

# Vienna's Off Spaces – A Vibrant Scene

**Ursula Maria Probst**

Vienna's off space scene is currently experiencing a veritable boom. Its artistic interventions have a most stimulating impact on the city's cultural dynamics. All the time there are new temporary art spaces emerging. With names like *Pro Choice*, *clubblumen* (club flowers), *Bell Street Project*, *Saprophyt*, or *Ve:sch* they allude to socio-political aspects of art practices respectively the dissolution of conventional notions of art in their own participation in the construction of urban sociotopes. Even though the term "off space" underwent significant re-codings since the 1970s, from illegal, subversive squatting projects to communally subsidized temporary spaces, the open non-profit structures of off spaces still have the advantage of greater flexibility compared to the utilitarian logic of established institutions.

Admittedly, Vienna is not half as attractive as Berlin for young visual artists—rents are high and, unlike New York or London, Vienna does not yet have the reputation of a place-to-be on the international scene. However, the city's profile as an attractive place for art fairs like the *Vienna Artweek* has been diligently improved in recent years. Irrespective of such cultural-economic master plans, the brisk activities of the off space scene, which fills empty premises, basements, flats, factories, administrative buildings or market places throughout the city demonstrate the city's artistic potential as well as its demand for such exhibition sites. Artist Mario Grubisic's concept for the *ViennaBiennale*, which he organized in 2006 and 2008, was based on the open structures of these off spaces. In 2008 the *ViennaBiennale* took place at off space venues like *Schauplatz* gallery in Leopoldstadt or *Hundsturm* on the other side of the city, places that usually fail attract little international attention.

Unlike established art institutions and their bloated working procedures, which depend on subsidies, sponsors, quotas, and the economic exchange system of galleries and the art market, non-commercial projects are mostly based on the initiatives of artist, architects, or freelance curators. As non-profit organizations they are capable of a level of spontaneity and improvisation often lacking in the sedate apparatus of institutions. While galleries concentrate in central parts of the city, off spaces are dispersed and singular. They often emerge from existing studio collectives or react to vacancies on short notice.

Contrary to Berlin or New York, where there is a long tradition of inexpensively using for temporary art sites empty buildings or urban waste land without much bureaucratic hassle, in Vienna such strategies for acquiring space only in the last three years have been put into practice on a large scale. These projects avoid the traps of gentrification that so often endangered their international predecessors. Temporary use of facilities has the advantage that rents are usually significantly lower and thus affordable for the short term. Even in cases where some communal or state subsidies are granted for these projects, the organizers mostly work for free or only very little remuneration. These project spaces differ from venture businesses like galleries in that here the artists themselves are responsible for set-up and organizing, for public relations and networking. Off space artists are required to multitask in a team with flat hierarchies. Their motivations are a dedicated just-do-it mentality, a wish to be

involved in the shaping of artistic values and to counter the drastic devaluation of relevant notions of art by the art market, as well as a desire to intensify interventionist art, gender art, and critique of institutions. The down-side of this precarious, unpaid cultural work is that due to economic exhaustion off spaces often expire after two or three years. Precarious living conditions and self-exploitation accompany off space work. Scrapped subsidies, scarce anyway and hardly enough to pay the rent, may thus well result in the termination of an off space. There are no guarantees for subsidies once given and even after perennial successful organizing subsidies may be cancelled with the argument that these off spaces become too established. Furthermore, a particular off space may be integrated into the existing gallery system, as was the case for Dana Charkasi, or for Andreas Huber, the manager of the project space *Offspace*.

Though off spaces rarely deal with political questions explicitly, they usher in a paradigm shift in exhibition practices through interventionist activity, site-specific art that infiltrates the urban exterior, through their social vibrancy as well as through a critique of production conditions and an urban public. The venues of off spaces are frequently left unchanged. Artistic interventions often incorporate these sites' earlier functions and make use of their location on main roads and thoroughfares.

