

steirischer herbst '21

Opening speech by Ekaterina Degot

Europaplatz, 9.9.21, 17:00

[Shouting Choir: The! Way! Out!]

I want out.

Out of the lockdown.

Out of pandemics, and out of measures against them.

Out of disease, and out of hygiene.

Out of danger, and out of safety.

I want out of this gate here, around us. And I have to assure you that tonight, on this square, at the end of the opening, this opening that is enclosed, there will be more ways out than there were ways in. As I know you want out too.

Imagine that I am a student in Soviet Union, at the very end of the Cold War, which I do not yet know is almost over—endings and beginnings are difficult to grasp. What I know is that I will never be able to leave, even as a tourist, even for a short trip. I will only dream of “out” and live it vicariously—through books and films perhaps, although they are also not always accessible. I am stuck in a smallness, in a huge country that feels tiny because it has no place for Kafka or Orwell. That will forever define my intellectual claustrophobia.

Or imagine I am a writer in Graz in the early 1950s. Before Forum Stadtpark and before steirischer herbst, but I do not yet know that this is the “before” time, as it seems like an eternity never moving forward. These are heavy and dark days that stand still like a swamp. “We are who we are, and Graz is Graz,” as Alfred Kolleritsch put it with a sad sense of resignation, describing his post-Nazi youth. As this anonymous writer in Graz of the early 50s, all I want is out. Unlike my young Moscow self, I, as this anonymous writer, could leave. But I also feel that this energy of wanting out, this energy of negation is a value in itself, and it is worth more than the trivial gesture of buying a train ticket to Paris.

Or imagine that I am an Afghan woman in 2021. I know the Americans want out, and they have a right to, as it is not their history. Their way out is towards their homes, towards the known, and what is theirs. But I also want out, towards the unknown, and what is not mine. Precisely because this is my history, and I do not deserve it. I was unlucky to be

born in the wrong place. I have the right to want to be out. But I am not even let out of the house—by the Taliban. And I am not let out of my identity of an Afghani person—by the West. An Afghani who is supposed to have their own traditions and choices that should not be those of the West, from the Western point of view. So I am trapped.

Now we are all trapped inside a specific frame by both left and right. There is a radical right-wing smallness, with families, patriarchy, and xenophobia.

There is a radical left-wing smallness now, with oppressed identities, safe spaces, flight shaming, and a suspicion of big narratives.

I want out of the small.

I want out not just of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, or post-Nazi Graz. I want out of “here and now” in principle, which is “here and now only and nothing else.” Out of a smallness that is suffocating and violent to those who do not belong.

I insist on a right to be somewhere else, to be someone else.

For that, what I need is art.

Art is with us to represent our reality, our places and times, but also to negate them, since after Magritte we know a pipe is not a pipe, and the more it looks like a pipe, the less it actually is one. By representing life in a most realistic way art is actually telling us there is something outside of it.

By doing this, art is dangerous to totalitarian regimes, as well to not-yet-totalitarian-but simply-overregulated ones, like the one we live under today.

Our current Western 21st-century society is very anxious and anxiolytic, obsessed about safety on all levels and trying to prevent any sort of disagreement and conflict with legal as well as moral measures. It is now not life but art that is the only sphere where all unpredictable things are possible: meaningful encounters, accidental coincidences, daring assumptions, as well as tragic and irresolvable differences.

Let us not call it freedom, the word is too much and too little at the same time, ambitious and banal. Let us call it more modestly, *A Way Out*.
Some kind of way out.

“There must be some kind of way out of here,”

Said the joker to the thief.

"There's too much confusion,

I can't get no relief.
Businessmen, they drink my wine,
Plowmen dig my earth.
None of them along the line
Know what any of it is worth."

These lines by Bob Dylan from 1967 were not on our mind when we named this edition. But they fit, as the joker and the thief are our heroes; they are artists, they are independent spirits. They are those who can find a way out.

[Shouting Choir: The! Way! Out!]

Perhaps I just need to go out. To wear some dresses and shoes that have been hibernating for almost two years, to drink some wine, to engage in some small talk.

Not every culture has this notion of "going out," by the way. I would have difficulties translating it into Russian, for instance. In Russian, one can go to a theater or visit someone, but if one just "goes out," that's just physically stepping out to the street, to take out the garbage, let's say.

Why is it that when we say "going out" in German, English, or French, we assume it is for a party and not to walk your dog? Did we always know there would be a moment, as in recent lockdowns, when being in the street would become a rare pleasure? Or maybe because leaving oneself behind and meeting others IS indeed a festive moment, a celebration? Not the celebration of the feeling of "us," which is even more fragile than our egos. But the celebration of just not being inside oneself all the time, and venturing out?

Still, to go out one must be in a city. You hardly go out in a village; as there are no others, no strangers, you do not risk being confronted by them. You remain safely at home even if you go to the market.

Is Graz an "in" city or an "out" city?

There are wonderful parks in Graz where people feel very much at home, but very few squares where they would be subordinated to some architectural logic outside their domestic life, some social or political logic of an agora, a forum, an arena.

One can also love it. As the great Graz writer Dževad Karahasan once noted, in Graz, he was “lastingly impressed by the love those in the city show Stadtpark,” but irritated “by the low opinion expressed in the relationship of the city to its squares.” He considered Graz very anti-power and informal and found pleasure in the fact “that even the main square has nothing pompous about it but is something so clearly there for the use of the people and not the government.” He liked it that “it bothers no one that squares worthy of a city simply don’t exist.”

We at steirischer herbst like it too, but we certainly miss squares as political and social forums. We miss them on the pragmatic as well as the conceptual level, because this is always where we want to start our story of the year. We are looking for squares that are also round and feel like a political forum! And Europaplatz never failed us.

