Alfred Schmeller

The Museum as a Flashpoint

In 1969, Alfred Schmeller became the director of the Museum of the 20th Century, today's mumok, and stayed in the post until 1979. Under the sign of the social upheavals of the 1960s, he saw the challenge for his tenure in "decreasing the distance between people and art," and he shaped the museum's collection and its exhibition programs with an expanded understanding of what art can be. Before taking up this new role, he had already enjoyed a diverse career. In the ART CLUB, the most important art association of the postwar years with an Austrian section, he had been a major contributor to rebuilding the Austrian art scene after 1945. As a critic for the *Kurier* daily newspaper and the state art restorer for the Burgenland he had pursued a wide variety of work in which contemporary art was always a primary focus.

In Austria the political climate had also changed. In 1970 the Social Democrats under Bruno Kreisky won the national elections. The minister for education and art, Fred Sinowatz, had a broad understanding of culture and in the following years his aim was to break down barriers that stood in the way of more people becoming "culturally independent." For Schmeller it was important to give the museum a new profile, and he wanted it to be a "flashpoint"—unconventional and interdisciplinary, leaving the artistic ivory tower in favor of a radically open institution. Schmeller invited the Wiener Festwochen to hold the Arena avant-garde festival in the museum, and he wanted to attract a wider audience by means of dance, theater, fashion shows, and music. By the end of his first year visitor numbers had already more than doubled. Some of the exhibitions of Schmeller's era are still seen as milestones in Vienna's art history, such as the 1972 The "Vienna School of Fantastic Realism," a great success in terms of numbers of visitors. Schmeller quickly recognized the outstanding importance of thematic and curated exhibitions, and he brought shows like Harald Szeemann's legendary "Bachelor Machines" (1977) and "Monte Verità – Mountain of Truth" (1979) to Vienna.

Schmeller also laid great store on art education. He introduced the first education program for children to the museum, thus founding the successful art education work of today's mumok. He wrote a flyer himself, entitled *adolf loos for young people*, and he created interactive scenarios for children like the *Beethoven Tower*, which we reinterpret in this exhibition as an education medium. One of Schmeller's most significant exhibitions was the 1970 show "Live", presenting Haus-Rucker-Co, the young architects and artists Laurids Ortner, Klaus Pinter, and Günther Zamp Kelp. The placed their *Giant Billiard* right in the middle of the museum—a plastic island with three enormous balls that visitors could play with. Performative and participative elements were thus brought into the museum in an attempt to break down the barriers between art and everyday life. Schmeller advertised this exhibition with the slogan "The Prater is closed. Come to the museum!" All of this was, and still is, quite unlike the classical contemplation of art, so that visitors to the museum enter shaky ground—quite literally in the case of the *Giant Billiard*. This playful form of interaction with the fine arts was very successful, and Haus-Rucker-Co's *Giant Billiard,* which has been documented by well-known photographers like Cora Pongracz and Peter Baum, went on an international tour.

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The profile of a museum is shaped by how its collection policy changes over the years. After the founding of the Museum of Modern Art and the initiation of a collection under the first director Werner Hofmann, the era of Alfred Schmeller (1969 to 1979) saw a major new direction. Schmeller's vision can be best characterized in his idea of the "museum as a flashpoint." He was interested in figurative art, which was not always in line with the taste of the time. This included contemporary interpretations of surrealism, and also a number of outsiders and newcomers. Schmeller discovered the Chicago Imagists, for example, a loose group of artists who had studied at the Chicago Art School and were influenced by surrealism, art brut, and pop aesthetics and comics, and who have gained new recognition in recent years. Their figurative painting focused on the grotesque and a world outside of conventions, unimpressed by the trends that were dictated by the New York art scene.

