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The Kunsthalle: A Study in Contemporary Art Display Archetypes

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Summary

Kunsthallen have been historically important to the art-viewing public and continue to be a leader in the practice and theory of displaying contemporary work. Through interviews with *Kunsthalle* curators and first-hand observation of six institutions, three categories emerged from the overall *Kunsthalle* family: The Museum *Kunsthalle*, The Blockbuster *Kunsthalle*, and The Contemporary *Kunsthalle*. Each of these categories represents a shared set of ideals and approaches to the display of contemporary art.

Introduction

Art museums have been a cultural staple since the Age of Enlightenment. Attitudes toward the display and viewing of art have changed with each different generation. So too have the methods for displaying and housing art. In collecting research for a feasibility study for a contemporary art museum in Lexington, the German *Kunsthallen* stood out as difficult-to-classify case studies of how to display contemporary art. They were neither galleries nor museums. *Kunsthallen* emerged in the mid-19th century as contemporary exhibition halls with no permanent collection. Today, some *Kunsthallen* still follow this model but there are many exceptions to this rule. Very little has been published on the *Kunsthalle* as a type in English, as it is specific to German-speaking areas, and the *Kunsthalle* seemed a perfect pivot point for the discussing the theories of the display of art in the 21st century. *Kunsthallen* are a European cross-section of institutions of contemporary art that can inform fledgling American institutions.

Methods

In order to begin to classify *Kunsthallen* as a specific genealogy, I visited six institutions in Austria, Germany and the Netherlands and conducted interviews with four curators. In late May and June I visited the Wien *Kunsthalle*, *Kunsthhaus Bregenz*, *Kunsthalle Mannheim*, *Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt*, *Kunsthalle Karlsruhe*, and *Kunsthalle Rotterdam*. I interviewed curators at Bregenz, Mannheim, Frankfurt and Rotterdam and corresponded through email with the Director of Vienna's *Kunsthalle*. Subjects were interviewed on their *Kunsthalle*'s particular approaches in the categories of History, Ideals & Mission, Architecture, Collecting/Classification & Display, The Public, and Commercialism in the museum setting. These categories were taken from Andrew McClellan's *The Art Museum From Boullée to Bilbao* and provided a framework for the inquiry.

Results

Kunsthallen exist in a gradient between galleries for contemporary art and museums for contemporary art and within the modern-day *Kunsthalle* type, there additional subtypes. From firsthand information, three categories emerged to classify *Kunsthallen*: The Museum *Kunsthalle*,

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The Blockbuster *Kunsthalle*, and The Contemporary *Kunsthalle*. Within these, each had its own combination of factors and approaches to the display of contemporary art work. By categorizing them, the different institutions contrasted one another to reveal information about the overall genealogy of *Kunsthallen*.

Among the institutions visited, *Kunsthalle Karlsruhe* and *Kunsthalle Mannheim* fell into the Museum *Kunsthalle* category. *Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt* was a Blockbuster *Kunsthalle*, while *the Kunsthalle Rotterdam* fit into both the Blockbuster and Contemporary *Kunsthalle* category. *Kunsthhaus Bregenz* was an example of a Contemporary *Kunsthalle*. Within these categories, particular attitudes about museum architecture, the display of art, the mission and responsibility of the museum in 21st century society, and the relationship between commerce and culture in the museum setting emerged according to the type of *Kunsthalle*.

Conclusions

Among the genealogy of *Kunsthallen*, each category represents a different approach to the display of contemporary work. Contemporary *Kunsthallen* considered contemporary architecture pivotal to its image and success and the museum as a source of excitement and entertainment as its primary mission. They also considered it of the utmost importance to generate and fabricate new works in partnership with living artists. Blockbuster *Kunsthallen* had the traditional *Kunsthalle* philosophy of ‘*Kunst für Alle*’ or ‘Art for All’ as its mission, making attracting the widest audience, particularly a non-museum-going audience, its priority. Education and approachability were equally important to Blockbuster *Kunsthallen*. Contemporary architecture was of secondary importance to Blockbuster *Kunsthallen*. Museum *Kunsthallen* were also tied to the *Kunst für Alle* philosophy as well as to the preservation of cultural heritage. Each category of *Kunsthalle* found its own balance of funding, including sponsorships, state and national money, and various income-generation programs to make up its yearly budget, and made no claims to criticize the relationship between art and commerce in contemporary art.

Recommendations

As the *Kunsthalle* inquiry relates to Lexington’s ability to support a new institution, it is difficult to recommend one type or the other, as the funding structure in Europe for art institutions is very different from that of America. However, as the University of Kentucky Art Museum would be most similar to a Museum *Kunsthalle* approach, I recommend a new contemporary art institution model itself after a Contemporary *Kunsthalle* model: a non-collecting institution with contemporary architecture, a mission to appeal to the public as a source of entertainment as well as to work with artists to commission and fabricate new artworks.