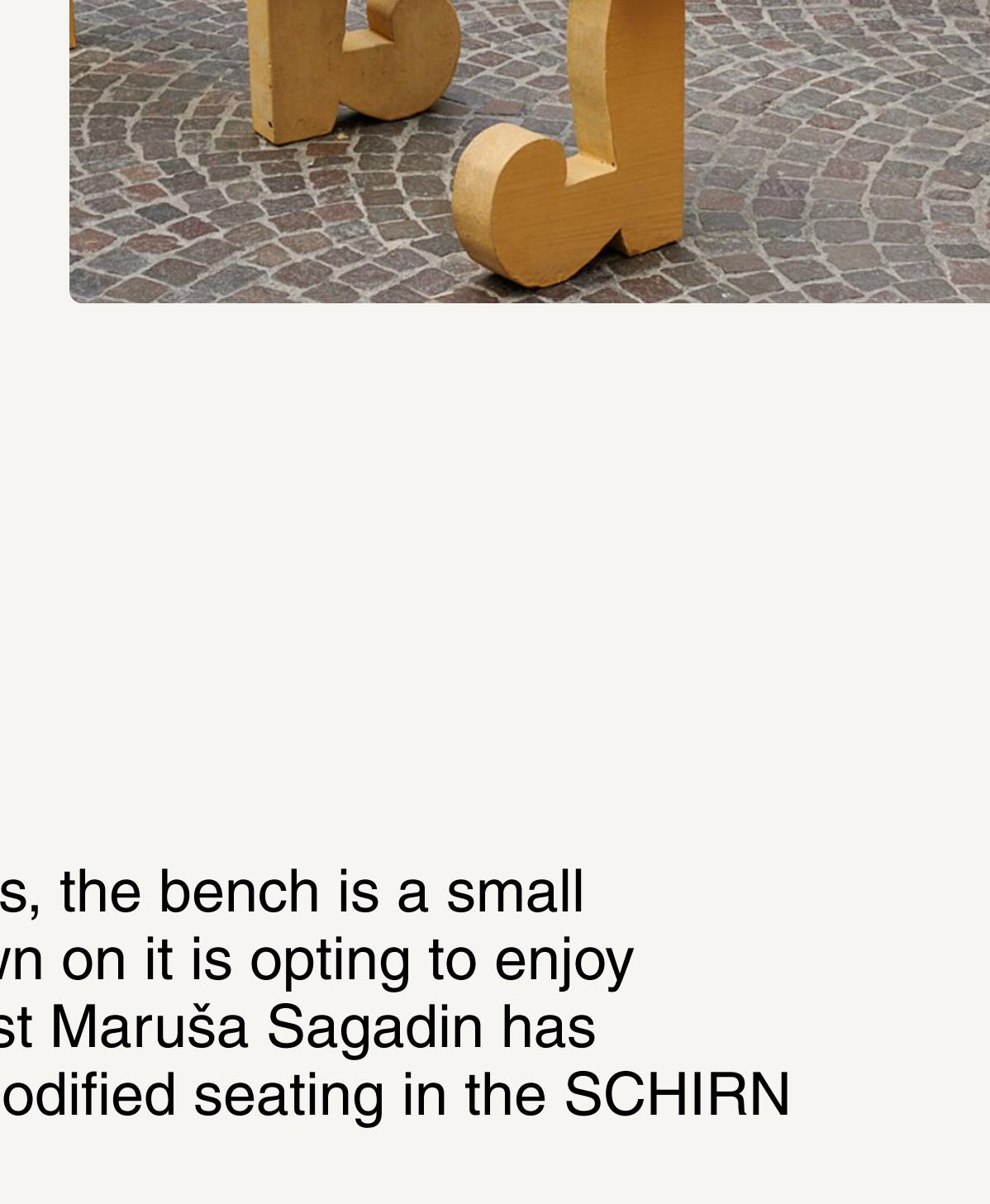


Please be seated! On the (im)possibilities of a bench



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7 min reading time

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CONTEXT

In keeping with the nature of an oasis, the bench is a small cosmos unto itself. Whoever sits down on it is opting to enjoy physical and/or mental time out. Artist Maruša Sagadin has installed precisely such artistically modified seating in the SCHIRN Rotunda.

