

Public letter on WHW termination as directors of Kunsthalle Wien

L'Internationale Confederation

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Live performance *VACCINE* during the opening of
Ines Doujak's exhibition *Geistervölker*,
Kunsthalle Wien 2021. Photo: © Esel.at – Lorenz
Seidler.

The museum confederation L'Internationale would like to express its dismay at the decision of the Viennese City cultural administration against prolonging the contract of What, How and for Whom/WHW at Kunsthalle Wien. The members of L'Internationale have collaborated with WHW frequently in the past and respect their attempts to develop a new model of institutional governance, based on collective directorship. We had wanted to learn from their experience at Kunsthalle Wien and saw their appointment as a progressive step to reform art institutions in the direction of more public accountability and shared decision making. As a confederation, we support and share WHW's commitment to work with concrete geographic, historical and political environments and to prioritise social responsibility and local to local communication. We believe the termination of their contract is a retrogressive step that rejects their way of working in favour of an abstracted white, western artistic internationalism that dates back to the mid-20th century. We are confident that their achievements would only become more visible as an effective model if they had been allowed to continue and reject the inadequate explanation for the decision issued by the city administration.

We believe that any judgment of WHW's programme should have taken account of the pandemic and the huge barrier it represented to WHW's attempts to reach a new audience and develop a new public image for Kunsthalle Wien. At the same time, we judge the programme they did realise as exemplary for the institution they were

directing. It encompassed a wide international vision of artistic practice - much wider than other Viennese art institutions - with a focus on the regions to the south and east of Vienna that should be of great interest to the diverse population of the city. In dismissing them, the city administration shows its contempt for the diversity of its own city and disinterest in addressing both the Global South and the burden of Hapsburg imperial history in South East Europe as it relates to contemporary Austria. Unlike the city administrators, we had full confidence in what WHW would have been able to realise in a post-pandemic situation.

Given that many contracts for state and city institutions have been extended (rather than terminated) as a result of the pandemic, the decision of the city administration is doubly perplexing. The idea that WHW as a collective, women and outsiders were targeted for dismissal has not been laid to rest by the utterly inadequate explanation of the city administration up to this point. The decision means that L'Internationale is losing a competent partner with whom we share many of the same urgencies and ambitions. It thus forces us to question the support of the Viennese city administration towards emancipatory art practices and the wisdom of continuing to collaborate with the city in the future.

We would therefore ask Ms. Veronica Kaup-Hasler, as Executive City Councillor for Cultural Affairs and Science of the city of Wien, as the responsible civil servant, to reconsider her decision or to issue a clear statement as to the real reasons for her failure to prolong WHW's contract.

L'Internationale Confederation Board of Directors

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