Spatial Collage and the Viewers' Gaze – An (Un)Pleasant Journey. The Life of Stefan Edlis after HIM

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Abstract

The exhibition 'An (Un)Pleasant Journey. The Life of Stefan Edlis after HIM' brought Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture HIM to the Jewish Museum Vienna and referred to an indelible part of collective European history from the perspective of the eponymous collector's life story. In this context, Margula Architects realized an innovative exhibition concept for the sculpture, without 'putting it on a pedestal', integrating a very specific museum space, references to different times and places in the life of Stefan Edlis and a notorious piece of contemporary art in a unique design solution. Their spatial installation guides the viewer's gaze through space on an imaginary journey through the collector's life from his emigration to the US in 1941, to successful plastics manufacturer, and finally to famous art collector. The exhibition and the narration of Edlis' life story revolved around 'HIM', one of Cattelan's wax-sculptures, as an example of the collector's approach to contemporary art, also mirrored in the documentary 'The Price of Everything' directed by Nathaniel Kahn. By adopting the concept of spatial collage Margula Architects combined multiple references to different time-spaces, mediated via historical fragments. A rich spatial narrative was interwoven with the museum's venue, drawing visitors in, guiding them through space and referring to Stefan Edlis' eventful life. Together with the museum's curatorial team, Margula Architects realized a unique exhibition setting for a controversial piece of contemporary art, conceptually challenging traditional notions of exhibition design, while striving for new horizons of communicating meaning, emotions, and history in space.

1. Introduction

To find a spatial solution for a complex exhibition topic is always a great challenge to/for architects, exhibition organizers and lenders of artworks. In the exhibition 'An (Un)Pleasant Journey. The Life of Stefan Edlis after HIM' (Spera and Vocelka, 2022) Margula Architects endeavored to make just this happen: To present a sensitive topic, in a sensitive space to a sensitive audience, while respecting the artist, the owners of the work and the community that could refer to the presented exhibition piece as potentially scandalous and an affront to their world views. In this case we are talking about the presentation of Maurizio Cattelan's sculpture 'HIM' in the Jewish Museum Vienna, a place dedicated to reflecting the multifaceted history of the Jewish community in Vienna in the light of the social and political situation of the early 21st century.

The sculpture was lent to the museum for the time of the exhibition (initiated and curated by museum director Danielle Spera) by Edlis' wife and co-collector Gael Neeson with the aim 1) to tell a story of the collector's life, based on Edlis' Viennese emigration passport issued 1940, which was donated to the museum in 2022, 2) to mirror his ambition as a collector and 3) to show a controversial piece of art in a place sensitive to questions of race, religion, and political persecution.

The late Stefan Edlis purchased the work 'HIM' in 2002 from his friend Maurizio Cattelan and kept it in his office library, facing his emigration passport he kept in an office desk, not only as a reminder of his personal life story, but also of the goals he attained and the great fortune he acquired in the USA after fleeing persecution by the NAZIs in WW2. In this sense, the work refers to his life trajectory from persecuted Jew to successful plastics manufacturer to avid art collector that has i.a. been the subject of the film 'The Price of Everything' about the workings of the art market as an inspiration to collectors and art aficionados, but also as a machine for money-making and the diffusion of principles for aesthetic perception. It certainly could be said that, as with most art collectors, Stefan Edlis had a very personal relationship to art, the artists he collected and the artworks in his collection.

Still, 'HIM' obtained a special status and it was up to Margula Architects to set the scene for its presentation at the Jewish Museum Vienna. This text sets out to document the process of exhibition planning, the conception of its architecture, its installation on site, its presentation, and conceptual implications after realization. To work with Cattelan's sculpture 'Him', one edition of which sold at Christies for USD 17.2 million (Christies, 2016), and to present it in a place dedicated to representing topics surrounding Jewish lives, art, and culture in the heart of Vienna was a special honor as well as a delicate matter, in terms of politics, public perception and museum architecture. In the end, a visual language had to be found that reflects the life of the collector, the value of the presented pieces as well as their historical and symbolic meaning. Therefore, in the next sections we will try to sketch out the process that led from the idea for the exhibition to its full realization in spring 2022.