Artists Christoph Holzeis, Luisa Kasalicky, Birgit Knoechl, and Rainer Spangl, who run off space *Swingr—Raum auf Zeit*, have organized sixty exhibitions from 2006 till 2008. In the case of *Swingr*, the incentive to create an artist run space came from a need for a show room, and the opportunity to rent a space next to the artists' studio. *Swingr* presents itself as a production site as well as an experimental art lab when it celebrates the closing of one exhibition and the opening of the next exhibition on the same night. For more than five years, off space *Auto* has been curated in a basement by artists Gerald Grestenberger, Jacob Lena Knebl, and Bruce La Mongo. Here, the main objective was to give visibility to still marginalised questions of transsexuality and gender discourse.

Art projects like *unORTung* or *ZimmerKücheKabinett* act at short notice and occupy flats and salesrooms that are vacant for only two to seven days. An apartment in Kaiserstraße, a factory building on Ottakring, a market on the outskirts of Vienna that has been vacant for ten years, and a patio cafe in Vienna's leisure district Donauinsel have already been venues for the project series *unORTung* organized by artists Andrea Maria Krenn and Veronika Barnas. Their chosen word *unORTung* alludes to the practice of artistically marking sites that have been ignored by city development. The focus is on spaces that lie decidedly outside the established art world. This strategy has also been adhered to by the exhibition series *Space Invasion*, which ran from 2006 until 2008.

*Bell Street Project Space* in Vienna's currently hip second district is the result of an initiative by artists Marita Fraser and Alex Lawler and their international networking. The recourse to key episodes from modernity and modernism as a working principle of engaged artists has through minimalist interventions created spatial intersections and passages in recent years. A small venue





1



2



3



4



5



6



7

with a shop window in an alleyway ensures a lively exchange with the urban setting. Random passers-by are turned into art consumers.

Artist Flora Neuwirth defines her project space *clubblumen* as a utopic enterprise, a social sculpture, where spaces of art and spaces of everyday life mingle. *Clubblumen* is designed as a social sculpture, a performative installation rather than as an exhibition site, where, during opening hours, a dish of the day may be exchanged for a donation, drinks are available at self-service, and art magazines are on display. The location, a former florist shop, has been left in its former condition. The only piece of furniture is a transportable “kitchen subject.” A diverse program consists of events like film screenings, lectures, performances, and *clubblumen*’s own ‘iTuned-by’ track. Warhol’s factory, Kippenberger’s office, and Gordon-Matta Clark’s food project are forerunners in this process of disturbing the art market by social activism. Compared to the adjacent fourth district, where Schiefmühlengasse, one of Vienna’s gallery districts, is located, art in the fifth district spaces are sparse. Many artists live here, however. This points to another relevant aspect: artists realize their projects in close vicinity to where they live, and thus create an open infrastructure of social and artistic exchange—a community.

The projects *Ve:sch* and *Saprophyt* highlight the figure of the ‘prosumer,’ an art consumer or art collector who becomes active and contributes to production networks by offering his or her space for free or only a little fee. *Saprophyt*, a location managed by artists Barbara Kapusta and Stephan Lugbauer, is itself an experiment that is supposed to result in a social sculpture. An empty, so far unused room, is taken as a starting point for architect Thomas Osterwinter’s intervention by the means of light. Other artists, who will exhibit their work at *Saprophyt* in the future, are to comment on their predecessors. An exchange

program with off spaces from Mexico is integrated into the concept. *Pro Choice*, an art space run by Lucie Stahl, Annette Südbeck, and Will Benedict, focuses on an international program. One of its objectives is to act spontaneously and free, by which *Pro Choice* distinguishes itself from established institutions. Another objective, this one alluded to by the name taken from political activism, is to instigate controversial discussions. However, a proximity to art institutions and galleries is intended not only by *Pro Choice*’s first district location. Galleries like *Krinzinger Projekte* and *Georg Kargl Box* have already taken up the concept of Sub-spaces as a vibrant platform.

