

Palais des Beaux Arts Wien: Legacy and Latency

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The Palais des Beaux Arts Wien is a historic surface dedicated to the projection of past, present and future alike. Hosting a collection of commissioned artworks and texts on a wireless router, the Palais surrounds an Art Nouveau building built in 1908 of the same name with a cloud of data. As a site, it folds time into today. As a host, it questions how what has changed also seems to repeat itself in everyday life; political cycles, socio-economic divisions, media and the art that both inspires and is absorbed by these untethered, wireless and invisible technologies. Creating a conceptually unmarked space between the history of the building in Vienna and its environment, data becomes the interface for the reproduction and representation of art and institutionality in the post-digital age. At the Palais des Beaux Arts, the vernissage is on the trottoir, exhibitions are more-or-less always open, and can be copied, carried around in your pocket and even deleted.

The name Palais des Beaux Arts is a multiple. Popularized in the 19th century as an architectural container for primarily Western European aristocratic wealth and its colonial exploits, this dangling signifier continues to be emptied and filled with varying degrees of intensity across the globe – Madrid, Belgium, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Lille. In 2014, Bernhard Garnicnig came across the Palais des Beaux Arts on Löwengasse in Vienna's third district on his way to the supermarket. At first struck by its ornate presence and the two sculptural globes on its roof that bear an uncanny resemblance to browser icons and dot.com logos, Bernhard began to dig into the building's history with the help of Herr Schleiffer (an antiquarian from across the street) and Eva-Maria Mandl (a cultural historian that grew up in the surrounding neighborhood). Motivated by a desire to explore new forms of collaboration and rewrite the dynamics of institution-artist relationships, Bernhard then began reinstituting the Palais des Beaux Arts by experimenting with how the building's facade and historic graphic identity might comprise the surface of an institution, using a website to express and further format the project as a kind of site-non-site. While its institutionality is validated by search engine optimization, a community of artists, and an ongoing program of events, Palais des Beaux Arts Wien in fact has no keys or official access to the Palais des Beaux Arts on Löwengasse. The Palais des Beaux Arts didn't always exist as a paradox though, and because of the overwhelming historic conditions it has inherited by adopting this particular building and this particular name, it's important that the project continues to address institutional forms of matter, memory and void.

To start, a rough timeline: 1898; Atelier Bachwitz is founded in Vienna by Arnold Bachwitz and begins publishing and distributing lifestyle magazines and fashion catalogs internationally. 1908; Palais des Beaux Arts is built on Löwengasse 47 as the central headquarters for Atelier Bachwitz where it also hosts fine art exhibitions. 1930; Arnold Bachwitz dies of natural causes. 1938; Because of the family's Jewish heritage, Atelier Bachwitz falls under the rule of the Nuremberg Race Laws and undergoes Aryanization. As a result of this seizure, their publishing rights to several internationally distributed fashion magazines are revoked. At this time it has around 320 employees. 1942; Rosine Bachwitz, primary caretaker of the Atelier and wife of Arnold Bachwitz, is murdered in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. 1945; Rosine and Arnold's daughter Alice Strel dies under unknown circumstances during a death transport from Prague. 1946; Atelier Bachwitz becomes the property of the Republic of Austria, the company existing almost exclusively on paper and only publishing minimally. 1958; Atelier Bachwitz is officially dissolved. 1991; The Palais des Beaux Arts building is renovated and put under historic protection. 1998; The Generali Insurance Company purchases the building as one of their real estate holdings. 2003; 20,000 outstanding shares of the company's stock are returned to descendants of the Bachwitz family and their relations. 2014; Palais des Beaux Arts is reinstated as an immaterial institution by Bernhard Garnicnig.

In 2017, Bernhard invited Seth Weiner to work on a project for the Palais based on a series of watercolors he had been doing in his basement that related to catalogs produced by Atelier Bachwitz. Throughout the process of researching and working on the commission, they began to discuss how different meanings and intentions behind the term 'occupation' collide in the Palais des Beaux Arts. On the one hand, occupation is part of the logic of fascism that ultimately led to the genocide that the Bachwitz family were victims of under National Socialism. Inversely, it's part of a post-'68 logic and used as a conceptual, situationist strategy that assumes an alternative set of values in relationship to ownership; here, appropriation becomes emancipatory, and occupation, a form of political resistance. In both cases, 'occupation' implies a set values that is meant to upend an accepted order, but used to very different ends and through very different means, and with very different intentions.

