

Notes on the Concert Gallery Maison 44 - Ute Stoecklin

On 22 November 2002 the concert gallery Maison 44 opened its doors to the public with its first exhibition and concert project. In an effort to summarize the brief history of this still-young institution, I shall draw on questions that visitors and other interested parties have posed time and again over the course of the past ten years. They deal with issues of motivation, content, interdisciplinary endeavours and with the house itself.

Our name and the logo are derived from the address and architecture of the house, whose façade includes a pointed, half-timbered gable. The designation 'concert gallery' refers to the interdisciplinary programming concept in which the plastic arts, music, literature and scholarly topics are united.

This art nouveau house was built in 1905 by two architects from Basel, the Stramm brothers, and it belongs to a terrace that today is designated a historic monument and whose individual houses vary significantly in matters of both façade and interior architecture. The gallery is situated in eight rooms on three floors that differ in their architectural atmosphere. We find here both the intimacy of the music salon with its fireplace, and the sober functionality of the cellar. The ground floor opens onto an old garden that belongs to the house.

'What began on a small scale has long established itself as an innovative institution for contemporary music and art', wrote Dagmar Brunner in March 2012 (in the programme book: 'Artful dialogues/Interdisciplinary matters in Maison 44'). This can be traced back to the concept of interdisciplinarity and the resultant variety and openness in our programming concept.

The fundamental idea and interdisciplinarity

Over the course of my artistic work and twenty years of teaching experience as a musician, my own multifarious interests nourished the idea within me of presenting the arts in a manner that transcended individual genres. In retrospect, when I consider that the beginnings of this idea can be found back in my school years, then I should really think of it less as an 'idea' and more of a philosophy of life. It was something that developed slowly, and while it was over the years overlaid by other realities, it was still always present in some burgeoning form. Thus, besides my professional studies as a musician, it led me to become an autodidact.

Like everything else that belongs to the realm of human creativity, art is not merely a product of the market, but something that needs sensitive encouragement. This also means that spaces are necessary in which critical debate can promote understanding. It was with this in mind that Maison 44 opened in 2002 with an exhibition of the Basel sculptor Ludwig Stöcker (his Michelangelo Cycle) and a concert programme that included a CD presentation (Hesperos) and the world première of the Sappho Songs (2002) by Andrea Lorenzo Scartazzini (performed by Michael Leibundgut, bass, and Ute Stoecklin, piano). In the ensuing years, an organizational concept developed with a broad spectrum that encompassed the most varied artistic tendencies and expressive forms. There have been exhibitions and supporting programmes with commented

concerts, readings, lectures and podium discussions that in their themes were intended to emphasize and to polarize, all in an interdisciplinary, discursive manner – as the logo ('vernetzt-diskursiv') of the house promises.

Interdisciplinarity means the greatest possible rapprochement of different media, complementing and counterpointing each other and thereby endeavouring to make the one comprehensible through the other. It aims at an expansion of one's viewpoint and at offering new listening experiences.

Goals

One fundamental aspect of our programming concept right from the beginning was to give a voice, too, to what is unknown or inadequately robust to assert itself. And also to present art forms that do not fit current trends – such as poetry and, analogue to this, song, with an emphasis on the contemporary (for the contemporary is a focus of my own work as a musician and of particular personal significance to me). Fringe groups on the path to greater social acceptance also feature. Two exhibitions took place of work by people with experience of psychiatry, including the remarkable project 'Inventions that were never invented', curated by Veronika Kisling (Seneparla) in 2007.

Another topic was the politics of a Europe that was in the process of recreating itself as a Union, but which in the meanwhile has become increasingly prone to crisis. The difficulty of finding its way to a true union while retaining respect for everything that is 'other' leads us directly to our endeavours to create understanding between people, both through culture and through the strength that they bear within themselves that is of higher significance than anything merely 'national'. We have to have a functioning economy, but this is not everything. Even though Switzerland does not belong to the EU, it still belongs to Europe. It lies, in fact, in its very midst! It is thus all the more important to promote tolerance and knowledge of the relationships between history and socio-political structures. For here, too, we can see how different peoples have a different understanding of democracy, and how this leads to constitutional problems.

Cultural exchange

A natural result of this is one of the other goals of Maison 44's programme, namely cultural exchange across national borders in collaboration with artists, cultural institutions and universities abroad. In the past ten years, our work in this regard concentrated first on Germany, Italy and Portugal and then, increasingly, on the countries of Eastern Europe, in particular Poland (represented by four exhibitions), Ukraine (with a focus on literature), Lithuania and Russia, here primarily in the field of music. This took longer to build up, and it was in part made possible by my previous musical activities and my existing contacts in these countries. In the context of an exchange project, Maison 44 will in 2013 take up an invitation from the University of Arts in Poznan in Poland to hold an exhibition with artists from our gallery.

Since the geopolitical shift of 1989, cultural exchange has become increasingly significant, for artists are now appearing on the scene who come from all parts of the world and who have the most varied backgrounds.

The fifty-year division between east and west in Europe took place over a limited geographical area but under fundamentally different political and social circumstances. To achieve artistic independence in Eastern Europe was the highest challenge for an individual; it was subject to pressure from officialdom and was in some cases condemned as ideological non-conformism. One had to circumvent a system. Today, Eastern Europe is the source of a highly lively, vital, imaginative art scene that on the one hand has its roots in old, great historical traditions and myths, and on the other hand in the resistance displayed by the fathers of the current generation. Twenty years on, and in the context of global art, this must now result in a different kind of reception history. The present generation wishes to set itself free from western criteria and from established artistic concepts and to observe what is 'other' and 'new', perhaps even what is still incomprehensible, from a series of different positions. It is a learning process.

Outlook

All the same, it is Swiss artists, musicians and writers who are at the core of our work. As a member of 'visarte', the work of regional artists is of particular importance to me. The programmes of recent years have become more comprehensive and have been enriched by scenic concerts and performance art. The gallery's good acoustic has also allowed us to increase the number of world premières we offer of contemporary composers. A regular collaboration has been established with the music academies of Basel, Zurich and Bern, with the Basel Eastern European Forum ('Osteuropa Forum Basel'), the History Faculty of the University of Basel and the University of Arts in Poznan, as well as with internationally active curators.

Maison 44 was initially run privately, but in 2009 it was given over to a board of trustees and a supporting association was founded. This should guarantee that Maison 44 will in future remain true to its hitherto artistic goals, and it also brings with it public and financial support, since the house is a non-profit organization that is intended only to maintain itself.

I would now like to thank our public and private sponsors for their support for our projects, in particular the following institutions: kulturelles.bl, Basel-Landschaft, the Cultural Office of the Department of Presidential Affairs of the Canton of Basel-Stadt and the Gesellschaft für das Gute und Gemeinnützige of Basel ('GGG', the 'Society for charity and the general good').

My own activities and support of cultural projects are a reflection of my endeavour to make a contribution to our society as best I can, a society that is becoming increasingly unstable as a result of shifting values and organizational forms. We live in a time of global, epochal changes, in times of 'crisis'. But crises have always given birth to art, with the concept of 'art' shifting from its original meaning to that of 'positions'. The 'arts', still named thus, have become more specific to the times in which they originate. Here, dialogue between the generations and between artistic practitioners is truly something sought-after.

Within the broad palette of cultural offerings in Basel, the Concert Gallery Maison 44 can merely function in a 'niche' – as a small battery to provide necessary energies during fallow years for culture and humanity.

Ute Stoecklin, 2012