

## Martin Dostál – October 2018

### Report on the AIR – Artist in Residence Niederösterreich program in Krems an der Donau

The first month of my two-month participation in the AIR – Artist in Residence Niederösterreich program in this historical town on the Danube just happened to be October 2018, which filled me with a strange feeling since in this month both Austria and my home country of the Czech Republic celebrate 100 years since the founding of their respective republics, which grew out of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, of which both our countries had been a part since the 16th century. Our geographical proximity, shared history, and similar mentalities and cuisine remain constants that bring Bohemia and Austria together, but a hundred years of separation are also an equally important constant that divides us. These differences and commonalities are thus one thing that occurs to me whenever I am in Austria. At the same time, as a curator of contemporary art, I was naturally interested in the art scene and exhibition activities both in the provincial town of Krems and, of course, in nearby Vienna. I first visited Vienna prior to the Velvet Revolution, probably sometime in early 1989, and have been following the city's cultural life with varying degrees of interest since then. Similarly, I have had a long-term interest in the activities of the Kunsthalle Krems founded by Wolfgang Denk, and in recent years also the Stadtpark Galerie. However, my trips to Vienna and Krems were always day trips or short-term visits. This was my first longer (one-month) stay.

And I was extremely satisfied. One important discovery during the first part of my visit was that time seems to flow more slowly here. The city's calmness and sense of balance, together with the sunshine and the generally nice and pleasant weather, made me feel like I was in a spa town – a natural contrast to my life-long home in Prague. But even Vienna, despite the crowds of tourists, feels calmer and “slower” than Prague, which is an exceptional local characteristic. I also had sufficient time for other activities, for instance visiting monasteries and surrendering to the Catholic *vanitas* and the spiritual and artistic legacy of the Gothic and Baroque periods. Göttweig Monastery on the hill, which I can see from the windows of my studio, is one such place – it attracts you with an awareness of maximum artistic and spiritual expression, but also arouses questions regarding economic dominance and primacy during its heyday, meaning the Gothic and Baroque periods – and also, as in the case of still functional monasteries like Göttweig, their meaning today. I come from a highly atheist country where our relationship to the Catholic Church has been quite complicated since at least the time of the Hussites, meaning the first half of the 15th century.

I also engaged in important and stimulating discussions with David Komary, the curator and head of the Stadtpark Galerie in Krems. We talked on several occasions about the context of contemporary art, about the art scene and about meaning in art in Austria and the Czech Republic, about the openness (or rather, closedness) of the Czech art scene, about current trends in art, about the positive and negative sides of the art industry, etc. We also talked about Czech artists whom David Komary finds interesting or has found interesting in relation to the gallery's residency or exhibition programs. I also attended the opening of a recent exhibition at the Stadtpark Galerie.

Another interesting experience was my visit to the Susanne Wenger Foundation. I had never heard of this Austrian artist before, and am glad that this foundation exists, although it is a shame

that for now it is accessible only by request. At the Kunsthalle Krems, I visited the Picasso-Gorky-Warhol exhibition from the Hubert Looser Collection on three different occasions. The Kunsthalle is close by, and I am impatiently awaiting the opening of the new Landesgalerie building. I also caught Eva Schlegel's exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Krems and the Kunsthalle's exhibition space in the former Dominican church, but I did not find them very interesting. I saw the excellent *Byzantium & The West* exhibition at Schallaburg Castle, and must also express my appreciation for Daniel Spoehri's Ausstellungshaus in Hadersdorf am Kamp, which is currently hosting the *Fluxus II* exhibition. I wasn't excited by the exhibited works, but it is great that a place like this organizes activities involving quite complicated visual art. I also visited both exhibitions that the Forum Frohner in Stein held during my time in Krems.

Besides contemporary art, which I am actively involved in as a curator, I also like older art, where one of my areas of interest is the 18th century. So I absolutely had to see the exhibitions organized in connection with the 300th anniversary of the birth of Martin Johann Schmidt – both the one organized by the Landesgalerie at the Museum Krems, and especially the surprisingly large collection at the Diözesanmuseum in St. Pölten. I love the virtuosity of 18th-century Baroque painting, and despite his formal and iconographic “reactionism,” I find myself attracted to the expressive chiaroscuro of this perhaps last great Baroque painter, who conservatively held out until the start of the 19th century.

I also went on bike rides along the Danube into the Wachau, and took train trips into the hillier regions: Lilienthal Monastery and (via cable car) to the hill above it, plus two visits to Mariazell, once by train, the second time by car, when I took the cable car to the top of the Gemeindealpe overlooking the town of Mitterbach.

I was delighted by my residency.

Martin Dostál  
Krems an der Donau  
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