Already by 2017, Bernhard had begun to feel he had reached the limits of where he could take the Palais project and had become somewhat exhausted by building and maintaining the collection and acquiring the necessary funds. Based on what he had been thinking about conserving the collection and solidifying its relationship to the site, the ongoing discussions about occupation, and the need for the institutional past to be addressed more directly in light of the current Austrian right-wing government's ties to a history of anti-semitism, Bernhard invited Seth to continue his involvement with the project as Artistic Director.

The following is an edited conversation between Sarrita Hunn (Temporary Art Review, editor), Seth Weiner and Bernhard Garnicnig around some of the issues surrounding the transition process.



Joe Hamilton. "Appraisal" (excerpt) Collection of Palais des Beaux Arts Wien.

Sarrita Hunn: When I first heard about Palais des Beaux Arts Wien and how it was going through this particular transition, one of the things it reminded me of was an article James [McAnally] published here on Temporary, "[The Work of the Institution in an Age of Professionalization](#)," a kind of "Manifesto for an art organization we can live in and with" – specifically point number eight:

VIII. To age well, to sustain or end well. An organization is also a kind of organism and it must not simply last, but live. As it ages, it must either retain an essential vitality through evolution of concept or form or it must end appropriately, supporting others still in its fall.

There comes a point when, for a lot of projects and institutions, it is no longer sustainable for the founder or the director to continue and it must be decided whether the institution needs to end or make a significant transformation or transition. So, I

wanted to start by asking Bernhard: What were your thoughts behind the decision whether to end, transform or transition the project?

Bernhard Garnicig: For me, the Palais des Beaux Arts Wien was a way of researching what an institutional model and practice for web-based art could be. Before the Palais, I'd worked through several temporary organizational structures for art production; artist-run spaces, the construction of artist identities and convening ideas and spirits in collective exhibitions and experiences. What is really special about the Palais building is that it has been there before me. So, there wasn't really ever a choice of not continuing – the Palais is an ongoing thing.

One of the qualities of modern institutions as we know them is that they seem to be instituted with the idea that they will always exist – compared to artist-run spaces, which are more temporary expressions of what a group of artists deem necessary to develop their audience, practice and community. Other theories around institutionality propose the Institution as a social imaginary, expressions of desires and intentions which have always existed because we as a people want them to exist – like the institutions of Law, Libraries or Marriage. Once I understood that perspective of the institutional, there wasn't a choice not to continue. The only choice was to figure out how the legacy that the Palais process has created would be stabilized and in which other version it could continue after the four years I had worked on it.

SH: The ninth point of this manifesto is to “To create a continuity of history.” It seems like both you and Seth are focusing the transition around that to some extent – both within the project itself and also the project's relationship to the site. What is the role of the ‘continuity of history’ in relationship to this project? And how are you approaching it similarly, or differently, or trying to coordinate that?

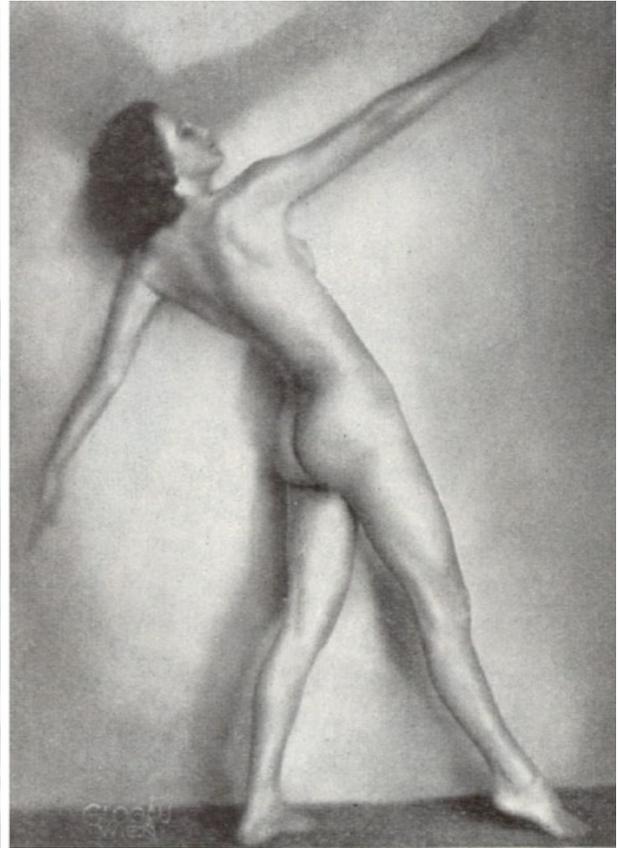
Seth Weiner: One of the things is that there are multiple strands of history and intentions at play. On the one hand, you have the building and the name Palais des Beaux Arts, which is also sort of detached from itself. The name is physically attached to the building as signage, but what is the name? There's the history of the family that initiated it, the history of the neighborhood surrounding it, the political history which created several gaps that become a part of that continuity, then there's Bernhard's work and representation of it. It's a really complex question. Because of these multiple strands of history taking place, for me the name on the building becomes a site where they all overlap; or at least meet in a somewhat fragile way. Bernhard picked up a certain history and to some degree is continuing it, but he's also creating a new history that's nested within it.

