



## SPEAKEASY SALON

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### Speakeasy Salon #4 – Art versus Decoration

#### "Art emerges when there is surprise"

The salon talks hosted by AHGZ & JOI-Design and powered by Internorga went into the fourth round. The theme this time: art versus decoration.

What makes art different from decoration? Does art in hotels automatically become decoration? What added value does art bring to hotels? These and other questions were the subject of the fourth salon talk sponsored by Internorga in Hamburg. This time, hosts AHGZ and JOI-Design welcomed Heike Iserlohe from Galerie Kunstraub 99 and Le Bistro 99; Ruth Sachse from Galerie Ruth Sachse; David Etmenan from Novum Hospitality; Professor Franz W. Kaiser from Bucerius Kunstforum; Henning Weiß from 25hours Hotel Company, Peter Joehnk from JOI-Design; and Claudia Johannsen from Internorga for an inspiring exchange in the salon of Villa Blohm. As usual, AHGZ editor-in-chief Rolf Westermann moderated the view over the horizon.

#### **Art as part of the overall picture**

Authenticity is important, says interior designer **Peter Joehnk**. "Twenty years ago, hotels still framed cheap calendar pages and called it 'art'," he recalls. "Fortunately, standards are higher today and greater sophistication is required."

"For us, painting a wall yellow and hanging a picture on it is not enough to tell a story," says **Henning Weiß**, chief product officer and member of the strategic board of 25hours Hotels. Context and environment also count. "Art is part of the overall picture," he says. "It is never used without context." He believes hotels should not take themselves too seriously, and therefore art should share a common thread as well as a touch of irony. When it comes to marketing, though, art hardly plays a role: "It's just a side note," says Weiß.





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"We do it the other way 'round, like 25hours," says Novum boss **David Etmenan** about his hotel group's art ambitions. "We give painters complete freedom to create street art that contrasts strongly with hotel environments." With Novum's Niu brand, **Etmenan** aims to establish a young hotel concept that integrates interior design with street art conceived by the creative cooperative "Viva con Agua". Proceeds benefit charitable causes. At Niu Cobbles in Essen, for example, references to the region's mining industry are woven with tiger, eagle and bear heads by artist Björn Holzweg. Clearly, art is not merely "decoration" to the head of Novum Hospitality, operator of 161 hotels. As a leader in the upscale budget sector, Novum wants to make art accessible to the masses in playful ways. According to **Etmenan**, high occupancy rates give the group the opportunity to do so.



**Joehnk**, interior designer of Niu Cobbles, admits he found the concept of contrasting art strange at first. "In hindsight, the results were good," he says. "Although artistic freedom is important, as an interior designer, I always prefer to choose a hotel's art concept."

**Heike Iserlohe**, artist and wife of Dirk Iserlohe, the CEO of Dorint Hotels & Resorts, agrees and thinks it's great to join the art and hotel industries. "It's a way to bring art into public spaces and reach those who ordinarily might not be interested."

"With art, emotions are awakened," emphasises **Etmenan**. However, the effect depends upon the chemistry between art, interiors and atmosphere. "As an interactive force, art makes experiences completely different than those in sterile hotels possible," says the hotelier. "What remains is its memory, which plays again and again in the minds of guests."

**Ruth Sachse** of Galerie Ruth Sachse in Hamburg was introduced to the hotel industry in 2003 when, in cooperation with former insurance company, Volksfürsorge, she curated an art collection of more than 600 pieces from 56 artists for Le Méridien Hamburg. This not only helped the hotel possess one of the largest art collections outside a museum, it also infused art into the brand's DNA. The guestroom card is even a ticket to contemporary exhibitions at the Deichtorhallen centre. "In hotels, art emerges when there is surprise," says



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Sachse. "Art can create suggestions and moments of wonder." Her recommendation for hotels? Soothing, peaceful works of art, especially those by regional artists whose "messages" create connections with guests.



### Real artwork is almost impossible

"I'm an advocate of 'real' art," says **Joehnk**, "yet evaluating what's appropriate for a hotel is difficult for us. So, our projects often have commissioned art and artist collaborations. However, at the end, we always question whether the pieces are still 'real' art - or did we push someone into the decoration corner?"



"Art does not stop when it has a mission, it stops when the artist's freedom is limited," says Professor **Franz W. Kaiser**, organiser of Hamburg's Bucerius Kunstforum the last two years and teacher at the Hochschule



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für Bildende Künste (HfBK). **Iserlohe** agrees. "As an artist, I have taken on commissions in addition to my personal creations," she says. "Ultimately, it's about giving artists the freedom to create their own work, pieces that use habitual imagery yet also bring in something new to express ideas that rub off on people."

How do art and reality relate to each other? Where is the border between everyday life and art? These are questions **Kaiser** has been asking. Museums, above all else, are about protecting and preserving unique works of art, he said. In hotels, art veers towards being a consumer object. Hotels exhibiting works of art by truly renowned, international artists raises conservatory and security problems that come with enormous costs. In most cases, that is not possible, says the art expert. Therefore, an alternative is to find reproductions of well-known artists.



### Conclusion

AHGZ editor-in-chief **Rolf Westermann** questioned if, conceivably, the hotel industry could fuel an art boom. The group unanimously agreed this is not the case. "Art is not suitable for the masses," says **Etmenan**. But it can be used as a vehicle to introduce topics, summarizes **Claudia Johannsen**. And **Joehnk** thinks great progress in hotels' artistic sensitivity has already been made, since they no longer hang up calendar pages. **Sachse**, on the other hand, demands more risk. "Two-to-three-star hotels are always afraid art is too expensive," she says. "I can bring them something at any price. They should be braver!"