

# ***A New Exhibition Space Gives Prague's Art Scene Some Spark***

**The New York Times**

The Kunsthalle Praha opens in a former power station with a show exploring how electricity transformed art.

**By Annabelle Chapman**

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**PRAGUE** — The Kunsthalle Praha, which opened in the former Zenger Electrical Substation here on Tuesday, is not the first exhibition space in a former power station. Yet from the start, this privately funded redevelopment opposite Prague Castle is putting electrically powered art in the spotlight with its opening exhibition [\*Kinetismus: 100 Years of Electricity in Art\*](#), running through June 20.

Featuring almost 100 artworks, the exhibition shows how electricity transformed art over the past century, enabling artificial lighting and motion. With the arrival of household electricity in the 1920s, artists had new options available to them: They were no longer limited to static images and reliant on external light sources.

Image

How much electricity revolutionized art is not always well appreciated, said Peter Weibel, the exhibition's curator. Unlike in the field of music, where electric instruments and amplifiers were embraced, he said, "In the art world, unplugged art — like painting and sculpture — is so highly valued, and art that uses electricity is debunked."

"There is a lack of understanding," Weibel said. "This hegemony of painting and sculpture," he added, was "an injustice to art."

The Kunsthalle Praha's opening exhibition shows how the rapid technological advances of the past century inspired successive generations of artists, from the early days of cinematography to computer art. Works by Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy are displayed alongside contemporary works by the Tokyo-based art collective teamLab and the Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, whose "Lightwave" installation greets visitors as they arrive.

Weibel, who leads the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, said the exhibition's starting point was the work of Zdenek Pesanek, a Czech artist who died in Prague in 1965. Pesanek was a pioneer of what is known as kinetic art — art that depends on motion for its effects. (His 1941 book "Kinetismus" gives the exhibition its name.)

Pesaneck had a direct link to the Zenger Electrical Substation building: In the 1930s he designed a cycle of allegorical sculptures for the building's facade, made of industrial materials with built-in neon tubes, and symbolizing concepts related to electricity, such as the principle of an electric motor. Yet the sculptures never made it onto the facade. They were presented at the International Exposition of Art and Another of Pesaneck's works, "The Spa Fountain," featuring two translucent torsos made of synthetic resin, lit from the inside by colored lightbulbs and curved neon tubes, sits at the heart of the exhibition. It was made in 1936 to celebrate thermal spa culture in what was then Czechoslovakia..

"Electricity was such a symbol of modernity," said Matthew Rampley, a professor of art history at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. This was why Pesaneck and his contemporaries found it so alluring, he added.

The exhibition is part of a plan by the Kunsthalle Praha's founders to jazz up the local art landscape. The institution was established by Petr Pudil, a Czech entrepreneur whose career has spanned industries from coal to real estate, and his wife, Pavlina Pudil. The Pudil Family Foundation, which the Pudils set up to promote Czech and international modern and contemporary art, bought the building in 2015. The purchase and renovation cost 35 million euros, around \$40 million, the couple said in a joint interview.

"Our mission was to set up an institution focused on contemporary and partially modern art in an international context," Petr said. In addition to bringing top-quality art to Prague from abroad, the Kunsthalle Praha will also give a platform to emerging artists from Central Europe, he added.

"We have a lot of freedom, because we are a nongovernmental and nonprofit institution," said Pavlina, adding that the Kunsthalle Praha will be funded by the foundation and through membership fees.

There is a shortage of privately funded art spaces in Central Europe, Petr said, because "the culture of giving back is still quite new in post-Communist countries." He added: "The reality is that a public institution does not have enough acquisition capital to acquire important artworks — not only in the Czech Republic, but I would say in the entire region."

"The best postwar and contemporary art is in private hands, and it is very difficult for the public to see it," Petr said. "We would like to fill this gap."

Private ownership also means financial independence in a region where nationalist governments have put pressure on cultural institutions in recent years. "While public institutions should be independent, they are funded by governments, and that often has consequences, to various extents in various countries," said Ivana Goossen, the Kunsthalle Praha's director. "We have seen examples in Hungary or Poland, where the art scenes are quite badly affected."

Petr said that he and his wife expected their investment to have a wider impact on Prague's art landscape. "It is difficult to predict how, but we definitely expect that new

galleries will be opened and that it will somehow be reflected in the model of other institutions,” he said.