The project *Open Space* defines itself as a center for transnational art projects connecting different regions and thus disputing any kind of marginalization often associated with off spaces. At times, initiator and director Gülsen Bal curates exhibitions herself, and she also invites international projects from Crazy Kuratur Juraj Carny to Daphne Dragona. *Open Space* especially pushes interdisciplinary collaborations between international artists, curators, critics and cultural producers that reflect the effects and tendencies of the EU enlargement. Here, once more, off spaces incite a debate on the effects of geographic, social and cultural conditions on identity and identification.

The fact that BEWAG Foundation—after its bankruptcy and the subsequent change of the executive board of BEWAG Bank with resulting budgetary consequences—broadened its definition of art to include a space that makes use of off space strategies, reveals the structural change that the lively activities of Vienna’s off space scene have effected in the city’s art milieu. The term ‘off space’ has turned increasingly into a positive feature denoting flexible, inexpensive exhibition activities. Opposed to a logic of hype and mandatory up-to-date-ness, the off space scene has rather become interested in generating sociotopes, the emergence of which is intensified by regional and international networking. There still is a strong desire to learn how artistic production may effect social change. Thus, in spite of the various attempts at appropriation, off space strategies still have a reputation of autonomy and counter culture.



Preceding page:  
*Autonomous Acts, Part 2: Camouflage of a Mannequin, Temporary Intervention, 2008.*  
Photo: John Miller/Richard Hoeck

Facing page:  
1 - Axel Koschier, *orst Skoff und die Denkarbeit 2008*, Installation. Installation view: Bellstreet Project Space, 2008. photo: Marita Fraser  
2 - Sebastian Freytag, *Error*, 2008, Installation. Installation view: Bellstreet Project Space, 2008. Photo: Marita Fraser  
3 - Self-portrait by Bernhard Cella, founder of *Salon für Kunstbuch* [www.salon-fuer-kunstbuch.at](http://www.salon-fuer-kunstbuch.at)  
4, and next page - Thomas Osterwinter, *Untitled*, 2008, Installation. Installation view: *Saprophyt*. Photo: Stephan Lugbauer  
On this page, left: 5, 6, 7 - *Pro Choice*, Projectroom, 2008.  
Foto: Lucie Stahl  
8 - *Salon für Kunstbuch*. Photo: Alena Boika



8



<http://www.dreizehnzwei.net/>  
<http://okto.tv/kit/>  
<http://www.openspace-zkp.org/>  
<http://www.pipelinevienna.org/>  
<http://www.plattformquelle.org/>  
<http://www.salonamhof.com/>  
<http://www.sixpack-hansen.at/>  
<http://www.sodaart.at/>  
<http://www.spaceinvasion.at/>  
<http://www.swingr.be.tt/>  
<http://www.unortnung.net/>  
<http://www.tobecontinued.at/>  
<http://www.intopos.com/>  
<http://www.fluc.at/>  
<http://www.wuk.at/kunsthalle/>  
<http://www.saprophyt.net/>  
<http://www.sezessionwichtelgasse.net>  
<http://www.salon-fuer-kunstabuch.at/salon/start>  
<http://www.fensterc.at>



# URBANPLAY

## VIENNA AND ART IN PUBLIC SPACE

**Ursula Maria Probst**

**T**he urban display offered by the modern western city tends to function as a monitored play-scape, a stage-set for the globalized iconography of capitalism. We can counteract this abrupt “instant urbanism,” one whose urban typology and rapid consumability evince striking parallels with the structure of shopping malls or theme parks, with the situative urbanism of artistic interventions in public space. What kinds of play spaces or open spaces constitute a counterweight to (over)staged and worn-out market economy strategies—“entertainment cities”—that are meant to rationalize away complex cultural processes? This question can be phrased another way: to what extent do artistic interventions, as case studies of thoroughly commercialized urban spaces, actually function as socio-political glue? If we look at Vienna from the perspective of art in the public space, what we encounter is an urban surface: streets, pedestrian zones, arcades, subway stations, squares, public parks, and storefronts. It is a space that fulfills transit, economic, social, and political functions as well as community interests, and, although openly accessible, it is not openly available. Artistic genres such as public art or Internet art, which adhere to an expanded definition of art, not only provide new avenues of exposure to the delimitation of media or institutional conditions, but also alter our definitions and perceptions of the public space.