They are one of those objects that we often encounter in the public realm but to which we only pay any attention when we need them: benches. Be it a park bench, a city bench or, in semi-public spaces, an exhibition or garden bench, are we not always glad when one suddenly crops up in front of us? Especially if we desperately need a rest from hiking or never-ending shopping. By contrast, frequently a park or garden bench is something we specifically head for in order to sit down and think or give our thoughts free rein. Irrespective of where it is located, the bench is always an oasis made of wooden slats (or stone or concrete or steel).

In keeping with the nature of an oasis, the bench is a small cosmos unto itself. Whoever sits down on it is opting to enjoy physical and/or mental time out. We step out of our surroundings and into our very own world on the bench. We are present and yet even before we actually sit down, we have distanced ourselves. Here the calm, there the hustle and bustle. The people hurrying past and those seated. Those who have to reach a destination, and us here on the bench who are simply here, watching the goings-on.



Maruša Sagadin, Luv Birds in toten Winkeln, exhibition view © Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt 2023, photo: Mareike Tocha

Benches are there so we might tarry a while, be it outside, inside, or somewhere in between, as with the SCHIRN Rotunda. From September 21 onwards, the latter will feature MARUŠA SAGADIN's benches, with which she has created much more than "just" a place to leisurely spend time and instead explores topics such as gender, language, architecture, humor, and exaggeration. Sagadin's benches are resplendent in strong colors and shapes reminiscent of Pop Art. Her "Doris" (2016) bench has the cross-section of a Doric column and yet simultaneously strongly resembles the shape of a woman's body. Women have to "bear" a lot, which is possibly why Doris also boasts female accessories such as a necklace and lipstick made of concrete. With her benches, Sagadin creates spaces where we can sit and ponder; on her benches we can relax, run, and perform. Her benches are stages and social places.

An aristocratic lady next to a serving girl? A no-no!

In fact, in the public realm the bench has always been more than just an item of furniture on which you sit. It has also always been political. In the Middle Ages, only those of the same social station were permitted to sit together on a bench. An aristocratic lady next to a serving girl? An absolute no-no.

In 14th-century Tuscany, benches were installed on plazas in order to create spaces for theater performances, street art, and tribunals, and thus promote bourgeois activities and cohesion. At the same time, their architecture communicated exactly what behavior was undesirable. The benches were only half a meter wide, too narrow to allow you to sleep on them. Benches in the public realm are installed by cities and municipalities, and even today their deployment helps dictate where people can or cannot sit and spend time. If certain groups of people are not wanted in specific places, then no benches are provided at all. The bench as a control mechanism.

Or as a gauge of gentrification. In their book which came out in 2019 on benches made of wood, "Bänke aus Holz" (with 60 instructions on how to build your own bench), authors Antje and Susann Rittermann note that according to their own observations, benches built around trees lining Berlin streets tend to disappear if the rental apartments in the particular district have been converted into condominiums. The sisters Rittermann have also determined that there is a striking number of benches in Halle an der Saale, while they are notably absent in Greece. It would seem that Greeks prefer to sit on chairs. Perhaps because chairs, more than benches, invariably have backrests?

