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YOUNG and BEAUTIFUL



Secession Julius Pristauz, *Sketch for Not Scared Just Changing*, 2022

With standout shows in a walk-through flat, a parking garage, and a former horse stable, this year's Independent Space Index Festival occasioned reflection on how Vienna's offspace scene can sustain a shared politics while growing out of the sweet bird of youth.

By Leonie Huber

Field Notes

A group of people are sitting in the courtyard and drinking prosecco. I've pushed open a heavy wooden door and crossed an imposturous hallway with a three-meter-high chandelier to get to Laurenz, a project space located in the horse stables of a late-historicist building near Naschmarkt, an open-air market swarmed with tourists. In memory of its former use, the walls of the main exhibition space are partly tiled and partly covered by smoky, dark wood, while gutters on the floor indicate where the horses stood. I walk up a staircase leading to a small white room where the stable boy lived.

For over a decade, Vienna has cultivated a lively and ever-growing scene of project spaces. Often referred to by the English epithet "Offspaces," these artist-run, non-commercial, independent initiatives are what constitutes a young generation of Viennese artists today, a fact that is affirmed by the evermore tiresome attempts of the city's contemporary art institutions, like Belvedere 21, to depict a scene by inviting project spaces to do the work that curators are typically hired for.

Laurenz, run by artist Aaron Amar Bhamra and curator Monika Georgieva, has been making exhibitions since 2020 at irregular intervals and various locations, including an inconspicuous storefront in the 15th district, their shared one-bedroom apartment in the 6th, and a small Bulgarian town near the Black Sea. For "On Your Side of Things," their exhibition during this year's Independent Space Index Festival, they invited seven international project spaces to answer the question, "What do we do as independent spaces, for whom, under which conditions, and why?" Each space sent an object to represent the artistic approaches they take *en face* of organizational changes like funding cuts, rent increases, or relationship break-ups. Enterprise Projects from Athens, for example, exhibited an excerpt of their publication *A Declaration of common sense*, a drawing of a smiley-faced grim reaper overlaid with the phrase "creative labor." Following the QR-code, I skim through a straight-to-the-point manifesto by independent curator Evita Tsokanta enumerating her profession's precarious working conditions.

The majority of Viennese project spaces are listed in the Independent Space Index, which was founded in 2017 in response to a right-wing shift in Austrian politics. As the initial fear of drastic budgets reductions abated, Index

established itself as a community network, an online platform, and a yearly event. The festival took place for the first time in October 2018 with twenty-seven participating project spaces, a number that grew to eighty-eight spaces for the fifth edition this June. Every month, the Index's organizers, Bruno Mokross, director of the exhibition space formerly known as Pina, and artist Francis Ruyter invite all listees to a *Stammtisch* (regulars' table). As of late, each gathering has been hosted by a different space, which has encouraged a more diverse group of attendees. "It's easier to join if a space you're friends with is hosting a meeting, than going to a bar where you might not know many people," Aaron and Monika

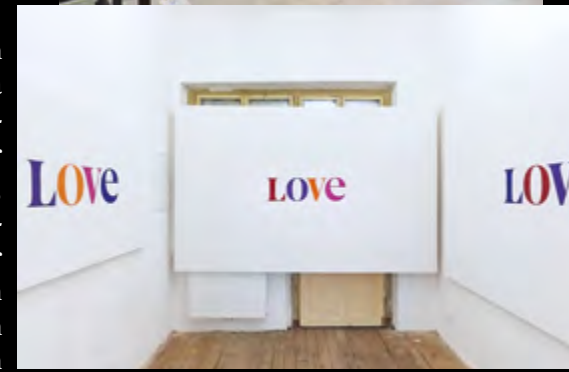
tell me. If that's the case, it might be more accurate to speak about overlapping friend groups than an evoked independent scene.

