

## The Museum as a Laboratory of Aesthetics

The Art Museum of the Cologne Archdiocese takes its name from the medieval church of St. Kolumba, upon whose ruins the new building was erected by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor between 1997 and 2007. When the museum was founded in 1853 as a classical diocesan museum, it followed the tradition of applied arts museums. In addition to collecting, preserving, and imparting knowledge, its purpose was to make templates and models accessible to craftsmen, who worked for the Church. This had to do with things like chalices, monstrances, and paraments, which is to say, accoutrements that were used for Catholic rites. The annual program also included sales exhibitions, where the craftsmen were able to offer products they had created after these models. The prevailing form ideal harked back to the Gothic style. Even as late as the "International *Sonderbund* Exhibition in Cologne in 1912", the very year that introduced Modernism to the city, Cardinal Fischer, in the so-called "Gothic Edict", proclaimed the medieval ideal, making it mandatory for Church art.

In the 1920s, the museum's directorship opened up to modern tendencies in its exhibitions, although no traces of this commitment were left behind in the collection. Jakob Eschweiler, the director in those years, also headed the "Institute for Religious Art" at the Kölner Werkschule in Cologne, a place where a new language of forms for Church art was being developed. After World War II, it was no longer possible to reconnect to these endeavors. The collection that had been assembled in this manner down through the years centered on several outstanding major works from the Middle Ages – for example, Stefan Lochner's "Madonna with the Violet" – a great number of paraments in varying states of preservation, and a large holding of drawings from Düsseldorf's Late Nazarene School, with the painter Franz Ittenbach (who died in 1879) as its main representative.

Such was the situation when in 1989, the directorship was placed in the hands of full-time art historians for the very first time, and the museum concept was overhauled. The issue was what role a museum supported by the Church might assume today at all. It is certainly not possible to provide any sweepingly valid answers to this question. Rather, this must be dealt with at each place, individually. In Cologne, a city with a great cultural heritage and a vast museum landscape, we probably enjoy greater liberties for taking an unconventional approach than in a city that has no other museum presence. Moreover, the Kunststation Sankt Peter (Art Station) had already been established, a place where the Jesuit Friedhelm Mennekes had introduced contemporary art into the liturgy, thus sparking great controversy with respect to the relationship between the Church and art.

We at the museum have taken up this discussion about today's relevance of Church aesthetics and tried to take a vantage point from the side of art. A museum is not a church,

there are no liturgical requirements, and the goals to be achieved are different than in a church building as well. Central to a museum are art and the visitors. It is the museum's primary task to create a contact between both of these partners that sparks as much enthusiasm as possible. Our approach is based on 20th-century hermeneutics, which focuses "above all, on a 'practical understanding' that, long before a liberal arts approach comes into play, appears as a non-verbal form of coping with existence, perceiving the aesthetic experience as a never-ending process of recognition".<sup>1</sup> Our didactic approach draws on the rhetoric of the artwork as expressing the artist's authentic message – be this from the Middle Ages or the present day – and it relies on the visitor's eager attention to address it as the only authentic form of perception. So we ask the viewer to give priority to the looking and experiencing. For this reason, labeling has been relegated exclusively to the short guide. Our task here consists of facilitating the best possible "stage appearance" for the message of the objects, thus giving the visitor's attention the best possible starting point. Ultimately, this is about room proportions, light situations, materials and their surfaces, pedestal sizes, display case forms, and the painstakingly deliberated filling of rooms, carefully balancing aspects of abundance and emptiness.

In order to house the quickly growing collection and create a suitable framework for its presentation, we set about the task of building a new museum. In the preamble to the call for bids in the architectural competition, we read: "In order to sensitize perception: We desire a lively museum that corresponds to the reality and the dignity of what already exists here, an architecture that creates space but exercises restraint, uses durable materials, a minimum of technology, displays simplicity and functionality in the details, is meticulously executed in keeping with the materials; in short, a natural setting for people and art."<sup>2</sup> Put into practice by the winner Peter Zumthor, this means: neutral, but distinctive rooms with entirely different proportions, light situations, and atmospheres, a reduction of vertical and horizontal lines, natural materials such as terrazzo and clay plaster, as well as an all-but-invisible technology.