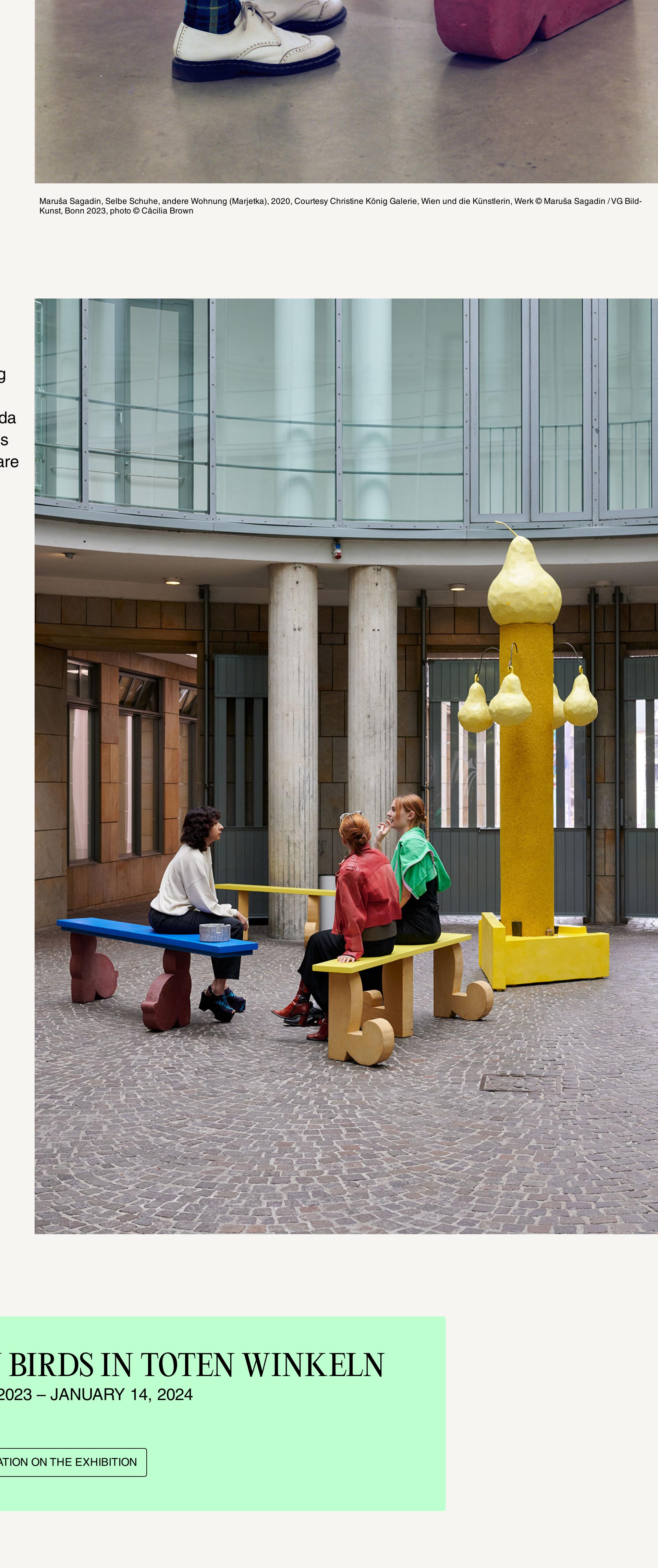
Antje Rittermann und Susann Rittermann: Bänke aus Holz, 2019, Image via thalia.de

Scientists have determined that most people prefer a forward seat slope of 10-15 degrees. Sadly, benches with backrests are fast disappearing. In combination with the appearance of "new" materials for benches, such as concrete and steel, the backrest-free benches do not always encourage you to spend time on them. The bench as a symbol of turbocapitalism? Meaning don't do nothing for too long. Do something! Buy!