**I**n their social installation *ValYou* (2007), artists Susanne Schuda and Florian Schmeiser explore the praxis of marketing firms and their staging of the social as service contract. The title *ValYou* derives from software designed to optimize database-supported enterprise processes. *ValYou* is an artistic intervention that takes place both as website and as boxing-ring shaped installation built on sand, intruding into the urban city-space. Actors from the troupe “The English Lovers” were commissioned for performances, engaging passersby along

heavily frequented shopping streets in Vienna in conversations that employed the communicative evaluative strategies of commercial firms. Such methods depend upon social, personal contact with potential clients as the first step in assembling a bid for a service contract. During the performance, passersby were asked to step into the boxing ring bathed in spotlight, to be surveyed on how they would rate their social value on a scale of one to ten. The most common result for this self-evaluation tended to be around two on the value scale, based on social criteria. In its staging of the social, *ValYou* functions as social sculpture in the public space, satirizing marketable corporate strategies based on emotional and social stimuli.

**R**ather than systems of social value, the project *G. S. A. - Vienna Security Days* (2008) interrogates the security economy. Developed to coincide with World Security Days as a partnership between Global Security Alliance and KÖR (Kunst im öffentlichen Raum, or Art in Public Space), the security policy intervention *G.S.A. - Vienna Security Days* asked the rhetorical question: “Are you secure?” (“Sind Sie sicher?”) “Kunst gegen Terror” (“Art against Terror”) is not only a response to systems of political surveillance and menacing paranoid phantasms; it also responds to the new security economy that artistic strategies are already exploiting. A series of psycho-geographic interventions were planned as politically symbolic punctuation: fleets of black helicopter shadows were to be spray-painted on sidewalks throughout the city, and were meant to be visible from space via Google Earth. The project could not be realized: approval for this artistic intervention was denied by the authorities, on the grounds that it would constitute too great a security risk. To coincide with the project, Konrad Becker, an artist and activist from Public Netbase, organized the panel, *G. S. A. Forum: the New Security Culture*, where the need for a conceptual clarification of cultural security policy and an appraisal of subjective security was discussed.



**T**he Russian media theorist Lev Manovich has called the reality space that surrounds us, one increasingly charged and permeated with digital information, as “augmented space.” Mobile communication devices allow us to exist simultaneously in both the real world and in digital data space. This is where shifts in our cognitive and social structures and habits enter the picture. How do these technologies, which allow us to log on to the datastream at almost any time or any place, alter our perception of such spaces and of our own behavior? This question is pursued by the artist Johannes Vogl in his intervention *Funkloch* (Dead Zone, 2009), in which he tries undo this fact. A man-made “dead zone” with a diameter of 30 meters was created using a mobile radio jammer that blocked radio waves of all kinds, creating a kind of “white noise.” A debate over ownership of the public space followed, which moved this installation into a legal gray zone. Artistic actions and interventions in the urban space make for new audiences, which then can critically interrogate the political sovereignty of a democratic glossary of values infiltrated by neoliberal economies. A plethora of interest groups—cultural, social, political, each with its own demands on the use of urban space—makes for potential conflict.

**B**asic rights such as freedom of expression, use of public space, areas for posturing on behalf of various cultural initiatives are all being forced into illegality by the tendency toward commercial monopolization. The suspension of civil rights, the decrease in individual freedoms, and the sharpening dialectic between justice and life are symptoms of a state of emergency that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has diagnosed as the permanent condition of our political affairs, and which he has characterized as a feature of the globalization of neoliberalism.