So, Graz, an “in” city? Graz has a strong “in” vibe, not as much as the Moscow of my youth where all the important conversations were held in kitchens, but close to it—they are held in the markets.

There are great markets in Graz, but there are few cafés in the Viennese sense, those where you are supposed to read newspapers, to watch strangers through a huge glass window, and to form your political opinion, probably a critical one, as too much observation certainly leads to overdeveloped critical ability. These cafés are places of seated political flânerie. There are very few cafés of this kind in Graz, if one compares it to Vienna or Paris. They are rather all inside, warm, darkish, and if there is a Gastgarten, it is not even seen from the street, and meeting there one has a feeling of being a member of a dangerous and illegal oppositional group. The medieval structure of the town is to blame—or to be thanked. Elfriede Jelinek once mourned Café Erzherzog Johann in Sackstraße where she was meeting other writers and Fredy Kolleritsch in the first place. Now, she wrote, it is perhaps “a vampiric spot, which at night maybe puts its fangs into passers-by.” Not surprisingly, places of politically explosive discussions retain their dangerous, disruptive force for years.

[Shouting Choir: The! Way! Out!]

How to break the wall of this apolitical domesticity? This is what steirischer herbst has been asking and answering for decades. But right now, it is not just the conservative spirit which is against us—it is a conservative spirit enormously reinforced by the pandemic and a

general atmosphere of fear.

The pandemic has made us small, limited us to our rooms. It made us small-minded, too. Everything big on a planetary scale is under suspicion from both left and right, and much of it rightly so—for you to decide what: market economy; overproduction; irresponsible travel; universalist ideas that only represent male white power; career ambitions; grand narratives that survived the previous purge. Art might be easily tossed out along with all this bath water, too. Because art is always about being not satisfied with the status quo. Even if it is a most modest and plain still life, it is always about something else, something bigger.

The pandemic has also made us old. We are supposed to be happy with what we have, not want too much, not dream of traveling around the globe. We need to accept that many things are already out of reach, that it is too late. We are supposed to be happy at home with eventual grandchildren and homemade bread. This is a *Pensionistenleben* in a place formerly known as a *Pensionopolis*, a city of pensioners.

There is a lifestyle trend that made a huge international career even before the pandemic: this is the Danish notion of *hygge*. Thanks to magazines we all know what *hygge* is, and in the German-speaking world one does not even need this word, as we have our Biedermeier *Gemütlichkeit*. *Hygge* is staying indoors, it consists of simple pleasures: warmth, comfort, cashmere sweaters, family, and pumpkin soup. It has been part of Danish culture for centuries, and now it is even vegan and anticonsumerist, maybe even a bit anticapitalist, and definitely anti-modern. But most of all, *hygge* is being away from the world's problems, closing the door to the world for inner peace and stability. It is in a nightmare version of *hygge/Gemütlichkeit* that we have been living for the past years, and it was also promoted as a way for our physical and mental safety. In Graz we actually see there is a very successful outdoor version of *hygge* too—with picnicks, bicycles, and lots and lots of sports.

Allow me to say something scandalous: Austria might be the Denmark of Central Europe. (Or is Denmark, since *Hamlet*, perhaps the best metaphor for everything and anything?) Anyway, cherishing the feeling of smallness, finding happiness in it is very Danish, but very post-war Austrian as well. The same goes for making the quest for happiness into the main goal of life. As well as making use of the socialist past, with its

assumptions of equality. Of course this equality, as everywhere, is based on exclusion—mental, at least—of those who are not equal, or not equal enough, with their different passports or different skin colors.

In Denmark, some daring thinkers have noted that a *hygge* situation around a warm fire becomes less *hygge* if there are non-*hygge* people around, namely foreigners. I think we know it here, too. *Gemütlichkeit* is about conformity and consensus, which are spoilt by those who disturb it. Those who are pointing out a problem are a problem themselves.

In Denmark, they also noticed that *hygge* ideology is constantly being mobilized by politics on the right, as an argument for xenophobia. As an argument for safety on all levels, where everything that threatens this safety cannot be tolerated.

From the current point of view dominated by hygiene, by the way, being out in the streets is safer than being inside. This is very counterintuitive, as streets are still full of hurricanes and tornadoes, of dangerous strangers, their cars, and quick-as-a-flash-bikes, but everything has been rather counterintuitive lately.

But from the point of view of art, being in the streets is still risky, and it is precisely this aesthetical risk which is exciting and which fascinates us this year in the festival program. It is risky, as artists are competing for the audience's attention with aggressive advertisement, talkative, overpresent architecture, and very distracting and distracted crowds. Art is competing with the Real, but this the only way to become real.

Especially at the beginning of this year's herbst, but also through its whole month this time, we are breaking out of white cube art institutions (not saying that this is forever) and also to some extent out of the online world where we had our great Paranoia TV last year (although we will be present online as well, and with some wild and interesting surprises). We want to meet you in the real world. Parks will perhaps become the squares that are missing in Graz, streets—those rare cafés for reading and forming one's political consciousness. We need you to be there, to be out.

Art has a magical ability to make us happy. It certainly makes me happy often. But it is not here to make us happy. It is here perhaps to make us unhappy with where we are, what we are. This unhappiness is called hope, desire, it is called meaning.

Life is the way out for art, and art is the way out for life—or, if we are more cautious, out of this strange gated situation we found ourselves in, physically as well as metaphorically.

With this, I am opening this year's festival, with enormous thanks to everybody who contributed—artists, thinkers, writers, my colleagues in the team, and you, the audience—which always will be in the picture.

[Shouting Choir: The! Way! Out!]

Ekaterina Degot
Graz, 9.9.21