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Caution, High Voltage!

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The special exhibition “Caution, High Voltage! Electrical Accidents – A Class of Their Own” at Naturhistorisches Museum Wien’s Narrenturm offers a striking and unusually focused exploration of one of the more unsettling by-products of modern electrification: the electrical accident. Rather than treating electricity as a triumphant story of progress alone, the exhibition turns the spotlight on risk and vulnerability.

At the heart of the exhibition is the historical figure of Stefan Jellinek, the internist who, as early as 1906, presented a small but pathbreaking display of preparations and devices documenting the effects of lightning and electric current on humans and animals at a hygiene exhibition in the Prater. His work would eventually lead to the foundation of the Electropathological Museum, popularly known as the “Electric Death Museum,” whose legacy the current show consciously revives and reframes. By bringing together historical specimens, instruments and case studies, the exhibition reconstructs not just the science, but also the cultural perception of electricity as both miracle and menace.

The narrative is organized thematically, leading visitors from the basic physical principles of electrical injury through to concrete accident scenarios and their medical consequences. Historical preparations – often unsettling, but presented with clear contextualization – show tissue damage and bodily traces left by high voltage and lightning strikes, making visible what is normally hidden beneath the skin. These are complemented by documentation of prevention strategies and first-aid practices, bridging past and present in a way that underscores how knowledge gained in early electropathology has directly informed contemporary safety standards.

One of the exhibition’s strengths lies in its deliberate attention to everyday and occupational risk. Electrical accidents are framed not as exotic curiosities, but as persistent hazards in workplaces, domestic environments and leisure activities. The show explicitly addresses phenomena such as “train surfing” among young people, highlighting the lethal consequences of such practices and positioning the museum as an actor in public awareness and prevention. Similarly, craftspeople and workers are identified as key groups still statistically at risk, making the exhibition’s educational dimension more than a general warning; it becomes targeted, socially engaged communication.

Spatially, the choice of the Narrenturm – the former tower for psychiatric patients, now home to the

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Pathologisch-anatomische Sammlung – adds a powerful historical and atmospheric frame. The thick walls and circular corridors convey a sense of continuity with the history of medical collecting and bodily display, while the exhibition's contemporary scenography and didactic materials ensure that the content is accessible and clearly structured. It is an environment that invites thoughtful reflection on how societies document, study and ultimately seek to reduce forms of bodily harm.

The result is a show that is simultaneously "electrifying" and sobering. By juxtaposing early twentieth-century preparations with modern protective devices such as the residual-current circuit breaker (FI-Schalter), the exhibition makes visible a century of learning – and reminds visitors that technological progress always carries a shadow of risk that must be acknowledged and managed. "Caution, High Voltage!" thus succeeds not only as a compelling historical and scientific display, but also as a timely contribution to public discourse on safety, responsibility and the often invisible dangers that still accompany the electrical infrastructure on which our daily lives depend.

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