Pilot, participating in Index for the first time in 2023, is located in the walk-through room of a shared 18th-district flat, where an old stained-glass window opens onto a lush green garden. The ornate wooden floor creaks as I walk through a hallway of neatly

arranged house slippers, passing the left-ajar kitchen door. Niclas Schöler and his housemates initially started making use of the empty room in their flat by exhibiting their own works and those of their friends; Niclas now runs the space by himself. For this year's festival, at Pilot's invitation, Berlin-based curator Linnéa Bake organized a solo show by the

Vienna-based artist Aykan Safoğlu. "Taurus" visually traces a life-size, one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old bull statue in Kadıköy, a liberal cultural enclave in Istanbul, focusing on its strength and enduring presence as a witness to political struggles past and present. Puzzle pieces grouped around the parquet floor recreate swathes of the tile mosaic around the statue's pedestal, while close-up photos of the bronze animal, silkscreen-printed using heat-transfer foil, drift fragily before the dark wooden doors and paneling.

What usually differentiates a project space from just any in-home or in-studio exhibition-making is a website, or at least a refined Instagram channel. In Vienna, younger project spaces have both the public in mind and branded floorplans. The signature interiors of Pilot and Laurenz, for instance, are instantly recognizable and, frankly, quite clickable. New spaces radiate strong self-images from the start, rehearsing their networking skills and promotional small-talk within friend groups. This dovetails, in turn, with the



Above: **Pina** View of "Drawings," 2022

Photo: Maximilian Anelli-Monti

Below: **Kevin Space** View of Angharad Williams, "High Horse," 2021

Field Notes

work of emerging artists who can bring sharp conceptual approaches to exhibition-making: At the Kunstverein Ve.Sch, Jennifer Gelardo showed commissioned installation shots of other people's shows in sculpted frames, while at Neuer Wiener Kunstverein, Charlotte Gash staged a car dealership with cardboard vehicles, including merchandise for a "Gash Station." Other spaces are intentionally — or out of necessity — more private and fugitive, providing shelter for communities that are more subculture than scene. I hear murmurs about an acquaintance making shows in their cellar, where the air might not be thick with chatter, but where people do get their hands dirty critiquing each other's work. If such rumors are true, it would differ fundamentally from an Index listee, which must be a "permanent, public, physical space dedicated to contemporary art."

Since the foundation of Index, a certain scene (friend group?) has shaped the label "Offspace" in the Austrian capital and tacitly defined a mainstream from which other project spaces distinguish or distance themselves. Archetypal is a shop window or souterrain space with white walls in one of the city's inner districts, with a yearly output of around five mostly object-based shows, including evasive exhibition texts and high-end installation photos. Aside from the occasional reading or performance, interdisciplinary or experimental formats are rare. Interspersed with international artists and thematic group shows by selected curators, the spaces structurally provide exhibition possibilities for emerging artists, often graduates from one of the two local arts universities, and center what they aren't getting from the city's institutions: an awareness of sustainable working conditions and fair pay in the cultural sector; international exchange; and a place for discourse and social networks.

school, one of Vienna's oldest project spaces, was founded in 2011 by artists Yasmina Haddad and Andrea Lumplecker. For this year's festival, and as part of the series "Performative Screenings," visitors were invited to a weekend of "attentive listening." A ritual more than a party, the format celebrated the musical production of wom*n in four-hour sessions of sound and silence, with sheepskin mats

spread across school's characteristic purple floor and vinyls and texts arranged on low tables next to the bar.

Non-visual and community-oriented formats are still at a disadvantage when applying for public funding, as fixed opening hours and an audience are important to qualifying for long-term state support: Public money requires a public interest. Yet manufacturing the conditions to satisfy this calculus, by making gallery-like group exhibitions where ten local artists each bring ten of their friends, threatens to reproduce closed social circles. And if a scene self-selects with near-algorithmic criteria, to the point that it functionally mimics an online bubble, then what really constitutes an outside position? The morning after an opening, no matter whether I enjoyed the evening or the show, a flurry of posts and re-posts make my head start to spin. What kind of public are these photos addressed to, beyond the very in-crowd that was at the vernissage?