2. A Brief History from Exhibition Spaces to Exhibition Design in Vienna

In the city of Vienna historical references are hard to escape, with the entire city serving as a huge open-air museum that presents to the interested observer different architectural styles within short distances, abound with historical references that make up the palimpsest of Viennese urban space (Siebel, 2004). Art and its exhibition spaces are said to be inherent parts of Viennese city life, and from art chambers to art salons and magnificent imperial museums the evolution of artistic life and the presentation of art in the city was long dominated by the high aristocracy (Beßler, 2009).

While early art chambers were conceived to reflect the sophistication and extravaganza of their owners, often reuniting a conglomeration of memorabilia, craft pieces of exotic provenance and a variety of artworks, 'good taste' and its reflection in a well-sourced collection became increasingly fashionable in certain social circles in imperial Vien-na and other aristocratic houses in Europe in the 19th century (Klonk, 2009). Thus, owners of artworks began to de-velop a sense for 'collecting' and presenting their collections in appropriate, increasingly pompous spaces. The emperor of Austria took it upon himself to create the most grandiose places for showing art, while increasingly opening them to the public. In the context of Viennese city development after 1848, various cultural institutions, such as the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna and the Vienna Opera, were erected in the place of the demolished city wall, to bridge the newly created open spaces and connect them to the former suburbs. The emperor thus followed an interna-tional trend to present formerly private art collections to the public and let them take part in exercises in aesthetic perception, instead of locking the works away in dusty storerooms. The presented artworks should first and foremost attest to the formidable taste of the ruling class, but also open a space for aesthetic indulgence and enjoyment to the public. A process of democratization of aesthetic taste and consumption had thus begun in an era that saw unprece-dented progress in areas as diverse as architecture, fine arts, design and many more (Thun-Hohenstein et al., 2015).

In the late 19th century, the emergent bourgeoisie created their own (exhibition) spaces and claimed their position in the dynamic space of artistic (re-)presentation and aesthetic perception. Consequently, the exhibition of art pieces and their public reception were increasingly separated from their former exclusively aristocratic context and adopted by the bourgeoisie seeking to demonstrate their social rank and exquisite taste. Collecting, exhibiting, and living with art had become an exercise in educated

citizenship, highlighting the value of the individual and its position in society (Witt-Döring, 2015). From private salons to public museums and art galleries, the 19th century saw an unprecedented en-thusiasm for art and presented a wealth of newly created exhibition spaces (Von Hantelmann et al., 2010).

Also, over time, the focus of exhibitions shifted from emphasizing the exquisite taste of the owner, to the artwork and, finally, to the artists, as exemplary figures of artistic production and aesthetic refinement (Klonk, 2009), who were, around 1900, celebrated as the new stars of the Austrian society. The progress in fine art, applied art, architecture, literature, combined with unseen technological and social changes contributed to a rich field for aesthetic evolution in early 20th century's Vienna that is still referenced in contemporary artistic production. The emergence of the white cube as a place for the presentation of artworks, was, according to Von Hantelmann (2012), a reaction to the increasing individualization of society, both highlighting the artwork on display and the role of the viewer an independent citizen. The Vienna Secession was exemplary in this evolution, as, aside from its still impressive exterior, it held exhi-bition spaces largely stripped of ornaments (Kapfinger, 2012).

The places for the presentation of artworks, hence, developed from overly decorated places of social representation, to 'purified' spaces of aesthetic perception, seeming-ly leaving social markers behind, while placing the focus on the artwork and the artist. Of course, this short outline of the history of exhibition spaces, cannot account for the myriad parallel and often contradictory developments that took place over centuries, but it highlights their evolution towards the seemingly neutral space of the white cube as a tem-plate for exhibiting.

