

SPIKE

MISSION FAILED: THE VIENNA BIENNALE 2015

Review
by Max Henry

The first Vienna Biennale aims to combine art, design, and architecture to generate creative ideas and artistic projects that help improve the world's problems. Maybe it wants too much. Our author puzzles over the problems of the event itself.

Another day another biennial. Welcome to Vienna.

Spearheaded by the MAK as a hybrid biennial model focused on a cross section of interdisciplinary practices, it simply doesn't work. Word on the street from observers and artists alike was a dismal recognition of its shortfalls and confused subcategories. Vienna has money, an energetic scene, brutally savvy new generational blood, and cosmopolitan history to offer. Still, the city can't seem to get the full-on thrust of contemporary art that resonates with the *now*.



Launched on a lovely summer evening, the biennial, which is initiated by Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Director of the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art (MAK), includes four participating curators and six exhibition projects in venues like Kunsthalle Wien, the University of Applied Arts, and the Architekturzentrum. MAK is the focal point where architecture, design, and contemporary art clash in an expo-fair-like installation. Thematically, its catch phrases are “Ideas for Change” and “Digital Modernity”. Politically correct U.N. concepts such as “sustainability” hold sway. Wall-papered slogan texts with wall-mounted video monitors “educate” the audience on the currents of urbanism. On offer are: “Uneven Growth, Tactical Urbanism for Expanding Megacities” and “2051: Smart Life in the City”. These may as well be chamber of commerce promos. Topics of interest cover problem solving around Lagos’s water shortage through public/private initiatives, to post-urban housing development along the Bosphorus in Turkey. A convincing, well-meaning infomercial by Varanda Products Brazil “offers a range of products dedicated to smart and economic everyday solutions”. Gee whiz!

In the main atrium space curated by Maria Lind, “Future Light” is a sterile hang of contemporary art positions that are neither here nor there. Topographic ink drawings on silkscreen prints by Philippe Parreno get washed out in the mix. A 1782 portrait of the sugar plantation and slave owner William Beckford is partially covered in black ink smears to obfuscate the appropriated archival portrait. This cheap gesture of negation by Matias Faldbakken amounts to a pseudo-anarchism of low-to-no impact.

WHEN THE LOFTY THEMES OF THE EXHIBITION ARE IN
NEED OF SUCH A TRANSFORMING EUREKA MOMENT TO
PULL THE PARTS TOGETHER, IT NEVER ARRIVES.

The trouble lies partly in the choice to bracket contemporary art with slick artless design and architecture presentations. They don’t make good bedfellows here. MAK doesn’t seem to trust that a full-on art show can elaborate its mandate for interdisciplinary links, and that the art of now has license to incorporate strategies of design and architecture. Meanwhile, architecture and design rarely make it to the level of high art as they remain beholden to municipalities, developers, and, ultimately, the end product.

For the next iteration of the Vienna Biennale, the institution might consider giving more curatorial trust and leeway to the artists themselves. Installed high above the fray, Haegue Yang’s well-traveled *Escaping Transparency* (2011) anchors and transforms the actual space with its large-scale venetian blind and rack structure. Ditto for Amalia Pica. Her *Venn Diagrams (Under the Spotlight)* (2011) use a pair of theatrical spotlights to beautifully allegorize the absurdity of the curricular ban on set theory by the Argentinian military dictatorship in the 1970s.

Exceptional dynamics such as this are wanting here. If you aim to underscore interdisciplinary hybridity on a high level, where are the likes of Liam Gillick, Marjetica Potrč, or the rising young Kosovo artist Flaka Haliti, for that matter? What about the late Austrian artist Ferdinand Penker, who under-the-radar produced a significant body of paintings that engage architectural space to great effect? If the curators even dared to select painting related to their premise, an easy choice would be Sarah Morris.

In the cellar space, another segment of the exhibition, “24/7”, tried to close the gap in thematic content regarding its premise of labor, work, and action. The Marxist cliché is so rampant in the art world that it has become trite; a structural or theoretical crutch. Capitalism is an easy target so long as academia’s money keeps rolling in for Marxist studies!

A wall text from Ulrich Nausner (*Limitation*, 2015) is just another tired rehash of 60s concept art. Mahony contributes the sophomoric *We Are the World* (2010): a karaoke rendition of the syrupy politically-correct pop song plays at a low decibel while you look at a miniature shipping container marooned in the middle of a watery black disk. Cute.

Verena Dengler gets more directly to the point with her labor-intensive needlepoint embroidery (*Sponsors*, 2001-2014). Her mash-up of cultural signifiers is suggestive of slacker leisure, branding, and multi-tasking. A hermetic counterpoint to all things digital, the analog materiality synchronizes the body and its relationship to time. Her work corresponds to Harm van den Dorpel’s screensaver *Event Listeners* (2015). Consider that algorithms hold sway in the movement of global capital and that automation makes certain kinds of human labor obsolete. Here, human thought (via text) and artificial image combine in an automated structure resembling the stalks of a plant.

For the most cohesive exhibition of the Vienna Biennale, walk upstairs to view “Mapping Bucharest: Art, Memory, and Revolution 1916-2016”. A host of all things Romanian, classic works tell the turbulent story of the country’s history up to the present day. Ion Grigorescu, Dan Perjovschi, Mircea Cantor, et.al, always make for a strong line-up and it’s worth revisiting their narratives. The criticism of this capstone of the biennial doesn’t lie in the choice of artists or the caliber of selections, but in the terrain itself. Romania is such a well-trodden topic in this region that a thematic show here is as safe a choice as it gets. This inclusion doesn’t seem to add anything new or exciting to a biennial that could potentially anchor middle-European discourse in the coming years. Thus, the biennial is perversely out of step with its mission of “Ideas for Change”; and ought to get over its Cold War hangover.