Employing Raqs Media Collective's idea that "an artist's education is never finished. school is never out," Andrea and Yasmina follow their subjective desires for non-linear learning when programming the space. This can result in reading groups, screenings, performances, lectures, or interventions in the space, all serving as a frame to

engage in collective experience and discourse. Talking over a coffee on a bench out front, they're greeted by passing neighbors, a refreshing sign of life in the city's otherwise empty streets during the midday summer heat. "It took some years to build up a sustaining audience. Being strategic was never our thing, because we always start from the position of enthusiasts," explains Yasmina. Andrea adds: "From the beginning, we looked for people that usually weren't represented in Vienna and worked closely with them. This formed a community, not one trying to support each other

in their individual careers, but one of a shared political position and reflection about how to live together and how this translates into an artistic position." This year, by agreement at the Stammtisch, the Independent Space Index became a registered association, creating a structure that can apply for more funding and outlive individual efforts. The change is a good occasion to reflect on



Below: **Laurenz** View of "On Your Side of Things," 2023

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its mission and characteristics, starting with the proclaimed independence of the listed spaces, which range from commercial galleries to a few Kunstvereins with institutional aspirations and yearly offerings to their patrons. While there seems to be an unspoken rule that a project space earns a twenty percent commission when a work is sold, every young artist I asked will feverishly defend them as non-commercial. If the brand "Offspace" is a valuable currency in Vienna supported by cultural policy, its beneficiaries should be wary of not losing their autonomy. Claiming visibility and resources for the work of a young scene is great; providing a service to the city or state with which to adorn itself instead of critiquing its politics isn't.

This past January in TownTown, an urban development project in the 3rd district, the artists Anna-Sophie Berger and Benjamin Hirte opened Can, a small space next to an elevator that descends into a parking garage, in between office buildings and high-rise luxury apartments on the bank of the Danube channel. Facing the entrance, a large cloth veined with flickering LED strips covers the wall. I stand next to a dog-like sculpture masked with a human face, both of us looking at the lights. The mask is modeled after New York artist Aviva Silverman, whose "Before the Law" is Can's fourth exhibition. The dog's tail emits a droning, therapeutic sound that morphs into a pop melody. Depicting the meridian system of the body, as treated in traditional Chinese medicine, the LEDs react to the dog's song.

The notion of "Vienna's independent scene as an international, decentralized institution" was put forward by a panel of the same name that Ruyter organized at the Neuer Wiener Kunstverein last year, along with the standalone publication of the discussion's transcript. Based on the number of exhibitions they produce per year with the amount of public funding they receive, project spaces appear to be better institutions, prompting the question of whether the "Offspace" scene should institutionalize. More fundamentally, what are the values, responsibilities, decision-making structures, and aesthetics of this decentralized institution? How can it guide young artists through the differences between a commercial gallery and a project space? And can it allow for experimentation and encourage young artists to question and subvert the very institutional framework it proposes?

The Vienna Secession recently rebranded as "artist run since 1897," when a small group famously separated from the official artists' association on the basis of the latter's conservatism. Talking to Anna-Sophie and Benjamin outside of Can, they remind me of the value of an artist-run space. Making use of their individual networks and careers, they mix emerging, mid-career, and established international artists in their programming. Less focused on strategic networking and friendly support, it's about showing artistic positions in that particular space, sometimes in intergenerational dialogue with each other, which they don't observe in the city's contemporary art institutions. Anna-Sophie and Benjamin make use of the fact that running a project space in Vienna is affordable: "Vienna doesn't need us, but we need a space. The social aspect is as important as the quality of the exhibited works."

We perform for each other what we perform for ourselves: an independence of institutional recognition, no less than the need for social approval. In rare situations, the longing for and fear of something outside this shared delusion of autonomy becomes palpable. During the closing event of this year's Rakete festival at Tanzquartier Wien, artist Luca Bücheler invited the audience to karaoke. Quickly, we drank the institution dry. After many people had performed, filmed by many more people still, everybody was asked to come on stage to bring the night to an end. Forming a choir to sing Lana del Ray's "Young and Beautiful," the fourth wall fell: In groups and pairs, we celebrated with one another, as much as everybody feared for their future selves: Will you still love me, when I'm no longer

young and beautiful? I walk home wondering if we've already forgotten about the green light glowing on the other side of the bay, pretending that we already have everything we need at this lavish party? —



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