Within the complex development of exhibition spaces, Austrian architect Friedrich Kiesler held an exemplary position, as he, from the 1920s on, started to incorporate extravagant viewing apparatuses into exhibition and stage design, creating immersive viewing experiences in historic Viennese interior spaces (Goodmann, 1988). In his work he de-coupled exhibition displays as distinct installation objects from the surrounding exhibition space, which could be used in any setting and stand alone as independent objects of exhibition design. Friedrich Kiesler's approach represents a coherent tool to unite diverse objects of art in a thematic curatorial narrative, in order to present them to an inquisitive audience. With this shift Kiesler presents the artwork on an exhibition display

Figure 1. Slow Sculpture. Spatial Collage. © Margula Architects (2008)

rather than in a neutral exhibition space and thereby guides the viewers' attention in an exhibition narrative that captures the audience in an immersive viewing experience. Exhibition architecture, in this sense, was not only supposed to guide people through space, but to create an exhibition experience based on aesthetic perception mediated by exhibition design. The role of exhibition architec-ture, as reflected in the work of Margula Architects, is to create a place for aesthetic viewing experiences guided by the socio-historic context of the artworks, the curatorial narrati-ve, and the exhibition space, based on guiding the viewers gaze through the exhibition.

3. Some examples

In recent years, Margula Architects have created exhibition architecture for some of the largest Viennese museums, i.a. Belve-dere Vienna (2022), KHM (Haag and Sharp, 2018), Secession (2020). Also, they were part of the 11th Venice Architecture Biennial (Betsky, 2008; see also fig.1). As shown in the pictures below (fig. 2-6) Margula Architects strive to overcome the ubi-quitous white cube setting for exhibition design and create rather narrative, engaging settings, which take the architecture of the exhibition venue into account, accentuate the works of art in their spatial and thematic context, adhere to the strictest security gui-delines and create spatial narratives that cross-reference historic and thematic elements in the exhibition and its spatial surroun-dings. The perfect example for this practice is the KHM exhibi-tion 'Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and Other Treasures', curated by Wes Anderson and Juman Malouf (Haag and Sharp, 2018; Mattiacci, C., 2019). In the exhibition Anderson and Malouf put a wealth of historical museum pieces on display that were selec-ted from the KHM's vast repository. The museum architecture (as shown in fig. 2-4) 1) highlighted the exhibited pieces, while 2) structuring the exhibition spatially and thematically, 3) applying a color code system that referenced the architecture of the KHM, 4) integrating highest security standards into the displays and 5) realizing an integrated architectural concept that guides visitors though the exhibition in an aesthetic spatial narrative, reflected its various architectural elements. Likewise, the exhibition Dalí – Freud – an Obsession (see fig. 5) made use of Kiesler's concep-tion of free-standing art displays, which were set in a red and pink interior (Moravec and Zeiss, 2021), that creates a cozy feeling referencing Persian rugs that Freud used to have in his office and consulting room (Freud Museum London, 2018). It also creates a feeling like you are inside the womb again (Hintermeier, 2022).

Figure 2. Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and other Treasures. Photo: Andrea Rosetti © Fondazione Prada

Figure 3. Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and other Treasures. © KHM

Figure 4. Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and other Treasures. Photo: Andrea Rosetti © Fondazione Prada

Figure 5. Exhibition view Dalí – Freud. Photo: Johannes Stoll. © Belvedere, Wien

Figure 6. The Age of Dürer. Photo: Johannes Stoll. © Belvedere, Wien

Figure 7. The Age of Dürer. Photo: Margula Architects. © Margula Architects

Figure 8. Heinrich Edlisz in front of the house at Schönbrunner Straße 138, ca. 1936. Private property of the Edlis/Wassner and Motz/Warburton families

The exhibition The Age of Dürer – Austria at the Gate of the Renaissance (see fig. 6) deals with art at the end of the Medival Times on the crossover to the Renaissance. Here Margula Architects works with the Medival clothing theme Mi-Parti, where the fabrics were mostly vertically parted in different colors. This creates stripes which can also be read as banners that remind the viewer of the artwork's period. The colors were picked to fit the paintings and objects in the room and make them stand out more than they would on a white wall. Meanwhile the vitrines and podiums are designed to fit the interior of the baroque exhibition space. (Belvedere Vienna, 2022)

In the design process Margula Architects work with space, instead of merely working in it, re-formulating spatial settings by combining thematic and historic references of the works on display with engaging exhibition architecture and the architectural context of the exhibition venue. In this sense, the supposedly neutral container of the white cube is transformed into an exhibition space,engaging the visitor, while creating an immersive experience.

