viewed as authentic, that can be exploited. Some other kind of approach is required.'

Where does this leave the theory that specific local traditions in Vienna still prevail? 'I'm not sure whether this is really in the air in Vienna or whether it's possible to refer directly to the lingering echo of the Wiener Werkstätte,' says Hirte: 'The question would be whether this is somehow a series of coincidences.' Traditions are never something that are simply there, of course. They are made and passed on, by specific people, specific institutions. But that makes them neither 'authentic' nor 'endemic'. One can always play with them. And a city like Vienna – 'a theatre city' as Dengler calls it – may be especially well suited to such play. And perhaps it is precisely this notion of the city as stage that leads back to the question of the interior. Loos himself did not rigorously orchestrate only the interiors of houses; once in a while he made plans – albeit unrealized – for theatre buildings. A stage opens up a sort of two-sided 'Spielraum' – in German, a room to 'play' as well as to 'manoeuvre'. Things there are not burdened with an appeal to reality or authenticity. Art and life do not 'really' converge: they can only 'seem' to – since theatricality has overcome the real. Any home interior is also stage in its own right; all the more if it's located in an actual space for exhibiting art. On the stage of an exhibition space, one makes oneself comfortable, as if at home, living with others' gazes as if these were one's audience. On the stage of an exhibition, the artist seems to enact a life; still, it's impossible to fully merge with this role. In an art world where work and person are increasingly expected to be one and the same, staging private life is actually a form of resisting this very need. To reverse Ikea's German slogan: why 'live' when one can simply 'inhabit'?

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

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