The deliberations given to the rooms went hand-in-hand with the new orientation of the collection concept. Since 1989 Kolumba has been able to expand its holdings to include numerous pieces of contemporary art. In doing this, the goal has not been to seamlessly document European art history, but to make people aware of the rhetorical quality of formal solutions, of constants and variations in terms of contents, of the field of tension between heterogeneous works presented in a museum context. The holdings are being introduced gradually in a new hanging of works each year. Always on September 14th, after completely

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Kraus: The Aesthetic Moment – An Attempt on Speechlessness. Lecture in answer to an invitation by the Cologne Artists' Union on the Occasion of the Ash Wednesday of the Artists in 2009 ([www.kolumba.de/Texts](http://www.kolumba.de/Texts))

<sup>2</sup> Kolumba. Ein Architekturwettbewerb in Köln 1997, p. 90.

emptying all of the rooms, we set up a new presentation of our own collection. This is invariably preceded first by the search for a new theme, the arrangement of the selection of artworks, and the very exact placing of the objects in the room. The titles of our exhibitions since the opening of the new building in 2007 each provide a direction, which may be understood both concretely as well as metaphorically. "Infinite Space expands", "Man Leaving Earth", "Bequest", "Noli me tangere", "thinking", "Art is Liturgy", and "show, cover, hide. Shrine". Using three different rooms as examples, I would now like to introduce to you the possibilities we implemented for transforming them.

Allow me to begin with a room in which a permanently installed work of art defines the mood in each exhibition: the "Tragedia Civile" from 1975 by Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis, an installation first shown at the 1975 documenta. Before a wall covered in gold leaf stands a coat rack with an old coat that has seen better days on the one side and what was once an expensive hat on the other. An old-fashioned oil lamp illuminates the wall with weakly shimmering light. The installation forms a stage upon which the visitor moves like an actor or a spectator. The title already imbues it with the atmosphere of a stage play, in which, depending on the focus, various things play a major role: absent persons and their characterizations indicated by the pieces of clothing left behind, the hyperbole caused by the gold leaf, or the bourgeois splendor hinted at by this and providing a blurred reflection of those present or the urban flair of the 19th century – to cite only a few of the possible variations. For the first exhibition in the new museum building, "Infinite Space expands", which was dedicated to the possibilities of artistic statements, it was in this room that our thoughts centered around things and their associative potential. The medieval counterpart was the housing of a Middle Rhenish family altar stemming from ca. 1440, in which the Virgin Mary's bourgeois sitting room serves as the stage for the Annunciation of the Birth of Christ. This was flanked by a painting from 1960 by Düsseldorf painter Konrad Klapheck, showing two sewing machines in his customary concrete abstraction. The title, however, leads us in a different direction: It is called "The Mothers". The other flank was formed by three display cases containing medieval aquamaniles and modern household goods, such as irons and coffee pots.

In the exhibition "Bequest", the room had an entirely different character altogether, due to sheer multitude of objects alone. A collection of wedding photographs had come to the museum in the form of a gift from a professional photographer. These suddenly began to play a role during considerations we had been giving to things that people leave behind. Randomly hung, they covered three walls of the room. In the middle were two Cologne copes, which had been crafted in the third quarter of the 15th century for the canon Göbel Wutscheid from Münstereifel. Because the duration of the exhibition was limited to only one

year, after consulting with the restorers and then giving precise instructions to the museum guards, we were able to exhibit both copies without a display case, thus considerably enhancing their physical presence. Their placement in the room prompted thoughts of a ceremonial choreography of the kind that is also fundamental to processions. It contrasted attractively to the stiff poses of the wedding couples and became a part of the action on the stage of the "Tragedia Civile".