4. An (Un)Pleasant Journey. The Life of Stefan Edlis after HIM

The exhibition 'An (Un)Pleasant Journey. The Life of Stefan Edlis after HIM' took place from April to October 2022 and was to be installed in the Jewish Museum Vienna's smaller exhibition space of 42 m2. It was planned to reflect Stefan Edlis' life story from persecuted Jew in Vienna to famous art collector in the USA on, centered around two exhibits: Edlis' emigration passport and Maurizio Cattelan's ingenious sculpture 'HIM'.

The Edlis family, who had arrived in Vienna from Munkacs in todays' Ukraine, lived at Schönbrunnerstraße 138 in Vienna until 1941 (fig. 8), when the deadly intentions of the ruling Nazi party became all too apparent. After having their passports stamped with the letter 'J' (fig. 9) for 'Jew' and facing increasingly dangerous circumstances in their newfound home Austria, Edlis' mother took one of the presumably last chances to legally exit the country and emigrate to the United States with her three children, where they arrived in New York. In the USA, Edlis joined the US Navy and was deployed to the Japanese island of Iwo Jima. He quickly gained citizenship and opened his own enterprise, Apollo Plastics, which produced, among other things, spare parts for electronic devices and plastic tools, and quickly earned him a vast fortune.

After separating from his first wife and mother of his two children and selling his company in 2000, he decided to take on an exciting new career path in a completely different field: He started to collect contemporary art and, together with his new partner Gael Neeson built an impressive art collection. However, the pair imposed upon themselves one rule: No more than 100 artworks and 40 artists were to be included in the collection so that, after
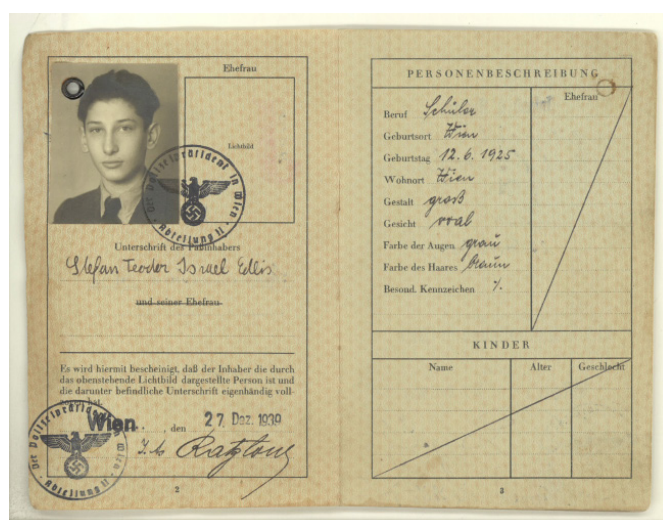

Figure 9. Passport of Stefan Edlis with the forced first name "Israel". JMW

5. Exhibition Design – the staging of 'HIM'

The initial idea was to transform a neutral exhibition space into a setting that emanated the atmosphere of Edlis' private rooms and to enchant the viewer in a spatial narration of his life story. The architectural concept for the exhibition included 1) the reenactment of the display of the sculpture in Edlis' office library in Chicago, 2) references to architectural elements of Viennese Gründerzeit houses, constructed in late 19th early 20th century, and 3) the integration of the wonderful interiors of the Vienna Jewish Museum, notably the classicist ceiling.

The goal was to combine elements of Stefan Edlis' life in the exhibition design, including his escape from Vienna, his newfound life in the United States and his activity as a collector, in an architectural staging of 'HIM' and its organic integration into the museum's spatial setting. Hence, a spatial narrative was to be designed and to be mapped to certain spatial and symbolic markers, which highlighted the socio-historic meaning of the exhibition pieces in the context of Stefan Edlis' life and his approach to collecting art. In short, familiar spaces (Edlis' library, his Viennese home, the experience of emigration) were to be symbolically integrated in the museum setting, while pointing to the inherent complexity and uncanny presence of Cattelan's work 'HIM'.

Below we see a rudimentary plan of the Edlis family's former home in Vienna, which they had to leave in 1941, sketched out by Stefan Edlis shortly before his death (fig. 11). The late collector obviously remembered his Viennese apartment in great detail, including room layout and furnishing. Even the proportionality of the rooms can be traced from his exact depiction of the window axis.

