

1989 – Exhibition Opening. Austrian Cultural Forum NY. Nov 11, 2009

Speech by Foreign Minister of the Republic of Austria, Michael Spindelegger

Dear Director Andreas Stadler, Dear Artists, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very happy to be here tonight at the Austrian Cultural Forum and celebrate with you the opening of this new and exciting exhibition showing how contemporary video artists reflect on the year 1989.

In this “annus mirabilis,” people in Eastern and Central Europe - longing for freedom, justice and democracy - dismantled the Iron Curtain and tore down the Berlin Wall. Europe as a whole and the entire international system profoundly changed: A new future began.

Twenty years later, throughout the year 2009, there have been a lot of celebrations and commemorative events on 1989 in Austria and all over Europe. I have personally attended many of them.

In the media and the academic world, the main factors contributing to the upheavals are again being analyzed and hotly debated. What were the causes of 1989? What were the conditions that allowed all this to happen in a largely peaceful way? And who were the main actors behind these fundamental changes? Who were the main personalities who brought not only freedom and democracy to millions of people in Central and Eastern Europe, but also ended the long divisions within Europe during the times of the Cold War?

There were probably many of them, and only a combination of extraordinary political leaders together with the courage of the people on the streets brought the changes the whole world was able to witness in 1989.

One of these many actors is here with us tonight. Anna Jermolaeva founded a democratic party in what was still called Leningrad in 1989. She had to escape to Austria because of her civic courage.

We are proud that she has found a new home in Austria and regularly contributes to our artistic and intellectual wealth.

What I particularly like about this exhibition is that it introduces an artistic perspective of what happened twenty years ago and what has been happening in our societies ever since.

Its focus on art also reminds us of the crucial role that many artists, writers, and intellectuals played during, and even more importantly, before the revolutions of 1989. Just to mention a few, these people included Vaclav Havel, György Konrad, and film director Andrzej Wajda.

The artists were able to express indirectly, through the means of exhibitions, performances, concerts, films, and literature, many of the thoughts and ideas banned by the communist regimes. In many cases, art was the only way to speak the truth and galvanize a political opposition that more often than not was marginalized and persecuted and through art found a platform to protest, an escape valve, a window to reality.

It is also important that this exhibition helps us take a critical look at our world today and at the legacy of 1989. What has become of our post-communist societies or our Western societies in general twenty years after the peaceful end of tyranny and dictatorship? Have we arrived where we wanted to arrive?

There are many positive things to report when we take a look at Central and Eastern Europe in 2009. Most former communist countries are now members of the European Union. The EU itself received an important boost of reform just a few days ago through the last ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, which can now enter into force after having overcome many obstacles.

Even though many divisions within Europe remain, and even though - like the rest of the world - Europe is just about to overcome one of the worst economic crises in a lifetime, Europe in 2009 is still largely a zone of peace and prosperity. But artists remind us that our societies today still face many social, economic and political problems and that we cannot rest by indulging in past memories of glory. On the gallery walls, one of the artists of the exhibition – Miha Strukelj from our friend and neighbor Slovenia – has drawn some gigantic construction cranes.

Europe is still in many ways a construction site, despite the many achievements we have attained in the past 20 years. In order to build the Europe we all want to achieve, let us consider what artists and creative minds have to tell us.

So I am very happy to open the exhibition *1989: The End of History or the Beginning of the Future? Video Art Comments on a Paradigm Shift*. I wish it the success it deserves!

Thank you very much.

(Es gilt das gesprochene Wort).