Schmeller also paved the way for many Austrian artists, for example the Realities group of figurative and socially critical painters consisting of Wolfgang Herzig, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Martha Jungwirth, Peter Pongratz, Franz Ringel, and Robert Zeppel-Sperl. He also collected contemporary Austrian artists like Oswald Oberhuber, Hans Hollein, Walter Pichler, Friederike Pezold, and Wolfgang Ernst. The finances he had at his disposal were not great, but Schmeller attempted to expand the museum's collection of classical modernism, which had been a main focus of his predecessor. To Hofmann's collection of sculptures, he added works by Andreas Urteil and Erwin Thorn. He also purchased smaller groups of works, such as drawings and prints by the Haus-Rucker-Co group of architects and artists, whose *Giant Billiard* from the exhibition "Live" (1970) is recreated in this exhibition on Level -2. Schmeller was the first to present this group, which in 1970 consisted of Laurids Ortner, Klaus Pinter, and Günther Zamp Kelp, in a museum. One year later Manfred Ortner joined the group, and later he and his brother working as Ortner&Ortner designed the mumok building in the MuseumsQuartier.

The design of this exhibition is a very broad reference to Schmeller's own exhibition about the architect Adolf Loos, which was shown in 1970 in one version for adults and another for children. In "adolf loos for young people" a giant model of Loos's *House Moller* (1928) was shown in the middle of the gallery, surrounded by photographs and models from the museum's collection. Schmeller saw a "teacher of people" in Loos, who was "more than an architect" and created a truly fundamental culture of building. In this sense, Schmeller wanted his exhibition to combine old and new in a playful fashion that overcomes barriers and makes access easy. In their exhibition design Eva Chytilek and Jakob Neulinger have taken note of this, and they have integrated elements from the work of Loos, including grid structures, long vistas, niches, installations and protrusions, and haptic surfaces.

Haus-Rucker-Co

(Laurids Ortner, Klaus Pinter, Günter Zamp Kelp)
Riesenbillard | *Giant Billiard*, 1970

Rejection of the social conservatism of the postwar years and its customary role definitions was reflected in far-reaching artist ruptures. In architecture, traditional rationalism in the spirit of the Bauhaus was challenged, and new experimental forms of living and everyday experience were tried out.

The 1960s enthusiasm for progress, which was further incited by the mass media's frenzied dissemination of man landing on the moon, was expressed in a new preference for industrial materials. But the new relationship between the individual and the environment in an increasingly technological world was also seen to be problematic. "Physically and mentally ill, he lives like a beggar in a fairy-tale castle," wrote Haus-Rucker-Co about the human condition in the modern world.

In 1967 the architects Laurids Ortner and Günter Zamp Kelp and the painter Klaus Pinter founded Haus-Rucker-Co in Vienna. The name of this "community of architects and artists" was programmatic. It referred to the Austrian Hausruck mountains and stood both for the place of origin of the group's members and for a move away from old houses to new ones. The aims of this young generation of architects were all about transforming society. With their experimental and visionary designs, they advocated architecture that was intended to do justice to both technological progress and alternative ways of life. In the early days, Haus-Rucker-Co developed a utopian view of architecture in the *Mind Expander* project, itself drawing on Pop art and the Fluxus movement. Actions in public space aimed to activate people to participate and to create new forms of perception and consciousness. Using unconventional techniques and materials, Haus-Rucker-Co made installations and spaces and undertook experiments, placing the sensations of the individual at the center of their work.

The *Giant Billiard* of 1970 was a spectacular action as part of the "Live" exhibition at the Museum of the 20th Century. An enormous airbed was placed in the center of the main gallery, fenced off like a boxing ring, upon it three large balls inviting people to interact. Nearby objects from the *Mind-Expanding-Program* were displayed, and three rooms were furnished for the architects to live in under public view for the duration of the exhibition. The show attracted a lot of media attention and became Haus-Rucker-Co's best-known and most influential public action. After Vienna, it was shown in New York. The group's ideas for social change were thus no longer familiar only to a small circle of art aficionados, but to a much broader audience—exactly as the new director of the Museum of the 20th Century, Alfred Schmeller, wished. In our reconstruction at mumok we also invite visitors to participate and to experience the new ideas and aspirations for social change in the interactive art of the 1960s.