The floor plan of the exhibition shows two bookshelves standing next to each other with Cattelan's HIM in the middle and Stefan Edlis' passport presented in a window niche opposite to the sculpture (fig. 12). The setting re-enacted the layout and atmosphere of Edlis' office library, combining it with the historic paneled ceiling of the exhibition space, architectural references to Edlis' life in Vienna, and an illustrated narrative of the collector's life story on the walls around. To re-create an authentic historic feel without directly copying Viennese interior pieces the bookshelves were designed to reflect various eras and their style features. In addition to aesthetic aspects the bookshelves also fulfilled a security function, preventing viewers from touching the sculpture from the side, while also incorporating an alarm system.

Figure 10. Stefan Edlis and Maurizio Cattelan. Private property of Gael Neeson

completing their initial goal, they had to decide which artwork or artist to drop, whenever they wanted to extend their collection. Over the years the pair amassed an impressive collection, which earned them a place in the artworld documentary 'The Price of Everything', where relationships between artists, artworks, collectors, and the art market were explored. His newfound profession also earned Edlis the friendship of many artists, among them Maurizio Cattelan, whom Edlis knew personally since 2001 (fig. 10). Edlis finally bought 'HIM' for USD 250.000 in 2002, which was manufactured by the famous wax figure sculptor Daniel Druet. He placed the sculpture in his library, close to his work desk in his office in Chicago, where the work remained until his death 2019 (Spera and Vocelka, 2022).Because of his strong emotional ties to the city of Vienna and the social relationships he had still entertained with the Old Continent, Gael Neeson donated Edlis' emigration passport to the Vienna Jewish Museum, upon his wish, and decided together with museum director Danielle Spera to organize an exhibition re-narrating Edlis' life story revolving around the donated passport and Cattelan's sculpture HIM. In the process of exhibition planning, Margula Architects were selected to create the exhibition design and stage the exhibition pieces in the small exhibition room, together with references to Edlis' life and his activity as collector.

Figure 11. Floor plan of the apartment, drawn by Stefan Edlis from his childhood memory, 2018. Private property of Gael Neeson

Figure 12. Floorplan Margula Architects © Margula Architects

The initial designs for the bookshelves can be seen below in fig. 13. The materiality of the objects as well as the chosen color scheme (depicted in fig. 14) optically related the various elements of the exhibition and integrated them in a common design approach. The goal was to condense multiple socio-historic references into a spatial collage, which stands for the collector's oeuvre as much as for the different periods of his life and the inherent meanings they communicate. In this sense the staging of 'HIM' should not become an exercise in historical placemaking, but in authoring a tempo-spatial assemblage which vividly re-narrates and integrates multiple historic trajectories in a single room, while reflecting the life of the famous collector and his agenda.

To visually diminish the size of the devilish figure on display Margula Architects chose to use elements of Viennese modernity that stretch the vertical axis of the bookshelf towards the ceiling and connects it with the sculpture on display below (fig. 15). Additionally, the re-enacted library exhibits protruding shelves, with round and brightly colored edges that accentuate the horizontal axis, while drawing attention to bookcase itself (fig. 16). While re-creating the setting of Edlis' library in Chicago the horizontal plane structures the visual field of the spectator, mimics a real bookcase with mockup books – even a representational version of 'Psychopathia Sexualis' by Austrian psychologist and neurologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing that also could be found in Edlis' office (fig. 17).

