

ART/AUSTRIA

Drawing attention

A group of Austrian philanthropists are working to shine a spotlight on their country's artists.

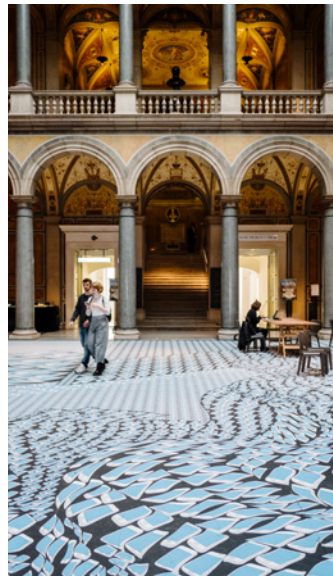
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Quick: name three living contemporary artists from Austria (Gustav Klimt doesn't count, he died a century ago). Can't do it? Don't worry: even avowed art hounds might have a hard time.

Phileas, a philanthropic association driven by a small Vienna-based group of art professionals, is working hard to bridge this missing link in Austrian artistic exposure. Its mission is to give Austrian art its due, supporting it with funding from private patrons and creating the important connections that might place Austrian artists in and at the world's foremost art venues and events.

"We like to believe we're a point of entry to Austrian art," says the group's co-director Moritz Stipsicz, a native Austrian with a background in economics and gallery management. He's explaining one aspect of Phileas's work as we sit in its small but high-ceilinged storefront office on Schleifmühlgasse, one of Vienna's gallery strips, as art-lovers pass by outside. He and art historian Jasper Sharp – a tall, affable British expat whose pedigree includes commissioning the Austrian pavilion in the 2013 Venice Biennial – founded Phileas in late 2014 after recognising an astonishing lack of Austrian artists on show abroad, as well as operational inefficiencies in arts funding at home. Now the organisation has come full circle, not only funding exhibitions and productions but also buying works of art and donating them to Austrian museums.

Another aspect of the group's activities is establishing private patronage in a country where it's not at all a tradition. Austrians depend on (admittedly very generous) state funding to drive not only



1

Upcoming Phileas-funded projects:

Anna-Sophie Berger
This Vienna-born artist's sculptures and writings mix fashion with art.
Smak, Ghent
FEBRUARY — MAY 2018

Gelitin
The Austrian quartet has titillated audiences with performative and mostly sculptural work for the past 20 years. At this exhibition, expect some scatological humour.
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
MAY — AUGUST 2018

John Gerrard
Irish-born Gerrard creates algorithm-based screen works (which look like videos but aren't) that often deal with how humans harvest energy. The artist and his team write their code from a studio in Vienna.
Manifesta 12, Palermo
JUNE — NOVEMBER 2018

Julia Haller
Haller, who lives and works in Vienna, uses various media to produce contemporary paintings.
Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis
SEPTEMBER — OCTOBER 2018

(1) Thomas Bayrle's exhibition at the Museum of Applied Arts, which was supported by Phileas (2) The team (from left): Moritz Stipsicz, Stefanie Reisinger, Jasper Sharp and Bianca Boscu



2



visual art but all culture, especially music. Unlike in the UK or US, Austria doles out many small artists' grants on city, regional and national levels, provides big budgets for museums such as the Belvedere and the Mumok, has a mandate to acquire Austrian-made artworks and even subsidises Austrian galleries' presence at international art fairs. But these programmes often bureaucratically overlap and there's little overview of results. When, for example, an emerging Viennese artist gets a small grant to fund a book, where does the book ultimately go? Phileas asks questions like this and sees art production as an ecosystem.

Early on Sharp and Stipsicz, both in their forties, approached potential supporters with their idea (and, the first year, a short list of exhibitions to support). They offered Phileas "partnerships": junior partners contribute €2,000 and partners contribute €15,000 or more. Phileas consists of about 40 partners and junior partners, three quarters of whom were new to arts philanthropy. "We didn't want to

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2

cannibalise existing museum friends' groups," says Sharp. Most partners are Austrian although some are international with Austrian roots or affinities.

The focus goes beyond finance and is about guiding projects from funding application to acquisition, all the while fostering dialogue among all parties. "The days where you make a wire transfer and show up for champagne at the opening are gone in most places," says Sharp. "People realise that there are enough dinners and cocktail parties to sink a ship. People would like content. They want access to interesting people and conversations that are out of the ordinary."