One of the difficulties for me coming in as the new Artistic Director is the question of how to create continuity with an awareness of its impossibility and its destructiveness. What are some of the ways multiple strands of history and intentions can be represented and carried on, however much they seem to be at odds with one another? I've been trying to define what the institution's mission was before I was asked to be a part of it, along with some of the ways I interpret not only Bernhard's intentions, but

also what Atelier Bachwitz had done after having adopted and reconstructed the Palais des Beaux Arts name, then what was done in their name (while they were being forcefully occupied), and then how it came to be that the building was just hanging around. An important point for me is to try to recuperate and represent these layers while simultaneously looking forward, without becoming moralizing.

BG: This is really exciting when going back to the idea of *passing on* an institution as a way of introducing instability into the way it's run. Passing something on is a way of destabilizing a process and introducing new questions to it. What I'm really excited about, through seeing how you [Seth] have started to pick up the project, is how the institution reveals itself as having these multiple layers of histories – and continuing multiple histories is how you are manifesting that into projects that continue to build the institutional character. Instead of seeing the institution as something that has been given to someone, it has been passed on to you to care for and realise your own intentions. It only prescribes the continuation of a transformation in the same way that I've picked up the history of the building, but also in how during my time we disregarded some of the historical aspects that were already there when I started. In a certain way, the institution was also passed on to me as it is being passed on to you. It's always happening and I think it's interesting in how that manifests in this project specifically.

SW: Yeah, and also for me it was about thinking into the future of it as well. You [Bernhard] first encountered it, or kind of picked up the institution, from the neighbourhood where it had been sitting in a somewhat neglected state. The idea of legacy within this project could also maybe be thought of as latency, and I would like to see it become a model for an institution that continually questions its own structure. Maybe it's picked up for some years, transformed, and then gently placed back on the shelf for someone else to adopt. The Palais survived without someone directing it for quite a while. Yet, how does it go back to being in-between states after having been fostered for some time? I would hope that although the name's relationship to its site and past remains somewhat unstable, it continues to accumulate, absorb and even reject the trajectories and pressures placed upon it.



Die Moderne Welt # 7, 1938, Published by Atelier Bachwitz, (L) Excerpt from Page 8, Original Caption: Ein Blick in die Zukunft. (A look into the future.) (R) Excerpt from Page 40, Original Caption: Das Geheimnis der Schlanken Wienerin ist Waldheims Entfettungs-Tee. (The secret of the slender Viennese is Waldheim's slimming tea.)¹

SH: To build on this direction, the full text of the ninth point in the manifesto says:

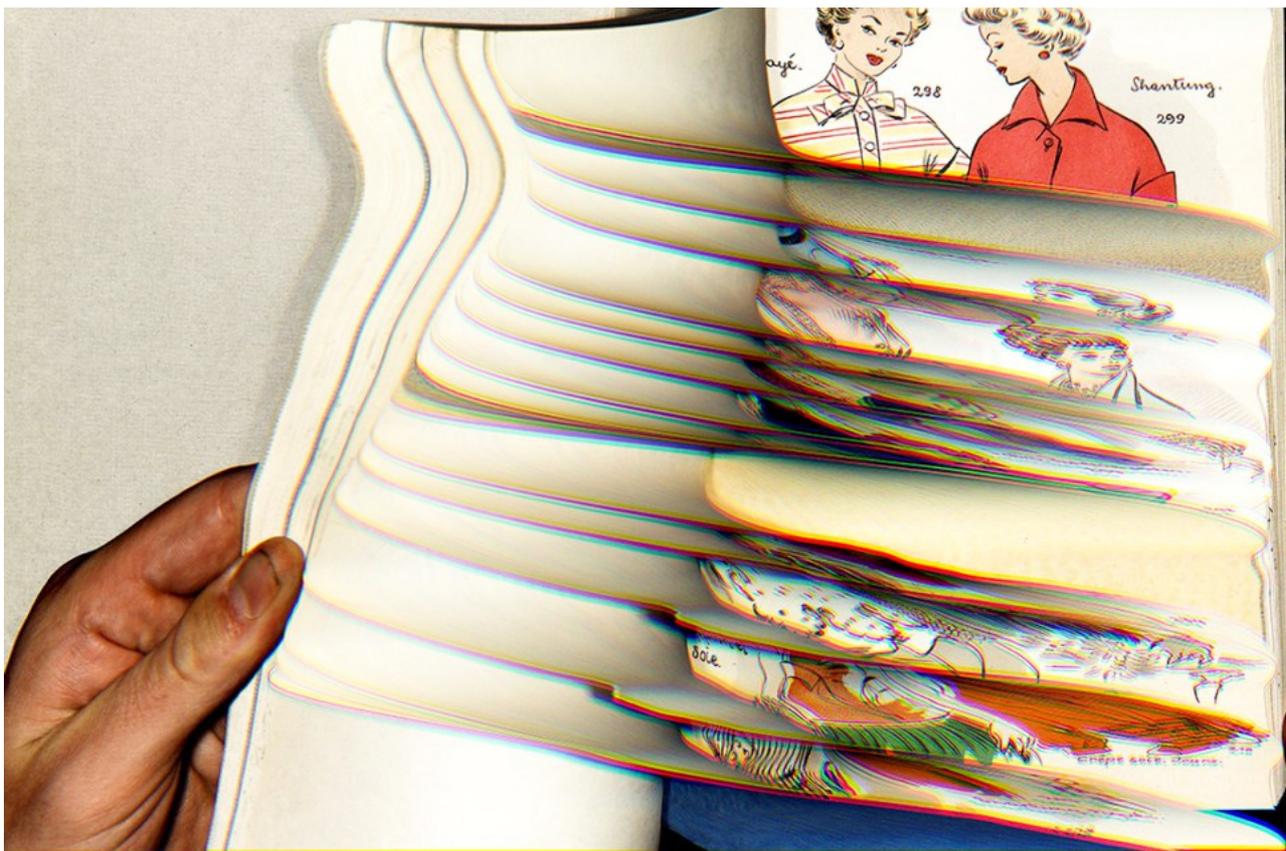
IX. To create a continuity of history. We aren't operating to sustain ourselves in a perpetual present: we inherit complex histories, we are a home for a time, and we propose alternate futures. We do not always need to live into the futures we propose: this is the after-life of the institution, embedded in its present.

I'm really interested in this way you're talking about the relationship between the past, the present, and the future, but I also feel like there's a sort of implicit future in how the Palais is organized. Maybe that future is defined by how you're dealing with the past in a sense, but I'm interested to know if either one of you (Seth in particular) feels like there is this kind of implied future (or 'social imaginary' as Bernard has mentioned before). I'm trying to think of how your relationship to the site – as an institution – is very different than other institutions' relationships to the site. What is particular about your iteration of the Palais des Beaux Arts in its relationship to these past, present, and potentially futures?

SW: Are you asking: Do I have some sort of ultimate goal or is there a specific social imaginary envisioned at the end of it? I would say nothing monolithic other than that the building will continue as it is and the idea would be to start to re-attach some of its histories to the site more directly.

SH: To reframe the question in a different way: Why do that? What's the point? I understand what the project is trying to do, but I'm trying to get more to the why. Why put these histories in relationship to this site? There's an implied reasoning for that and I wanted to know if maybe you could articulate that a little bit further.

BG: It's not something that I came up with but Deleuze's take on instincts and intuition is that we try to find satisfaction for our tendencies as humans in the institution. Reflecting on the research that I've done in the past few months, I came to the point where I'm highly doubting that Palais des Beaux Arts Wien has anything to do with an institution in the sense of a cultural or social institution. I don't think it has been an institution in itself before – I think it is a manifestation of a kind of built thing that exists in an environment that leads us to ask questions and say things about institutionality and about other institutions and about the nature of institutions. I think what Seth is doing now is to try and find satisfaction for his tendencies in an institutional form. Those tendencies are manifold and come from very different personal sources and directions. It's not about building an institution, because maybe institutions can't be built? Perhaps they all exist already and they are just a synthesis of our desires and our tendencies?

