

## **Introduction**

*Salzburg is too beautiful.*  
Anonymous Salzburger

This project explores several variations on the theme of *Überschönheit*. International artists have been invited to include artwork that, for them, has a relationship to excesses of beauty. These forms of excessive beauty and their associations may take many different forms, whether those affecting the senses; or perhaps more idealized notions; forms of abundances of aesthetic splendour; forms of conceptual or utopian beauty; or the more familiar realms of physical beauty, and so on.

What has evolved with the project overall, however, is a conceptual approach to a notion of *Überschönheit*. That is, visitors anticipating to experience an overload of beauty in this exhibition may have their expectations defied. There may be more excessive beauty activated within the imaginations of visitors – or as a form of conceiving what excessive beauty could actually be - rather than actually seeing forms of excessive beauty in the spaces of this exhibition.

This may be partly based on the aspiration that the imagination may always create far superior forms of beauty than the visual senses can experience. However it is also based on the determination not to allow this exhibition to collapse into a spectacle of kitsch.

### **Beauty as Concept: Gripping the Imagination**

Beauty has been pondered and written upon since early times. To say that there has always been an obsession with monitoring, measuring, qualifying and understanding beauty would be an understatement. Might we then today ask, what happens when one is overloaded with it? It has never been so predominately at our disposal, and may likely continue to be so on an increasingly exponential level. Can beauty also transform into something beyond aesthetics when it is, as William Butler Yeats wrote, a "terrible beauty?" This term was itself used as the title for two recent biennales of contemporary art (Lyon Biennale and Dublin Contemporary, awkwardly coinciding in 2011 with the very same title), and appears symptomatic of our times, whether accidentally, ironically or earnestly. Whatever way we might approach a notion of *Überschönheit*, this exhibition proposes a sort of distancing effect – that is, to stand aside from beauty and look at it from an angle or as if it is in a reflection, not unlike as Perseus had employed his shield when gazing upon the Medusa. In this case, however, there is no suggestion to behead beauty in order to defeat it. There need not be fear in this small labyrinth. Rather, we might simply hold the refracted gaze while in the darkened corridors of this exhibition and see if it shifts and demonstrates a few notions.

This project began with a late-night conversation over wine, in a dimly-lit bar in the Salzburg centre. The discussion had taken a turn towards life and living in

this city, from the perspectives of us all, natives of Austria or not. "Salzburg," said one friend, a woman originally from well beyond Europe, but now long integrated in Austria, "is too beautiful." She continued to speak about the city's architecture, the stage-set quality of the *Altstadt*, the endless streams of tourists in search of romance or *The Sound of Music* nostalgia, and some of us agreed, some of us didn't. Having lived here for eight years, her opinion was set.

And it dawned on me, that this concept of something being too beautiful had legs. I thought of Stendhal's famous fainting spell in Florence, his own reaction to a city that was too beautiful which later derived a scientific term: *hyperkulturemia* – an overload of the senses that results in sudden illness or episodic unconsciousness.

I'd never experienced that, but I wanted to.

However the idea of something being excessively beautiful, for me, could go much further than this architectural or urban experience of being overwhelmed. We might also consider that this term could apply to the rampant commodification of beauty in advertising and the entertainment industry, which is a continual bombardment in contemporary culture, and has arguably intensive impacts upon notions of male and especially female identity and sexuality. Carnal beauty itself has always been the deepest and most moving form of beauty. The same applies to erotics. Georges Bataille once famously wrote that no art collector could ever love a work of art as much as a fetishist loves a shoe. This sense of entrancement with eros or carnal knowledge may in fact raise such a fuss within cultural systems of belief to the point where it must be shunned as mortal sin or as illusion by spiritual practises. It has also spun off into new realms with the hyper-availability and almost-everydayness of contemporary pornography, which is practically inconceivable as a whole today in its ubiquity today. Might we consider these forms of *Überschönheit*?