“As an entrepreneur,” he added, “I strongly believe that, if you make a core investment, you are definitely creating an ecosystem.”



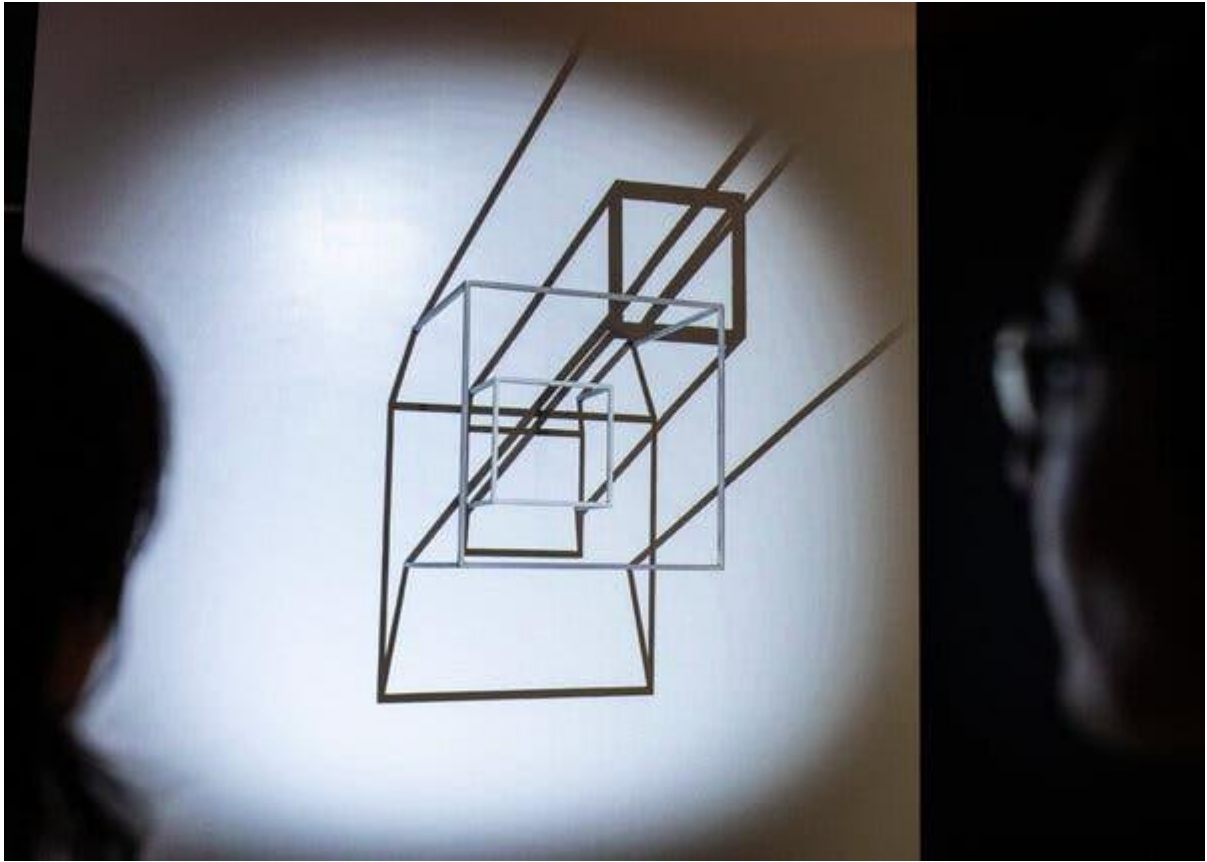
It cost around \$40 million to convert the former Zenger Electrical Substation into an exhibition space © Milan Bures for The New York Times

Kunsthalle visitors posing in Refik Anadol's installation "Infinity Room" (2015)

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“Umbra Triplicata” (2015) by the Budapest-based artist Laszlo Zsolt Bordos © Milan Bures for The New York Times



A view of Prague Castle from the Kunsthalle Café

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The Kunsthalle Praha is funded by the Pudil Family Foundation, set up by Pavlina Pudil, left, and Petr Pudil to promote Czech and international modern and contemporary art © Milan Bures for The New York Times