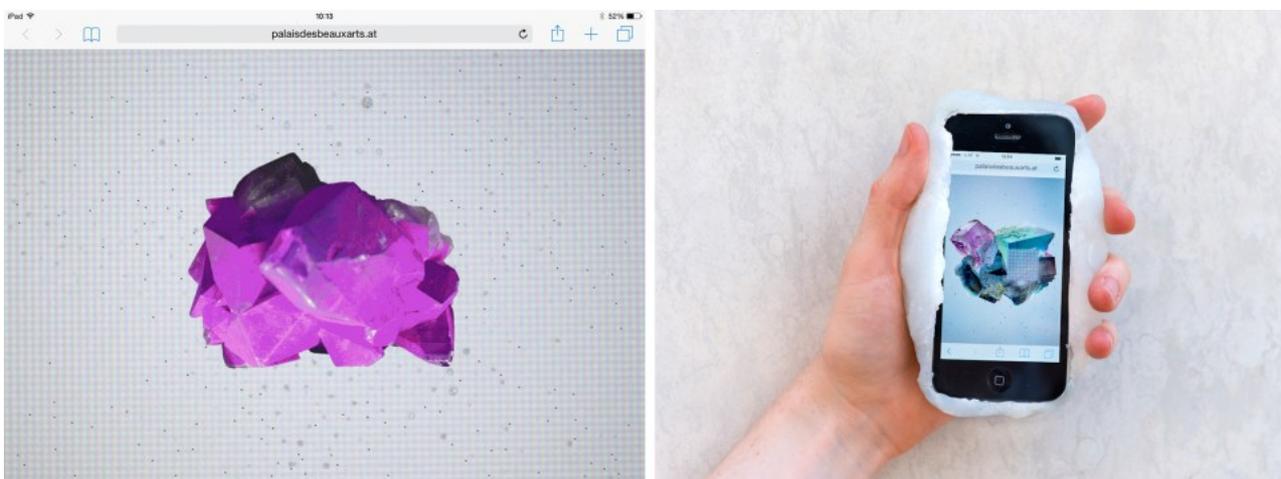


"Chic Parisien" scan. Published by Atelier Bachwitz.

SW: One of the ways I think about this project is that it provides a structure for some of my own tendencies as well as raises questions about Vienna's current relationship to the past. The building, and name attached to it, house a confluence of political and artistic impulses by embodying a conflict between the history of a place and the drive for producing a present amidst, and in spite of, that contest. It's hard for me to interpret

the project in a conventional sense as an institution, but it does become a site where the components of multiple institutions collide. There's this urban-mysticism aspect in the idea of it being latent, a violence in its history that is invisible in its loss, and there's the situation where works are being commissioned for a digital collection that is under seemingly constant construction. How do you deal with these components when you don't have a physical space? What is the form for this immateriality? How do you access it, share it, and experience it in a collective way – if at all? As more works are formalized into a collection that mimics some of the more traditional forms of artistic institutions, but doesn't use the same tools, values, or points of access; how does the project of the Palais become something that's accessible in ways that it previously wasn't? Whose history is represented in its projection? Whose history is omitted and maybe even destroyed in the process? For me, this is one of the tendencies; to look more closely at the context, construction, history and performance of a site.

But why use this building? Why do these sorts of things using the name? I think in some ways it's because the narrative of this building and its family has survived a series of gaps and interruptions that I feel connected to because of being Jewish. Also, in its beginning phase, Arnold Bachwitz used the name Palais des Beaux Arts in an act of appropriation. The building was never intended to house the spoils of the aristocracy, instead it was thought of as a sort of factory where the Beaux Arts would be produced. If you look at what this collection is doing now, it's not that there's a whole department of experts who have studied art history and decide what gets bought, sold, traded and shown. It's essentially one person: Bernhard. He's worked through his tendencies by commissioning a group of different positions that were surrounding him, ones he'd been influenced by and excited about, then somehow tried to find a way for that work to continue beyond the opening, beyond the traditional exhibition format and climate-controlled storage room, and onto a hard drive (where most of our ideas live anyhow). In terms of the institutionalization of art in this way that things are collected, preserved and curated, I think the strategy of adopting a name that just barely survived a hostile takeover, then using data as the material, makes sense in a kind of perverse way. The collection and history is somehow living, and can now self-replicate and spread beyond conventional understandings of material.



