

DIARY

# WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT

An incomplete list of things I did and did not do during Vienna's "Curated by" weekend

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**"Astoria Artshow" Rooftop Bar, Astoria Garage, Vienna.** Photo: Andreas Tischler/Vienna Press.

**THE PEOPLE OF VIENNA** are hard to please, not least because many of them prefer a bad outcome they can complain about to a happy but boring ending that prompts no further commentary. This attitude results in lifelong animosities between colleagues and competitors and is part of the reason why this year almost became the first without any proper art fair in town. But then, in the final weeks before the city's annual September upswing of festivals and openings, several key figures from Vienna's art world joined forces to create the Astoria Art Show, a new fair-like format organized as a cooperative enterprise by thirty-five galleries united by an understanding that, for now, seems to be holding together the Austrian coalition government of Conservatives, Social Democrats, and Liberals as well: the realization that cooperating with people you dislike still beats a kick in the teeth.

Somewhat logically, the main topics of discussion at the Astoria Art Show opening on Thursday, September 10, were how well everyone was behaving and how pretty the eponymous venue was—a centrally located 1930s garage owned by an antiques dealer turned real estate developer who has made a point of displaying his

phallophilia publicly in the village of Traunkirchen.

After hanging around the rooftop terrace at the badly catered and almost toxically positive Astoria opening for a couple of hours, we went to UA26, arriving just in time to see Robert Coutelas's tender cards and some more surprisingly sensuous art before the apartment gallery became too crowded to move and we just hogged a corner of the kitchen, clinging to our valuable chairs. Afterwards, everyone went to Café Milano, which became popular with students of the nearby Angewandte ten years ago, when the famous Café Prückel faced homophobia allegations and was boycotted. Over time, and especially since smoking was finally banned in 2019, Café Prückel became a hot spot for normies and tourist couples, while Café Milano can, on the right night, represent everything that's lovable about Vienna. I stayed until the bitter end and drank loads because I felt I owed it to the amazing waiters at Milano and to the readers of Artforum, who had, unknowingly, put their trust in me to do some real in-depth reporting.

On Friday morning I skipped the press conference and the "Curated by" breakfast for the same reason: out of respect for my readers and to remain unswayed by the (genuinely nice) people whose festival I was covering, but I also really didn't want to get up at 9 and would have hated to see other people so early in the day or be forced to talk to them.

Instead, a couple of hours later, together with my sister Anna, her newborn daughter, and her friend Irina, I went to visit some of the participating galleries on Schleifmühlgasse and some nonparticipating ones like BEK Forum with works from Elisabeth Kihlström and Galerie3, where an overeager gallerist slightly ruined Margot Pilz's work by talking about it. My sister sounded meaner than a transcript of her words would suggest when she asked me rhetorically to confirm what I had just told her: YOU are writing for Artforum?

She was right, though: As a novelist I really shouldn't be writing about art, but by then it was too late to cancel, so I tried to get her to say something insightful about the artworks that I could use for my article. Unfortunately, she and Irina were wary of my intentions and purposely refrained from saying anything quotable. When I asked for her opinion on a painting, my sister, who taught a class of young painters last year, said she preferred asking questions to passing judgment, which didn't really help me a lot, and I feel that what made her most joyful out of everything we saw were the plastered-over outlets at Galerie König that were not (directly) part of the show.

I told my sister that my initial idea had been to write about how an artist participating in "Curated by" still owes her seven hundred euros from when they were both studying at the Akademie, and I explained that this anecdote of someone borrowing money, deciding to simply not give it back, and instead ghosting the lender for thirteen years, even though they would inevitably come across each other regularly at openings, was representative of a certain self-defeating ruthlessness associated with Vienna's art schools that another person who studied in the same class once described to me as learning to be mean to survive, which, I said, could be educational

to the readers of Artforum, but my sister told me to write about something else.

The people of Vienna are easy to please. Just give them free drinks and a place where they can talk shit and smoke cigarettes and they will be happy. And even though on Friday the organizers of the rooftop bar were so overwhelmed that, at some point, the entire party ended up being just one big queue for the bar, the mood at Astoria could not be soured. Partly thanks to the sweet young artists of Garage Show who hosted the Gallery Bar on the third floor, the vibes were still decidedly good. When security stopped letting people up to the roof: It was fine. When they closed off the terrace, when they reversed that decision, when everybody was sent down hastily and a rumor spread that the building had suffered structural damage and would be impossible to fix: It was all fine. Hell, even when the juicy rumor was proved wrong and it made the rounds that what had been coming down was just plaster: Even that was fine.

So it's all fine in Vienna, in case you were wondering, and I suppose this matches the theme of this year's "Curated by" festival: love. What could not be fine about love? Unfortunately, I had no opportunity to discuss the essay "On Love," written by Ariana Reines, with anyone, because out of the hundreds of people I asked, nobody had read it. I would, however, feel disingenuous if I suggested that there could be any real reason to do so, apart from maybe the Rumi poem she quotes.

On Saturday I went to see some more gallery shows on Eschenbachgasse, surrounded by friends and babies. After almost being bored into oblivion by the curators at Galerie Martin Janda, I was very taken with the gallerist from Exile, and with David Medalla's printing blocks, which the gallerist disarmingly described as a metaphor for love: being carried along for many years through various homes on different continents but never used. Sadly, Exile is one of several Viennese galleries that will close up shop after the festival.

I missed out on visiting my favorite gallery, Sophie Tappeiner, because when we arrived, a performance by Samir Kennedy was in progress and it would have been impossible to enter without disturbing it. We then went to Can, one of Vienna's more remote gallery locations (and not a part of this year's "Curated by" festival), situated in the third district next to a mystical elevated fake square called TownTown, where some works by American artist Teak Ramos were on display. The ingenuity and the playful honesty of Ramos's art were not properly reflected in Anna-Sophie Berger's accompanying text, which reads like the work of someone who has been a little too good at writing funding applications for a little too long.