The color of the bookshelf, finally, references the paneled ceiling and lets the viewers gaze glide vertically, while the horizontal structure of the shelves and the proposed direction of access to the exhibition room guides the visitor horizontally. With Stefan Edlis' life and his path from émigré to famous collector narrated
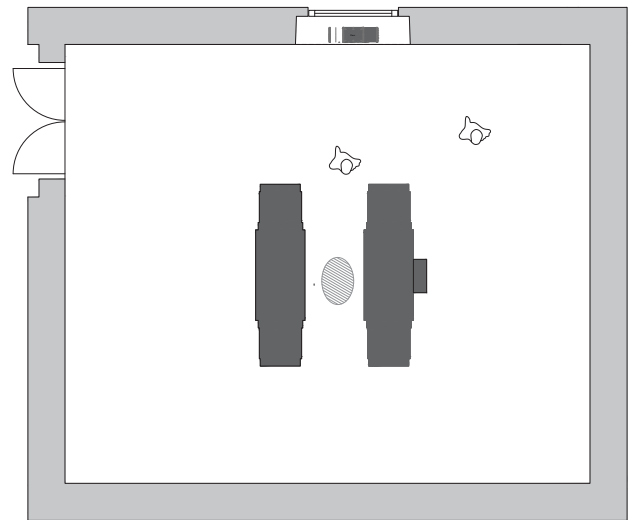
on panels on the walls clockwise, arrows were installed on the floor on Cattelan's orders, which guide the visitor in counterclockwise direction to the back of the shelve. Here, the ingenuity of the exhibition design, combined with Cattelan's sculpture and his instructions for the visitor's access, comes to the fore: Entering the room in full view of the bookshelves' sides, full of mockup books and the fake copy of 'Psychopathia Sexualis', the faint outlines of a person, hidden between the shelves, can be perceived.

Approaching the back of the shelf, with its distinct horizontal lines and protruding edges that reach from the floor to the top of the furniture piece, a tiny figure, seemingly a child in a somewhat outdated suit enters the field of vision. A figure kneeling, shy and hushed. After passing the long side of the shelf and finally having walked all around to the front, we at last see 'HIM' in front view. Slowly a silent feeling of creepy surprise takes a hold of us, and we realize, that, opposite to Stefan Edlis' passport in a window niche (fig. 16) re-created from a traditional classicist
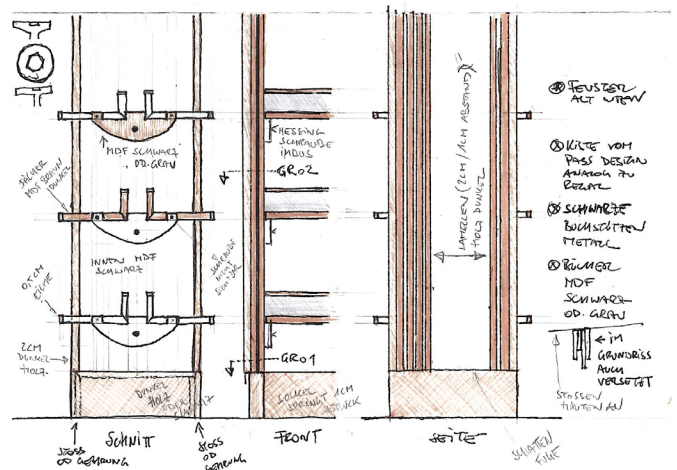