Relatedly, we might fathom notions of impossible physical beauty today or from Classical times, that which perhaps exists only in the realms of fantasy and imagination – that which may only be depicted through storytelling or idealization in one's mind, but nonetheless cannot really be seen. That is, when it is seen, is not the reaction some sort of disappointment in the realization of the fantasy, where the *terra firma* of reality cannot itself compete with the spell of the fantasy? I think that this inability for us to *see* this kind of beauty is inherent to its being overly beautiful and rhapsodic. Further, I would even associate a certain kind of fervent religiosity with this conception of excessive beauty, something bordering on eros but nevertheless captured within the realms of belief and faith, that which overpowers one's sense of self and both calms and further stirs a fluttering heart. Like Bataille's fetishist. Since we live in a world that is constantly mediated and reproduced into multiple visual universes, whether online or in video games (a term that seems so outdated now), we might also imagine this rhapsodic experience of aesthetic visual overload; beautiful forms constantly out of reach; beauty used as a disguiser of reality for an agenda; an opiate for psychological suffering; and then what about the notion of a resulting revulsion from „too much beauty?“

So perhaps *Überschönheit* is in fact a very everyday experience.

Simply, as the exhibition's original thematic kernel, we might associate abundant aesthetic splendour such as that found in Salzburg itself. This was the germinating consideration for the project. But this beauty need not appear in the exhibition, since it is already present in the city. Perhaps the exhibition may give us a new way of seeing this urban form. Either way, since this project has shifted from taking the original remark of excessive beauty within the city of Salzburg and employing it as a muse for an exhibition concept into a curatorial gesture of inviting artists to include a series of ruminations (that is, artworks) on what excessive beauty is itself as a concept, we might also consider, again as a means of introduction, forms of conceptual or utopian beauty. A first association may be conceptual beauty that gives way to idealized notions and stirs passions. These in fact may result in beauty's opposite, and become the socio-political nightmares that appear and re-appear in history, from Biblical violence based on unwavering worship such as Abraham's near sacrifice of his own son Isaac, to Robespierrian beheadings or the Soviet Gulag, both themselves emanating from political ideals and mutating into absolute horror, while the former comes from a religious absolutism, also devolving into barbarism. Do these examples all not involve an imagining of something so ferociously beautiful that limits of civility are thus shattered? Are these not forms of *Überschönheit*?

One need not venture to such extremes, however, to explore forms of excessive beauty. But what binds all the above brief explorations of what may be *Überschönheit*, in my mind, is a sort of fever that grips the imagination.

### **The Exhibition**

The artists' works in this exhibition not only serve to illustrate a kind of walk-through of *Überschönheit*, but also to perhaps test the associable infallibility of notions of beauty. I began this project by inviting Tilo Schulz to design its "housing concept." That is, earlier work by Schulz had often resided in the paraphernalia around exhibitions – the artwork would itself be the design of invitations, painting of walls, arranging of items in the space, as a form of formal conceptualism. In this case, Schulz devotes attention to the framework of the exhibition in consideration of its thematic concept. The result is a kind of doll-house labyrinth, obstructed from view at the entrance of the exhibition space itself, and therefore it cannot be seen as a whole but only experienced part by part, by walking through its rooms one by one.

This structure was designed by Tilo Schulz in consideration of each of the other artists' work and the overall curatorial theme. The structure actually physically arises out of his exhibition *Schritte, Zwischen (Strides, Between)*, which involved an installation of Black MDF constructed as a 1:1 scale model, adjusted slightly and elongated, based on and within the spaces of Haus der Kunst in Munich. This earlier installation was therefore conceived and designed specifically in relation to its notorious architecture and architectural history, having itself been designed and constructed during the Third Reich. After transferring the building

material to Salzburg, Schulz then works with our technical crew on building this new structure that houses all the artwork, as a means of altering the transitional function of the gallery space, making a work that resides between sculpture, architecture, exhibition design, and as considered space for each of the other eleven artists' work, in collaboration the artists and myself, the curator. Schulz's role is distributed throughout all these other roles: artist, technician, director, curator, designer, carpenter, architect and so on. Overall, Schulz provides us an open framework from where to begin a short journey through *Überschönheit*.