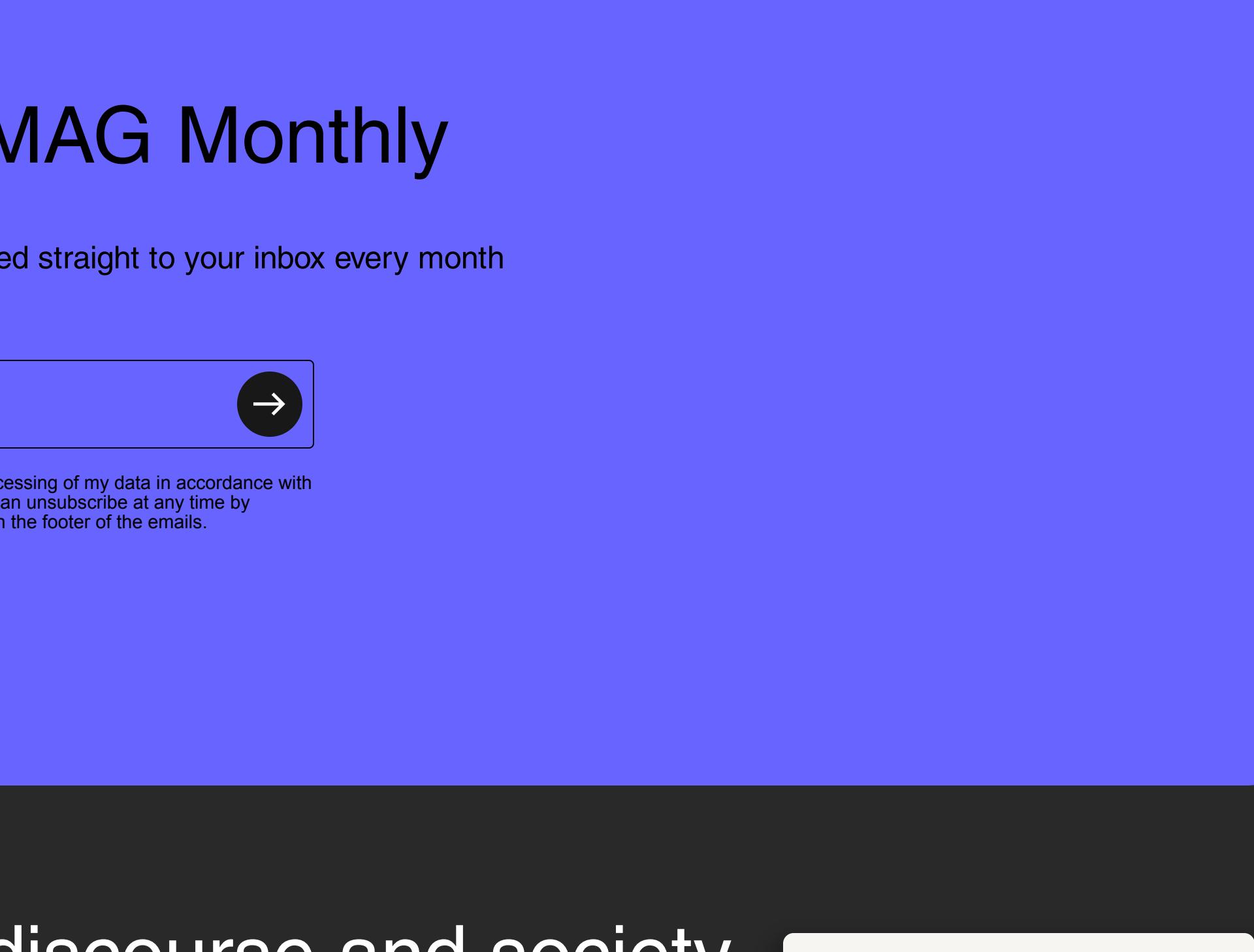
The bench as an expression of hegemonic views?

In the semi-public space of an exhibition, benches help structure the space, guide visitors, and also assist in some works being paid more attention than others. The bench as an expression of a hegemonic view? Who decides which artworks benches are placed in front of and which are left without? What artwork is it worth spending time viewing and which are not worth the effort? Sagadin leaves the way visitors perceive her exhibitions: neither to chance nor up to the institution and designs the tables and benches herself. In this way, these "items of furniture" become part of the overall installation. The bench as artwork. Which includes in the public realm, with Sagadin's "Doris" and "Summer" benches being especially beautiful examples.

Benches as art installations in the public realm are opportunities to make art approachable, to enable you to enjoy it at a sitting. The form of the bench offers truly infinite potential for new interpretations.



Maruša Sagadin, Selbe Schuhe, andere Wohnung (Marieka), 2020, Courtesy Christine König Galerie, Wien und die Künstlerin, Werk: Maruša Sagadin / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2023, photo © Cäcilia Brown



MARUŠA SAGADIN. LUV BIRDS IN TOTEN WINKELN

SEPTEMBER 21, 2023 – JANUARY 14, 2024

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