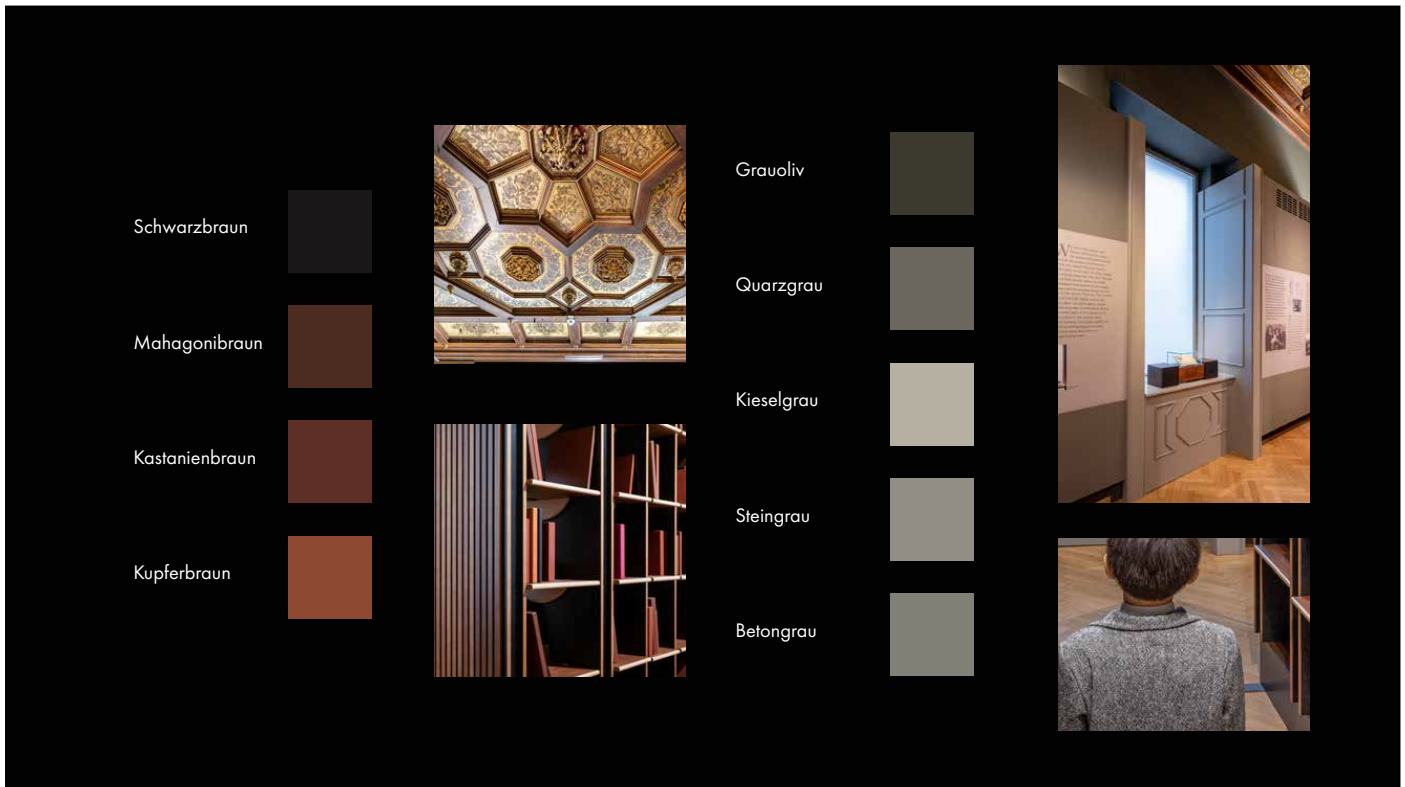**Figure 13.** Design study © Margula Architects

Figure 14. Color scheme. © Margula Architects

design, which references the ceiling's geometry, inconspicuous and seemingly absent minded, with a slightly cross-eyed gaze and harsh features, kneels a miniscule version of Adolf Hitler (fig. 18 and 19).

To have Adolf Hitler kneel in the small exhibition room of the Vienna Jewish Museum to pray for forgiveness opposite to Edlis' historic emigration passport stamped with the letter 'J' seems like a risky project. The sophisticated combination of exhibition architecture and implied safety measures with the surrounding architectural elements of the exhibition space and their integration in a matching color scheme, results in a rich spatial collage that draws the spectator in and highlights the exhibition piece in the light of a multifaceted life-story reflected in the museum space.

The rich spatial narrative traces Edlis' transformation from Jewish youth in Vienna, to marine, to entrepreneur, to famous art collector and involves Cattelan's sculpture, the architecture of the building and a site-specific intervention that accentuates certain architectural elements. The socio-historic context of the sculpture on display cannot be denied and neither its symbolism. Its daring presentation in a place dedicated to the reflection of Jewish life and culture shows how the complexities of Jewish histories can be re-framed in the contemporary discursive sphere. In this sense, discourse can be re-conceived in space, taboo issues can be reframed and aesthetic perspectives on historical events can be created. Above all the presentation at the Vienna Jewish Mu-

seum shows how a combination of architectural features, together with careful exhibition design can guide the gaze of the viewer to create a visual narrative that at the same time seduces the visitor, while accentuating the work on display and communicating its rich history.

6. Spatial collage as a strategy for exhibition architecture

By exemplifying Margula Architects' approach to exhibition design in the staging of HIM at the Vienna Jewish Museum, we want to re-create the process of assembling a spatial collage which references different historical events, personal experiences and shared time-spaces, which still reverberate in Vienna's historic architecture.