Realities and Chicago Imagists

Alfred Schmeller and the Realisms of the 1970s

In May 1968, a time of political upheaval throughout Europe, the exhibition “Realities” was held at the Vienna Secession, showing works by Wolfgang Herzig, Martha Jungwirth, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Peter Pongratz, Franz Ringel, and Robert Zeppel-Sperl, all representing a new direction in Austrian postwar painting. The title of this exhibition became the name for this loose grouping of artists, which was also associated with Heinz Stangl, Peter Sengl, and Karl Anton Fleck. Their painting was characterized by a focus on the artist’s craft, pop elements, references to surrealism, comics, children’s’ drawings, and a free and bright alternative way of life with an interest in sexuality and psychology. In spite of neo-avant-garde aspirations in performance and the new media at the time, the artists of the Realities stuck to painting: “The hand-painted reality of these pictures is a world of its own,” said art historian Otto Breicha. With their satirical and socially critical imaginative realism, these artists presented a worldview shaped by private ideas and by the easygoing ways of life and idealism of the 1960s and early 1970s. The later director of the Museum of the 20th Century, Alfred Schmeller, called these artists “painting crocodiles” in his review of the exhibition: “naive, impulsive, vital, easygoing, full of color, these croco provos are riding on the broomstick of reality.”

Alfred Schmeller’s collecting policy focused particularly on realist and social critical art, as well as expanding the classical modernism collection that had been a priority of his predecessor Werner Hofmann. Like the Realities in Austria, in the mid-1960s the Chicago Imagists had begun in the USA to cast an alternative eye on American daily life, far away from the predominant art center of New York. Their motifs refer to ethnical popular art, comics, and graffiti. They take up the vulgar and sexist allusions of consumer culture, dirty slang, strange and offensive ideas from advertising, flyers, or graffiti. Nonetheless the works of Art Green, Philip Hanson, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Christina Ramberg, Karl Wirsum, Ray Yoshida, and other artists from the group are all very different. Like the Realities artists in Austria, they ask as to the “other” in art—gender relations, pop culture, the self-taught, and artisanship.

How Can Modern Art Be Best Explained To Children?

Alfred Schmeller as an Art Educator and His “Education Department”

Right from the day he became director of mumok, Alfred Schmeller wanted to attract all kinds of people into the museum. Like his predecessor, founder director Werner Hofmann, he saw the significance of a non-hierarchical relationship between the museum and its visitors. He therefore replaced the usual guided tours for adults, which he described as no better than “herding people through like sheep” with conversations and discussions. The aim was to transform the “passive observer” into an “active co-player.” Schmeller held special seminars to train his art education team so as best to implement his progressive approach in practice. He was also the first to open up the museum to children, beginning with a painting studio in spring 1970. There followed invitations to children to „Children Paint, Draw, and Make Things in the 20er Haus“ between December 1970 and January 1971. During this period, the museum displayed works by children from the painting and drawing courses of the Vienna State Youth Office and also set up several “stations” where children could do their own creative work. This action attracted 6,000 visitors and was a great success. From then on, there were regular children’s painting days on Sundays, where a temporary studio area was placed in the middle of one of the museum’s galleries.

During the same winter, the special exhibition “adolf loos for young people” was shown. To mark the hundredth birthday of the architect, Schmeller curated an exhibition on Loos which included this special version for children, with a children’s museum gallery brochure he even wrote himself. He wanted to inspire children to go through the exhibition independently and to discover the works and contents for themselves. His selection of works also included works by school children on the subject. A class from the Mattersburg grammar school built a large model of Adolf Loos’s *Haus Moller* (1928) and presented audio and film recordings that they had made when visiting buildings by Loos on school trips.

A newly founded education department offered interdisciplinary educational events like puppet shows, theater, music, and literature. Schmeller asked sponsors to support these projects, and he was also assisted by art education consultants. As a result, the art education program at the 20er Haus reflected the educational philosophies of the period. Alfred Schmeller took children and young people seriously as museum visitors, and he created visible opportunities for participation for them. In this, he achieved his own goal of “explaining modern art to children.”

The *Beethoven Tower*, a free-standing artistic installation made in 1971, was planned as an environment designed by children. This three-meter steel scaffolding was designed as a space for the presentation of works and objects by young museum visitors. Here it becomes an inspiration and a platform for an art education program. Entirely in Schmeller’s sense, visitors can actively try out their own ideas and then present them. The materials can be reshaped again and again to create new forms within this framework.