Malgorzata Markiewicz, *Medusa*, 2021, installation view

Letter from Graz
Mittleeuropean Memories

The name of Austria's second city, the capital of the state of Styria, apparently derives from the Slavic diminutive for 'fortress', *gradac* or *gratsa*, which may account for the strange affinity this writer feels for the place. The medieval city's location has not only made it a focus for foreign invaders over the centuries but also opened it up to cultural influences from Italy, the Balkans, and Central and Eastern Europe, which form part of its identity. With several longstanding festivals to its name, the Diagonale showcasing Austrian films and the all-embracing Steirischer Herbst ('Styrian autumn') among them, the city boasts a vibrant art scene whose strong suits are its multidisciplinary character as well as a close-knit network of independent cultural institutions that largely compensates for the absence of art schools and the scarcity of commercial galleries.

My brief stay in Graz began with a visit to *Camera Austria*'s headquarters, housed in a repurposed cast-iron department store hugging the bulbous, futuristic Kunsthaus built in anticipation of the city's stint as European Capital of Culture in 2003. The magazine is a local institution dedicated to photography in the expanded sense. It's base doubles – or I should say triples – as an exhibition space and a specialised library with much the same focus, containing amongst other items an archive of photographs that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu took during his fieldwork in Algeria from 1958 to 1961. I arrived in Graz the day after the opening of Stephan Keppel's solo show 'Hard Copies', a stylish presentation of the Dutch artist's idiosyncratic take on Paris, New York, Amsterdam

and Den Helder, abstracted beyond all recognition in a series of grainy, wall-based prints of varying dimensions combined to form repetitive patterns alongside standard-sized reproductions in books and magazines laid out in vitrines mounted onto trestles.

The pandemic played havoc with the Graz Cultural Year 2020, which carried on well into 2021. Its chosen theme, 'Urban Future', chimed with that of the inaugural group exhibition 'Europe: Ancient Future' at the newly refurbished and rebranded Halle für Kunste Steiermark. The regional emphasis of the new name ('Steiermark' meaning 'Styria') is somewhat at odds with the artistic director Sandro Droschl's desire to portray the institution as 'a beacon that shines beyond Austria's borders', starting with the avowed cosmopolitanism of 'Europe: Ancient Future'. The show's heavy-handed theoretical framework and philosophical ambitions were fortunately offset by a more playful approach characterising works such as Jutta Koether's painting *Unfinished Sympathy*, 2002, which conveys a wealth of expressions in the barely outlined bun-shaped faces that fill out the canvas, or Franz West's seldom shown *Epiphany on Chairs*, 2011, a rough-hewn pink globe with uneven antennae suspended from the ceiling and the titular chairs standing before it. In the exhibition's context, the faces can be read as a comment on the nature of democracy, while the pink creature becomes a deity to be worshiped – or not, as the empty seats seem to indicate – by believers.
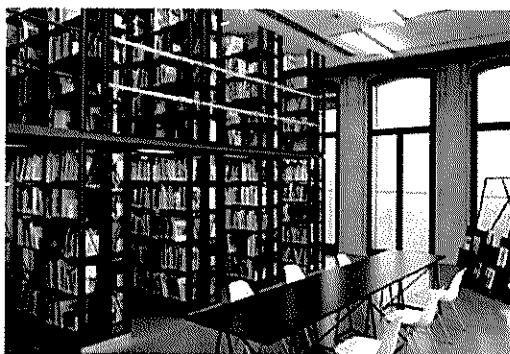
In fact, for the duration and purposes of the show, the entire pavilion sitting in the midst of the Stadtpark was styled as a Temple of Europa, the Phoenician princess abducted and seduced by Zeus in the guise of a placid white bull. Her effigy crowns the fake temple facade installed in front of the main entrance to

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deceptive effect; ironically, it travelled to Graz all the way from Ukraine,'where it was produced, according to Droschl. Another hard-done-by mythological figure, Medusa, who was raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple and beheaded by Perseus, who then used her head as a weapon, is the subject of a photographic series printed on fabric by the Polish artist Małgorzata Markiewicz, and displayed amid the suits of armour, shields, pistols and sundry arms lining the walls of the Landeszeughaus (Styrian Armoury). The artist had spent the lockdown months crocheting a costume of impressive dimensions, ending in 15m-long tentacles, made of naturally dyed wool and hemp in a restrained palette of grey, green, white, black and, most strikingly, red for the balaclava-like head cover. Although any woman can wear it, Markiewicz herself donned it for the photo shoot in a forest setting featured in the five prints on fabric spread over the four floors of the museum.

