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DYSTOPIA EUTOPIA

The Ideal Society and Its Counter-Image

May 3 – June 13, 2016

From Nightfall to Sunrise

Heldentor (Outer Gate of the Hofburg), Burgring
Michaelertor (Inner Gate of the Hofburg), Michaelerplatz
Vienna AT

As night falls, raster patterns and barbed wire overwrite the two most distinctive gates in the centre of Vienna. The gates of Vienna's Hofburg, the Heldentor (Heroes' Gate) and the Michaelertor (Michael's Gate) have been chosen as intervention locations for the project DYSTOPIA EUTOPIA. Over a period of 40 nights, the synthesis of raster, barbed wire and grand architecture creates an image of eutopia and dystopia whose physical presence cannot be overlooked. An appeal to assume personal political responsibility.

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Victoria Coeln

Light is a medium that moves and unites people, and is always in motion. Motion is life, standstill means death, in all systems. Light transcends all kinds of borders, including those of our own imagination.

I work with light in order to rethink reality and set new beginnings through action, breaking through the usual automatic processes. To me this means freedom. Living in freedom is perhaps the most precious good – yet we hardly pay attention, taking it for granted. History, however, has shown that a public life in freedom has only ever been possible for short while. Within only two years – my light intervention at the Heldenor in 2014 was dedicated to the peace activist Bertha von Suttner – state and society have changed drastically. We feel that we have arrived at a threshold we cannot name. Is our freedom threatened? By freedom, here I do not mean the freedom to vote or free will or freedom of thought. Rather, I mean the freedom which is ascribed to art today, the freedom to act. Hannah Arendt: *“It [this freedom] depends on whether a free nation grants the space in which action can have consequences and become visible.”*

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DYSTOPIA EUTOPIA

Kerstin Jesse

With her light intervention at the Heldentor and the Michaelertor, Victoria Coeln creates a new, topical place for commemoration and reflection.

The two gates of the Burg reflect an important element of our time: at any time, they can be open for people to pass through– or they can be shut. All who move through them now pass a place that brings to mind the fragility of the present, without preparation and immediately.

The two main elements of the precisely shaped light are raster and barbed wire. The iconography of barbed wire holds negative connotations in general. Given the current political situation, associations like fences, barriers and exclusion spring to mind. First invented as an instrument for fencing in grazing land, it went on to become an emblem of borders of inhuman regimes. Native Americans called the twisted wires with their sharp spines “the devil’s rope”. The raster, a motif appearing frequently in the arts, often also the subject of an image in its own right, stands for regularity, order and impersonality. It is an anti-hierarchical system, or, as Sigmar Polke defined it for himself, “a method, structure. It deconstructs, disperses, orders.” By the same token, the raster, however, offers the possibility of causing irritation or disturbance through deviation or breaks in the structure. In Victoria Coeln’s work, the disruption of this system signifies the brake-up of a strict logic.

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Brighting and braking up the raster can indeed be read as a form of social criticism. How rigid, how open is our society? Where do we draw our own borders, where do we expand our space? Where are borders crossed and spaces transcended? Who defines those who are defined by others?

Victoria Coeln has consciously chosen a central, highly contradictory site of Austrian history for her contribution to the current political discourse. DYSTOPIA EUTOPIA is not only an impressive visual experience, as thought-provoking as it is monumental, but it also challenges the cognitive abilities of the observer and turns the “Imperial Forum” into a forum for discussion.

DYSTOPIA EUTOPIA is an appeal to all members of our society, and thus appeals to the responsibility of each individual.

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Heidemarie Uhl

Barbed wire is an icon in European visual memory – it symbolises the world of camps and, after 1945, the Iron Curtain and the presence of the Cold War. The epochal year of 1989 was characterised by images of the Berlin Wall being torn down. The age of overcoming all borders within Europe now seemed at hand. The border fortifications that are presently being built mark a caesura: the end of a European vision. The Europe being built within the new border fences is no longer guided by the euphoria of the fall of the Wall, but by threatening scenarios and fears of ruin. How can Europe's utopian potential, the vision of an open, democratic, just social order, be reactivated as a resource for an atmosphere of new beginnings?

DYSTOPIA EUTOPIA in European Memory

The two gates of Vienna's imperial Hofburg are two points of culmination with regard to eutopia and dystopia. The four depictions of Hercules on the Michaelertor created by the imperial sculptor Lorenzo Martinelli glorify the emperor as Hercules Victor (Franz Matsche: 2011). However, they also encompass another level: Hercules had to undertake his heroic tasks to atone for murdering his wife and children. In 2012, a metal shell was found in the crypt of the Heldentor, containing two documents from 1935: one was a homage to the Nazis by Wilhelm Frass, the monument's creator, the other a Pacifist counter-document by his assistant Alfons Riedel. For decades, one capsule protected both a dystopian and a eutopian scripture.

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Victoria Coeln

The Viennese artist creates multi-faceted light interventions in the public space. The works she implements with her Atelier Coeln team relate directly to their location, never shy away from relevant social, political and ecological dimensions, and inspire the observer to question his or her own positions critically.

Kerstin Jesse

studied art history at the University of Vienna, at the University of Applied Arts Vienna and at Freie Universität Berlin: from 2008 to 2016 she was assistant curator and since April 2016 she has been a curator for the 20th-century collection at the Belvedere Museum, Vienna.

Heidemarie Uhl

is a historian at the IKT Institute of Cultural Sciences and Theatre History at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. She teaches at the Universities of Vienna and Graz. She is a member of the Commission on Military History and Monuments of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Defence and Sports and Vice Chairman of the Scientific Counsel of the Haus der Geschichte Österreich.

www.oeaw.ac.at/ikt

Atelier Coeln

was founded in early 2015 with the goal of expanding art-based research and strengthening transnational and interdisciplinary relations through artistic means. The main focus of Atelier Coeln lies on the exploration of light as the basis for developing chromotopian spaces in many different media and in the urban and rural public space, including at archaeological research sites, world heritage sites and locations dedicated to maintenance, development and cooperation.

www.coeln.at