In her seminal book 'For Space' (2005) Doreen Massey has described how spatiality can be understood as a network of intersecting narratives or as the sum of myriad 'stories so far', which in their totality, represent the multiplicity of spatial meanings and their possible trajectories from the past to the future. Margula Architects now attempt to translate elements of these stories, some collectively and some individually shared, into coherent, enticing and involving exhibition architecture. History is, here, not only understood as a socio-cultural backdrop or repository for sourcing material or references for exhibition design, but as an active matrix of collective imagination, which is re-created, re-invented and re-formulated by active intervention in a collectively shared

Figure 15. Jewish Museum Vienna. Photo: Simon Veres. © Margula Architects

Figure 16. Jewish Museum Vienna. Photo: Simon Veres.
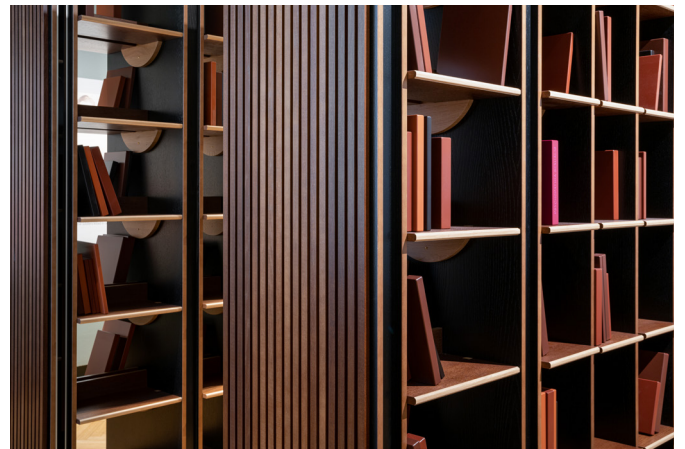© Margula Architects

Figure 17. Jewish Museum Vienna. Photo: Simon Veres.
© Margula Architects

Figure 18. Jewish Museum Vienna. Photo: Simon Veres.
© Margula Architects

Figure 19. Jewish Museum Vienna. Photo: Simon Veres.
© Margula Architects

Figure 20. Jewish Museum Vienna. Photo: Simon Veres.
© Margula Architects

space of memory and aesthetic perception (Lindner and Meissner, 2019).

To tie together multiple strands of history, represented by objects, signs and symbols, in an architectural setting, also means to create an architectural chronotopos (Bachtin 2008; Holloway and Kneale, 2000) reflected in a spatial collage that re-unites different time-spaces in a particular place. The architectural interventions by Margula Architects highlight the work on display, emphasize elements of the museum architecture, re-narrate the life story of Stefan Edlis and integrate all these in an enchanting exhibition setting that takes the viewers gaze as a starting point for visually (re-) narrating history as an aesthetic experience. Spatial collage, in this case, describes a concept for combining and re-arranging various references to a shared cultural space in a specific exhibition project. Space is, therefore, understood as a malleable matter shaped by the viewer's mind, mirrored in and accentuated by the architecture and the presented art pieces. Architectural references guide the viewer through space and make the context of exhibition understood, not only through words, but

though an all-encompassing experience of place. The weaving together of different socio-historic time-spaces via architectural references and spatial collage, then, makes for a rich canvas to interpret and dive into the exhibition matter at hand.

Following Deleuze and Guattari's (2005) concept of the Rhizome, specific museum settings can be understood as tempo-spatial assemblages, opening potential for reflection and inspiration. In the present case, numerous references to different phases in Edlis' life served as spatial markers for weaving together different strands of time. Spatial collage creates a wealth of interlinked references, which make socio-material assemblages understood or accessible to the viewer.

Exhibition architecture thus becomes an active part of spatial narratives, which highlight certain elements of shared history to present us with a rich body of references from which to make up our own mind. Margula Architects presents these worlds in a way that allows the viewer to become part of a collective narrative and find her/his own position in a meshwork of socio-cultural

meanings. In this sense, we are all part of a shared chronotopos, constantly (re-)narrating the world around us. The work of Margula Architects reminds us that we are all part of history, and we all work together to collectively re-enact it in the light of current events. Margula Architects' exhibition architecture, thus, exemplifies how the presentation of artworks and architecture are interwoven to an extent that they both form part of shared narratives re-enacted in space pointing towards our collective future.

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