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Centre for Contemporary Art

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## **SUGAR Industrial Heritage and Colonialism**

Exhibition: 8.10.-23.12.2021 + 7.1.-29.1.2022

Participating artists:

Luz Blanco • Alessandra dos Santos • Samuel Ferretto • Fokus Grupa • Ferenc Gróf •  
Elisabeth Gschiel • Kyo Kim • Zdena Kolečková • Pia Lanzinger • Ilona Németh •  
Resa Pernthaller • Anna Ponchon • Isa Rosenberger • Sandro Sulaberidze



### **Curatorial Statement**

Sugar is a vital energy source, more precisely it is glucose, or grape sugar. For living organisms, glucose is even the main source of energy. The human body too needs it for all activities. It is able to extract the need for glucose from carbohydrate-rich food. However, the body does not need table sugar (saccharose), sweetened foods and drinks.

In the frame of the exhibition project *SUGAR*, artists reflect with their works on the industrial history of sugar production, which goes hand in hand with various forms of colonialism. First, sugar is produced for use as food. In more recent history, however, it has increasingly been used for industrial applications and fuel, such as ethanol.

The history of sugar is first of all a history of cane sugar. Sugar cane has been cultivated for thousands of years. Domestication originally took place in New Guinea. In Europe, the sweetener appeared at the time of the Crusades and quickly enjoyed great popularity. The importance of sugar in modern Europe can be seen in the fact that Christopher Columbus took sugar cane plants to the Caribbean as early as 1493 on his second voyage to America.

A fateful journey in many respects. In relation to sugar, millions of trafficked Africans would toil as slaves on sugar plantations in the “New World” in the coming centuries. It was not until 1888 that slavery was abolished in Brazil, the last country in the Western Hemisphere to do so. The exhibition contributions by Alessandra dos Santos, Ferenc Gróf, Luz Blanco and Fokus Grupa address the issue of slave labour.

The work of Fokus Grupa also highlights the beginning of industrial sugar production in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The so-called Privileged Company of Trieste and Fiume, which held the monopoly for industrial sugar processing and sugar trade in the Monarchy, was established in 1750 on the initiative of the Habsburg Crown by Dutch merchants and processed cane sugar imported from far away.

Even the Imperial and Royal Privileged Sugar Refinery, which was established in Graz in 1821, initially still processed sugar cane and was only converted to refining sugar from sugar beet decades later. The Graz-based artist Elisabeth Gschiel has intensively studied the history of the Graz sugar factory, of which only a few remains can be seen in the district of Geidorf today.

Around 200 years ago, sugar beet, which was now cultivated on a large scale in Europe, became a serious competitor to imported sugar cane. Shortly after 1800, what was probably the first sugar beet factory was built in the Prussian province of Silesia and marked the rise of the European sugar industry. At the time of Napoleon's Continental Blockade, which made the import of sugar cane more expensive, beet sugar experienced a boom. In two graphic works from the 1830s, Honoré Daumier whimsically dealt with the competition between cane and beet. Ferenc Gróf incorporated these sheets into one of his exhibits.

Pia Lanzinger's work deals with an important location of sugar production and seed development. The village of Klein Wanzleben appeared to be a place of importance for the industrial production of beet sugar as early as 1838 and for the systematic cultivation of sugar beet since the 1860s. To this day, the local company is one of the most essential seed producers on a global scale.

Further artworks in the exhibition deal with the history of other actual factories. Isa Rosenberger has looked into the history of the Enns sugar factory. Founded in 1928, the factory was the only one on Austrian soil not to be destroyed during World War II and was thus of great importance for post-war production. In 1988, the factory in Enns was shut down, partly because of cheap sugar competition from Eastern Europe. In 1993, the cultural centre d'Zuckerfabrik was opened on the premises.

Resa Pernthaller draws on a family connection to sugar production in her contribution to the exhibition. Her grandfather ran a Syrupfabrik, i.e. a molasses factory, in Fohnsdorf, Styria. However, it lasted only for a very short time, from 1947 to 1949, because it could not keep up with the sugar beet supply contracts that the Enns factory, for example, concluded with farmers.

There are currently two sugar factories still in operation in Austria, both located in Lower Austria near Vienna, in Tulln an der Donau and in Leopoldsdorf in the Marchfeld. Maybe one still remembers that the Leopoldsdorf sugar factory was due to close in mid-2020. Reportedly due to insufficient beet production quantities. The pressure in view of sugar produced more cost-effectively all over the world may probably also play a role. Since the liberalisation of the sugar market in 2017 on the basis of interventions by Brazil, currently the world's largest sugar producer, the European market has also been open to imports. The Agrana Group, as the owner of the Leopoldsdorf sugar factory, did not pursue the closure after effort have been made on the political level.

The work of Sandro Sulaberidze provides an insight into a different geographical context. He deals with the Agara sugar factory located in the middle of Georgia. In late 2017, it ceased operations and 481 workers lost their jobs. In April 2018, the former workers marched 144,000 steps (about 100 km) towards Tbilisi to protest against the production freeze. Thereupon, operations were resumed with state aid.

The work created by Ilona Németh is of particular importance in the exhibition. For years she observed the fate of a sugar factory in Dunajská Streda, a town 45 kilometres southeast of Bratislava and also the artist's place of residence.

In 1989, ten sugar factories were in operation in Slovakia. The largest and most technologically advanced in Dunajská Streda, built in the 1960s and operating under the name Juhocukor ("Southern Sugar"). Over the years, Ilona Németh observed first the privatisation of the state-owned company, the management of the factory under a European group and then the closure as a compensation deal, finally the dismantling of the plant—all this represents one example among many in the history of transformations in Eastern Europe since 1989.

Based on Ilona Németh's extensive work on sugar production in Slovakia, Kunsthalle Bratislava, in association with the Slovak National Gallery, has developed an international cultural project and successfully submitted it to the EU's Creative Europe programme under the title Eastern Sugar. International partner organisations are Schafhof – European Center for Art Upper Bavaria, Freising; École nationale supérieure d'art de Bourges; T-Tudok, Centre for Knowledge Management and Educational Research, Budapest; Centre for Contemporary Art FUTURA, Prague; and also < rotor > centre for contemporary art, Graz.

The works by Samuel Ferretto, Anna Ponchon and Kyo Kim shown in the current exhibition were created in the context of the École nationale supérieure d'art de Bourges and were presented for the first time in the La Box gallery there.

The exhibition *SUGAR. Industrial Heritage and Colonialism* is part of the arts and culture project *Eastern Europe* funded by the EU programme Creative Europe.

In this context, < rotor > was allowed to participate in a supra-regional exchange on this extremely insightful topic, which illuminates an aspect of European and global industrial history and, in conjunction with this, traces the history and present of colonialisms. Several artists were commissioned with new productions for the exhibition, most of which were preceded by research visits to former or still operational sugar factories and archives.

Margarethe Makovec & Anton Lederer  
Directors duo < rotor >