**V**ienna in the 1990s underwent a process described by Graeme Evans in his “Cultural Planning: An Urban Renaissance?” (2001): a boom in the concept of culture as image factor. Museums more than ever serve as flagships for tourism, and biennials expand cluster-like into the public space—to say nothing of the growing competitiveness among European cultural capitals, with their increasing interest in programs and projects that take place in the urban outdoors. Projects of such ambition not only tend toward the promotion of urban space as cultural showcase, hence playing a role in the structural procedures of urban renewal, but also produce an urban branding that is useful both culturally and political-economically. Vienna’s profile as venue for festivals is increasingly prominent, as the program schedule of the highly subsidized Wiener Festwochen “Into the City” shows.

**O**ver the years innovative art projects, such as Soho in Ottakring, have emerged along the urban periphery and in the public space, and in 2009 their permanent structures were temporarily put to use by the festival, for advertising purposes, relying on hip counterculture and immigrant-community musical genres. The rhetoric of transnational everyday life in the multicultural city, exploited once again by the publicity machine, nevertheless ignores the fact that within the city’s sociographies such a mixture of nationalities and ethnicities is still out of sync with the socio-political or city planning response. There are cultural practices that test the bounds of the play space of tolerance and acceptance as they are lived.

**T**he danger that public space will be treated as a readymade, which is currently being partially realized by city planners and architects with joint projects around the redesigned Nordbahnhof on the Wiener Praterstern, is being counteracted by Kunst im öffentlichen Raum (art in open space), so that the public square might be understood not as “tableau” but rather as zone of activity or contact area for urban architecture and urban design. The art and music club Fluc, on the Wiener Praterstern, is one example: operated by the artists Martin Wagner, Joachim and Sabine Bock, the Fluc and the Fluc\_Wanne consist of an L-shaped container ensemble that has been transformed into a concert and dance floor flanking the outlet of a pedestrian walkway, serving as a venue for art, performance, sound, and club production. Dubbed by its architect Klaus Stattmann as “parcour accidental,” the Fluc has turned against the trend toward over-organized social engineering that has increasingly concentrated on the monitoring of the urban. All these permanent encroachments, spatial interventions, expansions, and extensions across the terminal square that runs from the front of the Fluc containers to the Wiener Nordbahnhof (itself recently revitalized in the manner of a shopping mall), or the artwork on the outer facades in the public space, constitute everyday praxis in Fluc. Female Obsession’s art action, the aluminum-foil textual installation *Exzess. Six Seconds To Read This Sentence* (2006), which ran along the glass façade of Fluc, interrogated such moments of perambulation. An exhibit called “Local Strategies - Urban Signs” (2008), which took place on the square in front of the Fluc, with installations and sound interventions from David Moises, Michael Gumhold, Anna Artaker, Lucie Stahl, Stefan Sandner, Boris Ondreicka, or Christian



Egger, took this position against the city as space for punctuation or typesetting. Sonia Leimer’s *Ohne Titel* (Untitled, 2008) served as a temporary installation at the interface between language and architecture, seizing the opportunity for direct communication. The typeface of her textual installation *BETON, STAHL, GLAS*, mounted in front of the Nordbahnhof on the Wiener Praterstern, borrowed the look of rental advertising signage, offering, tautologically, a subtle riposte to it.

**K**unst im öffentlichen Raum has been a central hub in Vienna since 2004, subsidizing projects in the public space, and sponsoring international artists such as Ken Lum and Joep van Lishout and projects such as *Wellness Skull* (2008). This program has been realized through an underwriting scheme that gathers allocations from a number of community departments (culture, housing, and urban planning) and apportions them not to structured projects that have been earmarked as “Kunst am Bau” (Art Under Construction), but to independent projects in the urban space. This union of urban renewal and temporary intervention is the driving force behind a number of projects currently being realized in Vienna. Developments in city planning and urbanographies can be co-designed even in their planning stages, and a creative artistic instrument for perceiving the city as a mesh of relationships between different experiential spaces can be co-produced.

