

RELAX

Christoph Meier, Ute Müller, Robert Schwarz, Lukas Stopczynski

18 January – 6 March 2022

MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna

Fluorescent tubes are flickering within the mirrored ceiling suspended below the historical coffered plafond of the MAK DIREKTION—the former Director's Office that is now open to the public as a new exhibition space—, manifesting a bewildering feeling between unease and curiosity. The lowered ceiling declares the size of what is the dematerialized interior of a bar, a social sculpture with only three beverage vending machines alluding to its former function, allowing visitors to buy drinks. The deep humming sound of the automats' refrigeration units is acoustically amplified, forming an omnipresent body of sound in the otherwise dark and deserted space,

RELAX is the latest variation of Christoph Meier, Ute Müller, Robert Schwarz, and Lukas Stopczynski ongoing series of installations in reference to the legendary "Loos American Bar", designed by Adolf Loos in 1907/08 in the heart of Vienna's 1st district. Over the years, the artists have been creating to-scale, location-specific variations of the architectural icon that is only 27.36 m² in size, but seems to expand infinitely behind its partly mirrored walls. From episode to episode, the artists have broadened their repertoire of cross references pertaining to the Loos Bar's interior using a range of materials and growing levels of abstraction into complete dematerialisation.

The bar as a social space and temporary counter-universe transcending everyday life and societal roles into the realm of excess has almost entirely disappeared during the pandemic. Social life has come to a stop or has moved outdoors. Instead of the interior of the Loos Bar the artists take it's familiar outer façade as a point of departure for RELAX, conjuring up a dystopian scenario: In place of the three welcoming doorways of the original entrance portal, RELAX presents three self-service machines, quoting the portal in scale. A bar without barkeepers, without guests or music, and nowhere to sit down: The only social interaction is that between human and machine: each time visitors use one of the automats to buy a drink, the sound of their performance is cranked up and the ceiling lights start flickering in tune.

Besides drinks such as takeaway cocktails, bottle miniatures, mixers, and a special brand of American beer, the machines also dispense specific artist editions: RELAX branded bottle openers and lighters, tiles and mixtapes from earlier Loos Bar projects and a limited edition of ashtrays made of melted beer cans.

The mirrored ceiling of RELAX corresponds exactly to the dimensions of the Loos Bar's interior. It is a relic from the previous installation by the artists, LAX BAR, created in 2019 in a former record store in Vienna's Laxenburger Straße. For the exhibition poster, the illuminated ceiling was staged in the MAK Columned Main Hall as the motif for the exhibition poster.

A historical photograph inspired the concept: The striking entrance portal with its three glass doors and projecting glass prism with the American flag was reconstructed in the 1980s according to the original plans and displayed in the MAK Columned Main Hall, before it was reattached to the Loos Bar's façade. The RELAX installation brings the two architectural fragments together and closes the conceptual circle between reconstruction, copy, and variation of the Loos Bar creating a dematerialized space.

Loos Bar Series —Los Angeles, Brussels, Vienna

Christoph Meier, Ute Müller, Robert Schwarz, and Lukas Stopczynski developed the idea for their project series on the Loos Bar in 2015 during their residency at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles as Schindler scholarship holders. For their first project, LOS BAR, they built a small-scale version of the Vienna Loos Bar using cheap DIY materials, inside a garage of the Mackey Apartments of Rudolph M. Schindler (one of Adolf Loos's students), and ran it as an artists' bar. In the 2017 STROOKOFFER project in Brussels' art space Etablissement d'en face, they constructed the interior of the Loos Bar out of straw mats and used it for performances—an allusion to the "Strohkoffer" [Straw Suitcase], an exhibition room that existed below the Loos Bar in the 1950s. In 2019, as part of the Wiener Festwochen, they developed the third version, titled LAX BAR. This was an even more abstract space: Tiled in white from floor to ceiling and with a mirrored neon ceiling alluding to the infinite mirroring of the original bar, this version's minimalistic patterning represented a negation not only of Loosian opulence but also of any connection whatsoever to the outside world. The fourth version, RELAX, now presented by the collective at MAK Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna takes one step further and now culminates in the bar's complete deconstruction.

(Text: Marlies Wirth/Antje Prisker)

On view until 6 March 2022, MAK DIREKTION

MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna

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