Rosemary Lee. "Artifacts" (excerpt) Collection of Palais des Beaux Arts Wien.

BG: It's really interesting that you bring up the collection because it solely consists of commissioned artwork that have been specifically made for that place by artists engaged (through their work) with the site. To date, we have a collection of eleven browser-based artworks stored in an offline environment and five texts online. One of my intentions was to take web-based art out of the infinite scroll and content engagement optimisation that had taken over a primarily community driven the web by then. By producing these artworks, we're also producing displays and re-produce their framings, attempting to create a vantage point that we all share – because there is no 'inside' of this institution. We are all outside; nobody has a key! Making these works was an impassioned attempt to figure out what that place is and what it means.

In a sense, the work you [Seth] are doing now is finding the ways the institutional enters a place, a site, a work or a history. In this case, it seem to be about the way we institutionalize History and how that plays out in our consciences and consciousnesses. We *intend* to be that what allows us to do that which we would like to live among. I think that's where I see the relation between the institutional and the institution and the question, *Why the hell do that?* The collection (or the commissions) is essentially a situation created to allow a place like this to be made.

SW: For me, it hasn't been a question of why. That was clear right away when I encountered the project and what was exciting about it. How, though, is still unresolved and I think this is where new questions of 'why' will continue to infect its representation in an almost Talmudic spiral of questions. The production of place is going to come from different positions on what constitutes a place, and in searching for different ways of approaching that production. Not only to inhabit the multilayered site of the Palais but rearrange and construct it to some degree. And then I would say collecting these positions, or making that work somehow legibly, is where it gets difficult and really interesting as to how this becomes tied to the physical brick-and-mortar structure of the building, which is maybe one of the more persevering institutions of the whole project. So, how does this process become tied to a material? In a way it's like renaming, using different artistic positions to highlight and challenge aspects of the very material it references. For me, the ideal situation would be for the project to continue accumulating different positions about what constitutes place by working with the palimpsest of its institutional surface; and somehow in the process keep the Palais des Beaux Arts signifier dangling...

For more on Palais des Beaux Arts Wien see the recent Issue 7.1 / 2018 of continent., edited by Bernhard Garnicnig and Maximilian Thoman.

Seth Weiner (USA, 1982) became the Artistic Director of the Palais des Beaux Arts Wien in 2018. Containing performance and proposal simultaneously, Weiner's work employs a wide range of media in which he explores the gaps between architectural fiction and social convention to create both actual and imagined spatial environments. Often process-based and collaborative, he has worked with Untitled Collective (co-

founded in 2010), Gruppe Uno Wien, and (since 2012) has served alongside of Gerhard Schultz as the Co-Artistic Director of Berlin-based Care Of Editions, a conceptual business model in the form of a record label.

Bernhard Garnicnig found the Palais des Beaux Arts Wien in 2014 and acted as its Very Artistic Director and Janitor until 2018. In 2014, he co-founded Supergood, a nomadic movement in the ambiguous space between product and performance. In 2012 he co-founded the Bregenz Biennale, a bi-annual festival for ephemeral and impermanent forms of art in the lakeside small town he was born. In 2011, he co-founded continent., a para-academic journal for thought in its many forms. These days he works conceptual narration within emancipatory institutional, corporate and media surfaces, through structures for aesthetic collaboration, as earnest attempts at making paradoxical things work to experience what happens. Also, he is a researcher with *Institutions as a Way of Life*, a research project on institution as creative practice hosted at the CML IXDM FHNW HGK Basel.

1. In 1938, the administrative board of Atelier Bachwitz fell under the rule of the Nuremberg Race Laws and underwent Aryanization. As a result of this seizure, the board – comprised mostly of the Bachwitz family – was replaced, their publishing rights to several fashion magazines revoked. Issue # 7 of Die Moderne Welt (The Modern World) has several pages celebrating the Nazi party's arrival in Vienna on March 13th of 1938. Based on the lack of historical records available about Atelier Bachwitz, it's unclear if the editorial process of this issue was based on a more general Austrian mandate or a result of the publishing company's direct occupation. The representation of idealized female figures however runs throughout the entire output of the company and is primarily framed by a male gaze.



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