**K**unst im öffentlichen Raum interventions necessarily respond differently to functional and content-related questions, local conditions, or historical connections and displacements than does art in the institutional space. Kunst im öffentlichen Raum projects uncover confrontations, and challenge the very notion of democracy, as the “Big Art Mob” project in Great Britain has shown. In “Big Art Mob” Britons are called upon to compile a map of art in the public space and to decide for themselves what art actually is.



This concept of art as the construction of a sensorium of exceptions, as the prominent French philosopher Jacques Rancière has defined as the experience of aesthetics, can scarcely find a more adequate field of activity than in the public space. This results in a sense experience, derived from the aesthetic, that distinguishes itself from other sense experiences by being subject neither to categories of perception nor desire or fetishization. According to Rancière, art proves resistant to the temptations of objects of consumption. Temporary or performative art in the public space comes as close as possible to the resistance that Rancière has called for.

The subversive actions of the artist Leopold Kessler have precipitated a situational urbanism that can be traced back to the Situationists around Guy Debord in the 1950s. Kessler's guerilla strategies sometimes involve tapping into power lines or public infrastructures, reminiscent of the exploitation of international rail for cigarette smuggling. Kessler's projects simultaneously explore the topography of the city, ranging from traffic routes that shape urban life to patterns of behavior and the responses they elicit. Public squares, routes, street signs, or barriers are the main targets of Kessler's interventions. He exploits gaps in the system to stage events that take on the profile of officially sanctioned or permitted construction activities; these require Kessler to dress up in a public works employee's uniform with an oversized ticket punch to perforate street signs. One such perforation performance *Perforation Kal. 10 mm* (2007) took place as a response to the FPÖ's xenophobic poster campaign "Wien darf nicht Chicago werden." Parallels to the bullet-riddled street signs found on the outskirts of numberless big cities are self-evident. One of the most interesting aspects of this art in public space is that such a project need not be unconditionally understood as artwork. For those who notice the event, seeing it not as intended, but recognizing it as artwork, this can be read as one miniscule disruption at the margins of the system.

The *Autonomous Acts* project, curated by Michael Scott Hall, provides the framework for a four-part performance sequence that likewise attempts to redefine everyday perceptions of reality and aesthetic experiential data.

In *Camouflage on a Mannequin* (2008), a project co-produced by John Miller and Richard Hoeck, male and female mannequins in military garb were engaged in a dialogue. During the course of the project the mannequins changed outfits and positions, so that the setting itself fell into formation, and a paradoxical narrative structure distinct from the other display windows resulted. It is the regulation or commercialization of public space that the artist Christian Eisenberger confronts with a nonviolent discourse regarding public space as a conflict zone between economic and individual interests. Eisenberger simultaneously decouples art from its meaning and function of art through its quotidian habits. His staffage figures are either taken away by collectors or by garbage disposal. Eisenberger's commitment to "poor" materials recalls *arte povera*, the subversiveness of temporary cardboard boxes as illegal street art proves to be deeply political. Such projects play a part not only in the construction of urbanographies, but also serve, as the French philosopher Michel de Certeau has articulated, as the foundations of urban and municipal trade as well as a psychograph of the city. Current publications, such as Christiane Feuerstein and Angelika Fitz' "Wann begann temporär?" (When Did Temporary Start?, 2008) provide an interesting appendix to the history of early urban interventions.



Previous page: *Fluc Gesamtansicht*: Anna Artaker, Michael Gumhold, David Moises, Christian Egger.

Photo: Urban Signs - Local Strategies, Fluc, 2008.

Left: Leopold Kessler, *Perforation 10 mm Calibre*, film still, 2007.

Photo: Leopold Kessler

Above: Hanako Geierhos, Benedetta Jacovoni, Panos Papadopoulos, Maximilian Pramatarov, Mirjana Rukavina & Sebastian Sauer, 2009, Installation. Exhibit Concept: *The subject as a body in space*, Ve:sch, 2009. Photo: Elisabeth Penker