Such experiences include, for example, an intimate curator-led discussion of an upcoming exhibition in Rotterdam, organised by Phileas, in Gelitin's deliciously jumbled studio in Vienna's third district. An artist collective known for its impish performances and sculptures often loaded with scatological humour, Gelitin has exhibited in venues such as the Prada Foundation and the Venice Biennale. Its studio is an old factory floor that's filled

1

with half-finished sculptures, stacks of used chairs waiting to be reconfigured into sculptures and some comfy old sofas.

Phileas patrons stand and look at a model of the exhibition, which remains a secret but will definitely evoke laughs – and maybe some squirms. Questions are asked, wine is drunk and contacts are made. "We're happy about Phileas," says Gelitin member Tobias Urban, whose multicolored jumper blends seamlessly into the scene. "It's good if funding comes from different places. I don't just ride the bus: I walk, cycle and take the subway too. It's like that."

Phileas also bring curators of international biennials – Venice, Istanbul, Liverpool, Sydney and the Documenta, to name but a few – to Vienna for research trips, exposing them to exhibition spaces that are off the beaten track or suggesting specific Austrian artists, such as painter Julia Haller, who might suit their curatorial concepts. The partners meet at least once a month and discuss where their money will go; debates sometimes get heated. "Our partners really are partners," says Stipsicz. "They give us good guidance too."

However, Sharp says the group doesn't have an "art-advisory" role (an art market term). Phileas wants to support artists but actually selling their work is left to the galleries. A gallery might work with Phileas when an artist has a large institutional show and is keen to meet international curators who have been invited by Phileas. In turn, Phileas's members have been exposed to artists who they might not have known otherwise. Members' final decisions though on what to support (or what to buy for themselves – which does sometimes happen) is up to them.

Phileas now generates about €500,000 annually, combining partner contributions with corporate donors as well as support from the Federal Chancellery. This allows for more ambitious grant-giving than the state's numerous small grants. The group supported a 2015 show of American artist Amie Siegel's work in Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts with €100,000 (including acquisition and donation of three of the works to the museum's collection). And

(1) Works by American contemporary-artist RH Quaytman in a Phileas-supported exhibition at Secession in Vienna (2) Thomas Bayrle exhibition at the Museum of Applied Arts (3) Tobias Urban of Gelitin (4) Thomas Bayrle's work



3



4

In numbers (since 2015):

- Austrian artists at international biennials: 18
- Studio visits and artist talks: 22
- Commissions of new works: 28
- Donations to museums: 28
- Curatorial research trips to Vienna: 28
- Exhibitions supported: 37

in 2016 maverick Austrian artist Oliver Laric appeared at the Liverpool Biennial, which might not have been possible without Phileas support.

The name? Sharp explains that as the group began to take shape he received a birth announcement from a friend whose son was named Phileas. Phil, of course, is also the root of the word philanthropy. The name has stuck and running Phileas might be likened to raising a child: spinning plates. This year there are 18 art projects – biennials, exhibitions and new productions – running, as well as trips for partners to exhibitions such as the Manifesta in Palermo. This year Phileas will also publish a series of monographs for Austrian artists. And the group just donated 17 artworks that it helped produce to Vienna's Museum of Modern Art, bringing art production full circle.

In addition to co-directors Sharp and Stipsicz, Stefanie Reisinger heads programming and Bianca Boscu manages outreach and media. All four still have jobs elsewhere and together they evoke an arthouse band like Talking Heads. Ultimately the quartet hopes to become a presence like that of The Mondriaan Fund in The Netherlands or Pro Helvetia in Switzerland, both of which fund and disseminate their countries' art and culture alongside their respective governments. Is such a model in Phileas's future? Perhaps. "We have to figure out if we'll work more closely with the culture ministry. A minor frustration is that we're three and a half years old and we're on our third culture minister. How do we reach the level of The Mondriaan Fund? How does private funding tally with the public purse?" says Sharp.

Stipsicz unfolds Phileas's slick new brochure-poster on the office's midcentury table. On it is a busy world map, visual evidence of where Phileas projects have taken place and of how far the group has come in strengthening what it calls Austrian art's voice. "We hope that anyone who plans to do an exhibition with an Austrian artist knows who to call," says Sharp. "And it's nice for the artists here to know someone is going to bat for them." Soon, thanks to Phileas, many more global museum-goers will know their names. — (M)