In the center of the museum, there is a large room located exactly above the excavation site of the old Kolumba Church and sharing the same basic floor plan. It is the anchor for all of the exhibitions. The thematic focus reaches its culmination here. In the presentation "Art is Liturgy", terms such as space, time, order, body, action, and play constituted the selection criteria for the pieces to be displayed. The title of the exhibition went back to a 1973 quote by American artist Paul Thek, whose work divulged itself in large spatial installations. None of these installations has come down to us in entirety, which meant that new contexts had to be created for the presentation of the fragmentary remains – just as is the case for the "old" art. Thek's works make us conscious of the staged quality of art works, since if there is no setting the scene, no public display comes about. In the middle of the large room stood the splendid Kolumba monstrance dating from around 1400 – the center and performative highlight of the Christian cult. The longing for the physical presence of Christ that is clearly inherent here was reflected in the exhibition with the large-format drawings (2002–2003) by the priest and artist Herbert Falken, in which he tried for many years to give the body a new form, and ultimately succeeded in arriving at its dissolution.

In our current exhibition, "show,cover,hide. Shrine", the room is filled with the shrines of saints that are kept in St. Servatius Church in Siegburg. They are at our museum for the time being due to urgent renovation works currently underway on the churches there. The theme is reckoned among the most essential characteristics of Western art and cultural history. It has its place in the three great religions based on Divine revelation – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and especially, in our daily life as well: Covering, and showing seem to facilitate each other, since apparently, it is only the covering up that first attracts the gaze to what has been hidden, thus making it visible. This mechanism is archetypically expressed in the reliquary shrines, which bestow a visible form upon the invisible holiness and with their splendor, serve to enhance the veneration. On the walls, pictures painted between 1977 and 1990 by the American artist Max Cole accompany the medieval ensemble in the middle of the room. Her persistent alignment of short vertical brushstrokes allows us to detect the heartbeat of the artist, and leads directly to the perception of a measurable, physically palpable, progression of time. Looking through to one of the adjacent cabinet rooms, we glimpse a photo series by the Munich artist Kurt Benning called "German village in winter"

(1990), in which the house motif of the shrines recurs. Coursing around his native village, Benning has rendered buildings that augur protection from winter's cold, but oddly enough, do not seem to invite us in.

The walk through the museum ends in three tower rooms, of which one reaches a height of 12 meters. There, for the first time in the exhibition "Noli me tangere", the Pentecost Retable from the Church at the Hospital of the Holy Spirit in Nuremberg, which had just been acquired at the time, was placed on display. Most likely, it was created shortly before 1449 as a commission by Margarete Valzner, the widow of the Nuremberg master of the mint, who had died long since. On the middle panel, the Descending of the Holy Spirit takes place. This is flanked to the sides by the Annunciation and the Birth of Christ, His Resurrection and the Death of Mary. The saints on the outsides of the wings inform us as to the altarpiece's original location, whereas the back panel with the Last Judgment alludes to the confessions heard behind the retable. The composition of the middle scene is aimed to include the viewer, expanding the events to involve the parish. The viewer becomes part of the picture, so to speak. As a counterpart to the altarpiece, we placed a work by Cologne sculptor Heinz Breloh called "The Vessels of my Body", from 1982, raw plaster shells, in which fragments of the artist's extremities had been cast. It is about extending and effusing the self into space as a characteristic of creative work and about hindering this due to physical limitations.

For the next exhibition that followed, "thinking", Breloh's sculpture was replaced with a technical arrangement by the Viennese composer Bernhard Leitner, "SpaceReflection. Sound-Space-Sculpture" from 2010, which emitted noises into the room, sounding it out and filling it at the same time. Apart from the fact that in a first, very elementary stage of perception, an almost automatic connection came about to the flames of the Holy Spirit, the sounds that virtually exploded at different points had in turn an impact upon the visitor. The person was consciously able to position himself/herself with respect to the sounds, understand the dimensions of the room both acoustically and physically, or even allow a "pling" to resonate in his or her own head.

Gaining an understanding of the exhibitions in such a way requires time and peace of mind. For this reason, we no longer conduct our guided tours with discussions during our normal opening hours, but now offer these at times before the museum opens or after it closes. In this way, we are able to create exclusiveness for the individual visitor's own private gaze, and provide for groups the joy of an exclusive visit. It seems to be time to "take the visitor seriously as a viewer, not as a number to be counted, or as one of the paying masses, but to experience him or her as individuals, and thus be able to confront the person with the fact that there is nothing to 'understand' about the work of art if it has not been experienced first.

'Nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses', asserts Thomas Aquinas". The museum becomes an individual laboratory of aesthetics.<sup>3</sup>

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