Medusa gave her name to a jellyfish, at least in some European languages. For her solo show at Grazer Kunstverein, titled 'Cameo', Brussels-based Bianca Baldi explored the chameleonic ways of cuttlefish, the source of sepia used to tone photographs. The artist worked with a marine biologist based at La Ciotat near Marseille (where in 1895 the Lumière Brothers famously shot their first film snippet at the train station), who helped her 'source' the characters – Lucy, Sepia, Whitney and Clare – for her 2019 video *Play-White*. Baldi, who hails from South Africa, sees in the cuttlefish's colour-changing properties a metaphor for 'passing', a term drawn from the field of sociology which can apply to an individual's ability to adopt a different racial, ethnic, class, religious, sexual or any kind of other identity to fit in with a new group. The video projection at Grazer Kunstverein was complemented by a sequence of see-through patterned textile works hung from the vaulted ceiling in long thin strips or draped across the gallery space.

The Grazer Kunstverein, not unlike Halle für Kunste Steiermark, is trying to reinvent itself and is questioning its own relevance, starting with where it is situated in the historic but no-longer-beating heart of the city.

Under the banner 'Grazer Kunstverein is moving!', proposals were put forward for what the institution could become if it relocated to one of the city's other 17 districts. One such bid imagined the Kunstverein as a public bath house full of sculptures by artist Anna Paul in the Waltendorf neighbourhood.

Spanned by several bridges, the Mur river divides the more affluent part of town, which grew around the small hilltop fortress that gives the city its name, from the working-class neighbourhoods on its right bank. On my last afternoon in the city I visited Rotor, a non-profit arts space on the 'wrong' side of the Mur in Annenviertel, once home to the Italian immigrant community. A mine of information, Margarethe Makovec, who co-founded Rotor on the eve of the millennium together with Anton Lederer, explained to me that the pandemic has made art in public spaces meaningful again. On my way there, I passed one of their 'Islands of conviviality' projects, set up in front of the Orpheum theatre: a long bench bedecked with mural paintings evidently popular with the locals, judging by the number of people sitting rapt in conversation.

Rotor itself exuded warmth in its suite of colour-coded rooms, each given over to a different artist or collective from around the world, some of whom have chosen to make Graz their home. 'We are lucky to have them,' as Margarethe put it. Works made by participants in a clay pottery workshop displayed in the entrance room segued into a tent-like sound installation by the Rome-based artistic duo Grossi Maglioni in which visitors could recline on jute cushions tied together with ropes to form a star-shaped flower, surrounded by plants and sundry healing objects assembled by Daniela Brasil in the blue room, as part of The School of the We. In contrast to the stilted, familiar and rather cold vision of the continent that came across in 'Europe: Ancient Futures', here was a Mitteleuropa in the true sense of the word, one that welcomed others and thrived on the cross-breeding of cultural influences.

Agnieszka Gratza is a writer based in Rome.

Camera Austria's library
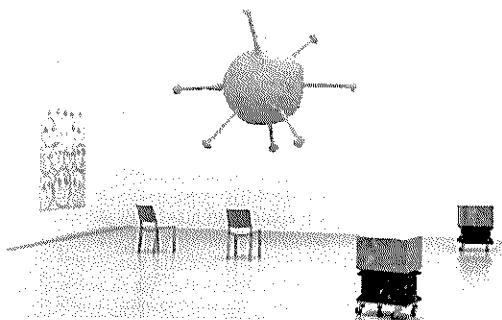
'Europe: Ancient Future' installation view,
Halle für Kunste Steiermark