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Contemporary Art Practices and the Museum

To Be Reconciled at All?

AS AN INDEPENDENT writer and curator, I have collaborated only occasionally with museums in the fifteen years of my professional life. For a long time, I believed that museums — especially when it comes to contemporary art — suck the life out of art and the artist, embalm them, and disconnect them from their potential audience, instead of encouraging a vital dialogue. One of my own projects seems worth mentioning as it shaped my view on museums. During my term as the Austrian federal curator for visual art from 1994 to 1996, being enabled to spend a generous amount of public money, I initiated a temporary gallery in Vienna's Museum for Applied Arts, which is, in spite of its name, to a large degree committed to contemporary art.¹ I conceived this gallery as a showcase for young local artists working predominantly with new media.

One of the participating groups, Klub Zwei, had been involved in a quite strong movement of institutional critique, examining the structural conditions of exhibiting. The group proposed to set up a production studio in the gallery instead of showing a finished and polished work. So they did. They provided a Hi-8 camera and an audio recorder and installed an editing place. They also provided a small archive of videotapes and invited friends and colleagues to discuss and watch documentary art videos at night.

Most of the time, the gallery was empty, nobody ever used the editing facility, people rarely watched the tapes, and only the usual small crowd of their friends and acquaintances attended the talks. Klub Zwei had appro-

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failure



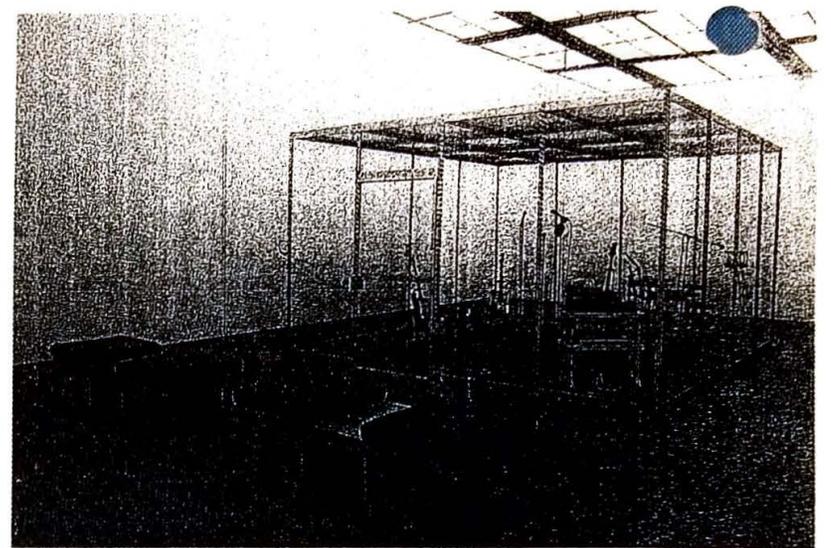
Visitor watches the film *Das schwache Geschlecht muss stärker werden*. Courtesy of Klub Zwei.

appropriated a model that was successful elsewhere and failed at the museum — the model of a "project space," an independent, self-organized artists' space.

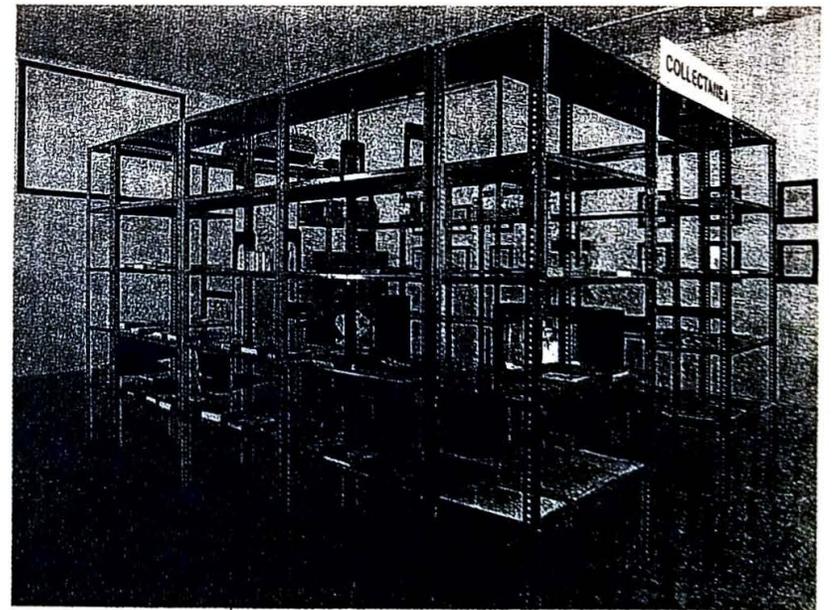
I recount this because back then, in early 1996, it seemed to confirm my own prejudices against museums and, for that matter, other high-art spaces. The living exchange system that I wanted art to be seemed inevitably paralyzed within museum walls. Since then, contemporary art museums everywhere have gone to great lengths to prove that, yes, there is life inside, even trying to suggest that it's in the museum where "It" is happening. In that sense, they find themselves competing with street fairs, football games, car shows, movies ... all kinds of events offered to get the boredom out of one's weekend.

Museums occasionally become sites of production (think of Rirkrit Tiravanija's sound-recording studio, set up to be used by visitors), relaxing zones (the environments that Charles Long designs for listening to Stereolab's tunes), and social gatherings (Tiravanija's Thai dinners). With perhaps a more education-oriented intention, a museum exhibition can also serve as a research archive (Renée Green's *Import Export Funk Office*) or a para-academic site of theoretical discourse (Rainer Ganahl's *Reading Seminars*) or can replace separate education programs by education-as-art-projects (Maria Eichhorn's or Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler's

Living exchange
system
dies in
museums but
they've been
trying to
step up that
game.



RIRKRIT TIRAVANIJA, *Performance Anxiety*, April 19–July 6, 1997. Exhibition photograph of MCA exhibition, Rirkrit Tiravanija Installation. Photograph © MCA, Chicago.



RENÉE GREEN, *Import/Export Funk Office*, 1992–1993. Installation with audio, video, and reading materials. Dimensions variable. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Gift of Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann.