

CUKRARNA

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PRESS RELEASE

Cukrarna, a new space for contemporary art in Ljubljana

On Friday, 24 September 2021 the newly renovated Cukrarna – a new space for the production and presentation of contemporary art – opened its doors to the public. One of the most monumental examples of industrial architecture in Ljubljana, a source of inspiration for a leading quartet of modernists, a modern exhibition space and also an urban landmark that invites us to stroll along the Ljubljana to the eastern edge of the city centre – Cukrarna is all these things. The City of Ljubljana, which has been guiding the extensive renovation of the building – to plans by architecture studio Scapelab – since 2018, has entrusted the management of Cukrarna to Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana. The inaugural exhibition, entitled *The Wonderfulness of Memory*, focuses on the interweaving of past and present as its central theme.

Open days for visitors is taking place on the first weekend of every month until the end of the year.

History of Cukrarna

Cukrarna is defined by its own rich history, which is full of transformations. Constructed in just a few months in 1828, the building began life as a sugar refinery. It was here that the first steam engine within the borders of present-day Slovenia got up steam for the first time in 1835. An accommodation wing was later added to the brick-built main building, from which it is today separated by the Fabiani Bridge. In view of the building's 24-metre height, the walls were more than a metre thick at ground level, reducing to less than half this thickness at the top of the building. The building has been remodelled and added to several times over the course of its existence, with its various transformations dictated by the numerous different uses to which it was put over the decades. Following a serious fire in the refinery in 1858, Cukrarna was converted to a tobacco factory, and then to a textile factory. Later, it was used as a barracks for soldiers. Following the great earthquake of 1895, which it survived thanks to its durable construction, it was increasingly used as emergency housing for the most vulnerable classes of the city's inhabitants. The symbolic identity of Cukrarna was significantly influenced by Slovene modernist writers (Dragotin Kette, Josip Murn, Ivan Cankar, Oton Župančič, Ivan

Prijatelj, Cvetko Goljar, Radivoj Petruška, among others), whose works contain frequent references to the state of the building. The building had in fact been slowly deteriorating ever since the second half of the nineteenth century, and although individual parts of it had been repaired from time to time, most of Ljubljana's largest building (in terms of volume) had essentially been left to decay.

Scapelab's architectural design

The project by Marko Studen, Boris Matić and Jernej Šipoš of architecture studio Scapelab was based on the history of Cukrarna, the planned new content and future orientation of the building, and the poor state of the existing structure.

"Analysis of the state of materials before the start of the renovation showed that the walls were on the point of falling down. Together with the City of Ljubljana and the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, we saved Cukrarna at the last minute. Had we not done so, it would have suffered the same fate as the Kolizej complex in Ljubljana or the former Rakusch Mill in Celje."

An essential part of the renovation was structural rehabilitation that reinforced the dilapidated existing structure to the point that it meets modern standards and at the same time gave the building a wholly independent new inner structure. The exterior of this former factory with its 366 windows has protected monument status and represented the part of the structure which the architects wished to preserve, since this was essential for maintaining the identity of Cukrarna. For this reason the external walls were supported during the renovation phase by a protective steel structure, after which the original brick structure was consolidated by the injection of concrete at specific points. The supporting structure from the construction phase has fulfilled its function and today the entire building rests on new composite concrete walls in the interior, supported by concrete piles sunk to a depth of 20 metres. The composite wall is topped by a concrete cornice on which a steel roof structure is hung, replacing the previous completely derelict roof. The modern intervention in the emptied-out interior space of the building sees two gallery volumes suspended from the new concrete structure, which means that they place no load whatsoever on the original brick envelope. A total of 500 concrete mixer truckloads and 862 tons of steel were used in the construction process. The new supporting structure rests on the "bathtub" walls around the newly excavated basement level, the excavation of which was an extremely time-consuming process because of the vulnerable state of the existing walls. A total of 3,000 truckloads of material was removed from the site over the course of more than a year – the time it took to complete the excavation.

The main entrance to the building is from the river side. The forecourt in front of the entrance connects the cycle and pedestrian path running along the Poljanski Nasip embankment. The ground floor is the only part of the building lit by natural daylight; the regulation of light, ventilation, temperature and humidity is envisaged for both gallery volumes. The two floating cubes are clad in perforated sheet metal, which serves an aesthetic purpose by giving a uniform appearance to the exteriors of the new spatial interventions while at the same time meeting functional requirements: concealed under it is acoustic insulation that absorbs echoes in the spacious gallery, along with elements of mechanical installations. The new basement contains a multipurpose auditorium, cloakrooms, visitors' toilets, a

heating plant and a workshop. On the ground floor there is a bar, which the architects have clad in black, in contrast to the gallery, while one of the walls reveals the original brick structure.

“We are really satisfied with how the historical and the modern exist simultaneously in the new Cukrarna. They are defined by the gap between the internal volumes and the building envelope, a gap that is of the correct dimensions and the correct ratio. The visitor unconsciously gets the sense that something brand-new has found a space in something extremely old. Just as contemporary art will.”
(Marko Studen, Boris Matić, Jernej Šipoš)

Contribution to the revitalisation of the urban space

The reconstruction of Cukrarna took place in the context of the Cukrarna Gallery Development Project, which was jointly funded by the City of Ljubljana, the European Regional Development Fund and the Republic of Slovenia. The project was implemented using the integrated territorial investments mechanism, aimed at eliminating degradation and revitalising the urban space. The City of Ljubljana used the full amount of EU funding allocated to the project, a total of 13.5 million euros.

By reconstructing the existing building and regulating the area around it, the City of Ljubljana has improved the urban environment and further revitalised the wider city centre area. It has also removed a physical obstruction that impeded mobility along this part of the Ljubljanica embankment, thereby preventing the optimal connection between the city centre and the urbanised areas in the east of the city. The social aspect of the use of the space has also been improved, since following completion of the project the area has become, thanks to its new content and arrangement, a dynamic and vibrantly social space with a rich programme that is also safer and friendlier and will encourage multiple visits both by residents of the city and visitors to Ljubljana.

Guidelines for the preparation of background documents for a public competition covering regulation of the entire area of the Cukrarna complex were drawn up by the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia in 2009. Reconstruction of the building included the arrangement of its surroundings for the purpose of revitalising the wider city centre area. Above all, the aim was to preserve the building's shell and in this way conserve the memory of the building throughout the entire period of its existence and use.

The Wonderfulness of Memory or the inexhaustible power of art

The context of the location of the former sugar refinery and its history offered Cukrarna's artistic director and exhibition curator Alenka Gregorič a conceptual framework for the exhibition *The Wonderfulness of Memory*, which focuses on the interweaving of past and present as its central theme. The works in the exhibition look at the question of memory as a collective and individual experience or as a matter of feeling and rationalisation, where the curator juxtaposes notes, written records, archives, narratives and found objects. We can thus understand the works as a homage to stories that have been wrested from oblivion and are at the same time interwoven with the memories written into the fabric of Cukrarna as a building.

In view of the largely sombre stories about Cukrarna that have taken root in our collective memory, the curator's decision regarding the conception of the exhibition has gone in the direction of shifting perspective and looking for ways to connect the building's past with contemporary artistic production, while investigating the positive and creative aspects of the work of a quartet of modernists who introduced new ideas, new themes and new expressions to Slovenia's cultural space. The exhibition title *The Wonderfulness of Memory* derives from a reflection contained in a letter from Dragotin Kette to Ivan Cankar: "And I also laughed at your credulity, how you so love to believe the wonderfulness that spill from the mouths of my friends, wonderfulness that only become wonderful because of their wonderful memory." The narrative that emerges from a reading of the letters that make up the correspondence between the two writers is one of a transition from past to present, since it turns out – as is so often the case – that the writers of the Slovene modernist movement were plagued by similar problems to those facing artists today: they were misunderstood and disrespected – yet their faith in the power of art never waned and they persevered steadfastly in their mission.

Fifteen contemporary artists present their works at the international group exhibition *The Wonderfulness of Memory*: Rosa Barba, Sophie Calle, Janet Cardiff, Jimmie Durham, Vadim Fishkin, Teresa Margolles, Ernesto Neto, Adrian Paci, Lia Perjovschi, Marjetica Potrč, Tobias Putrih, Miha Štrukelj, Aleksandra Vajd/Anetta Mona Chisa and Samson Young.

The human need to preserve different types of audio and visual recordings can be identified as one of the narrative threads of Rosa Barba's 35mm film *From Source to Poem*. Through it she encourages us to think about the value of remembering, about the need to keep records for future generations. Personal experience and the painful memory of unexpected loss are the central threads of *Exquisite Pain* by Sophie Calle, a subtle translator of personal testimonies into the language of art, above all through the power of words and photography. Vadim Fishkin's work *Dark Times* reminds us, through the ticking of clocks, that every part of our life is just one of the sounds in the march to the end, just one of the sounds that inexorably count down the minutes from the first moment to the last, from Big Bang to black hole. The eternal evanescence of the moment is something we can trace in the video work *Sonata for Smoke* by Samson Young, which draws our attention to the usually invisible instruments with which video and film are created. The capitalisation of time – its optimal use and minimal loss in the working day – is the theme of *The Column* by Adrian Paci. With *The Forty Part Motet*, a reworking of the motet *Spem in alium* by the sixteenth-century English composer Thomas Tallis, as sung by Salisbury Cathedral Choir, artist Janet Cardiff investigates memory and the reception code of the audience. Miha Štrukelj offers an account of the creation of the concrete building that contains his works through a series of compositions that at first glance seem abstract, one of which he has created *in situ*, on a concrete wall in the Cukrarna basement. By reading miscellaneous professional literature and works of fiction, watching films, listening to music and examining other documents of cultural value from the past, Lia Perjovschi creates "cosmic spheres" from which ideas and comments, sentences and statements, information and facts emerge like sunbeams.

The interpretation of ideas and formal and architectural solutions from recent history is one of the key elements of the artistic practice of Tobias Putrih, who, after careful analysis and interpretation of designs by the Italian industrial designer Enzo Mari, created his own designs for furniture for the Cukrarna library, a project he calls *Walkingstick*. Aleksandra Vajd and Anetta Mona Chisa's interventions in the space introduce an ambivalence of appearance to its dramaturgy that draws

attention to the possibility of alternative views and readings. In *Recados Póstumos*, Teresa Margolles places fragments of suicide notes on the marquees of abandoned cinemas as though they were movie titles. Jimmie Durham shows us, with his assemblages *Joe Hill Painting 1* and *Joe Hill Painting 2*, that life is not a retreat from art and art is not a retreat from life. The works are props from his film *The Pursuit of Happiness* (2003) and, at the same time, witnesses to the search for harmony and compositional coexistence among ephemeral and discarded materials. Marjetica Potrč is represented at the exhibition by *The House of Social Agreement* and the series *Earth Drawings* and *Drop City and Das Archipel*. Using the tools of anthropology and sociology in conjunction with art and architecture, the artist reveals the importance of coexistence and the search for sustainably oriented modes of responsible human management of nature. Ernesto Neto's work *Life is a River*, created for the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012, can be seen as a reflection of the artist's desire to link his own creative practice to Indian culture.

The exhibition is complemented by a catalogue, the design of which followed the principle of cooperation and the inclusion of a range of collaborators. Catalogue editor Alenka Gregorič consulted each of the artists on possible versions of a text on the work presented at the exhibition. The basic proposals were that the artists themselves would propose a writer to write a new text on the work, that she would propose a writer, or that the artist would contribute the text themselves. The diversity of the material submitted dictated the dramaturgy, design and art editing of the exhibition catalogue, with the result that it has become both a document of the exhibited works and a book of different contributions, different formats and different authors. The catalogue contains texts by Corina Apostol, David Crowley, Oscar Gardea, Alenka Gregorič, Birte Kleine-Benne, Sarah Messerschmidt, Alva Noë, Barbara Predan and Vladimir Vidmar, an interview with Ernesto Neto, diary entries from Samson Young, a poem by Petr Borkovec and texts by the artists Rosa Barba, Jimmie Durham and Marjetica Potrč.

Cukrarna in numbers

366 windows
5679 m² total surface area
1828 year of construction
1858 sugar refinery ceases operation following a fire
2018 start of renovation
23.2 million euros (including VAT) – value of project
4 galleries and 1 multipurpose space
10,000 circles cut in the metal cladding of the galleries
15 artists taking part in the first exhibition

Visitor information

OPENING HOURS

Tuesday to Sunday from 10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m.

ADMISSION

Adults: €6

Students, pensioners, disabled visitors: €4

Family ticket: €14

Free admission: children up to the age of 7, ICOM, SMD, PRESS

Visit us free of charge on the first weekend of every month:

1, 2 and 3 October 2021 from 10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m.

5, 6 and 7 November 2021 from 10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m.

3, 4 and 5 December 2021 from 10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m.

