

//Ian Macgregor Morris

Salzburg's School of Seeing

The Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts

The city of Salzburg is, to a degree, synonymous with festivals celebrating the arts. Key among them is the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, held every year in July and August. Originally it was founded by Oskar Kokoschka in 1953 as a "School of Seeing", as an attempt to revive humanist ideals in the horrific aftermath of a war which changed Europe beyond recognition. It was not to be an art school in any conventional sense: "My school does not strive towards technical skill, nor towards photographic imitations of nature, and not at all towards abstract art ... I want to teach my students the art of vision". Such an original idea led to a quite unique creation, which has persisted in a recognisable form to the present day under the direction of art historian and critic, Hildegund Amanshauser.

Over a period of six weeks, the Summer Academy provides a complex of courses, lectures and exhibitions, which coalesce into one vast creative experience. Throughout the emphasis is on learning through participation, be it in courses, lectures, exhibitions and debate. Each weekday would see an average of two events in addition to the courses, with lunch talks held alternatively between the grandiose settings of Salzburg Castle and the atmospheric Alte Saline – or "Old Salt Works" – in the town of Hallein. Each of the artists running a course also contributes a lunch talk, examining the context and history of their own work, or aspects of artistic practice. The core of the Academy, nevertheless, remain the twenty-three courses themselves. Most last three weeks, although a few are shorter and one lasted four. Each is led by an established name from various fields, ranging from drawing, painting and sculpture, to theoretical courses on issues such as curating and ideas in art. This year's Academy focused on the concept of the "Studio", the many connotations the term carries, and its enduring relevance – or lack thereof – in contemporary cultural production.

The Academy has remained true to Kokoschka's original vision. It is not merely a case of training for professional artists, but of courses open to all, irrespective of training or ability. Kokoschka hoped to teach students through the creative process, rather than just the techniques of the process. Today, the courses consist of both young artists studying at some of the world's leading art schools, and interested beginners whose qualification is a passion for the arts. Such a mix is indeed a challenge for teachers, more used to classes of students who tend to possess similar levels of knowledge and technical background. However here the diversity of students required a quite different approach, which forces teachers to reformulate elements of their method. There is much less in the way of shared knowledge, as students with quite different backgrounds bring quite new perspectives. In this sense, it becomes a learning experience for the teacher as much as for the student.

The intimacy of the courses reflects another aspect of the Summer Academy. Courses ran daily, broken only for talks and lectures on various aspects of the arts, generating an intense experience. Here, too, we see Kokoschka's expressionist ideas survive, as it is the total immersion in the experience – creative, technical, intellectual, political and social – which forms the education of the students. Many participants admitted a sense of satisfied exhaustion at the close, a testament to a learning experience in its broadest sense.

The notion of participation and involvement ran through the Summer Academy's

programme in a number of ways. Established artists performed a variety of roles: they participated as teachers, each leading courses on aspects of their own media; but they also participated as commentators and critics, in their contributions to the series of talks and lectures, which reflected aspects of the practices and politics of the art world. They played the role of curators, in helping to organize the exhibitions of their students at the close of each course; and finally, several participated as artists, holding exhibitions of their own work in local galleries. This complex of activities presented a variety of the ways in which individuals participate in the process and practice of "art". It encouraged both students and artists to consider the world of art in its entirety, focusing not merely on completed works of art, but on process and production, context and audience: in other words, the totality of artistic production.

A further element is an emphasis on opening the participatory element of the Summer Academy to the local artistic and cultural community. The lectures, exhibitions and open days welcomed all, while local artists opened their studios to members of the Summer Academy, explaining their work spaces and allowing an intimate insight into the ways in which cultural production is taking place in Salzburg today. Such an unrestricted concept of participation in the arts drives and defines the Summer Academy. Leading figures in the art world alongside beginners and passionate amateurs, each learning from and sharing with the others, generates the very vision of art Kokoschka had hoped to instil into his students. Next year will see the Academy's sixtieth anniversary, as this quite remarkable tradition continues.

For more information, please visit: summeracademy.at

(Photography: Ruth Ehrmann, 2012)

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