

### **What do we need Russian artists in Vienna for?**

*Almost two decades ago Anna Jermolaewa fled from St. Petersburg to Vienna for political reasons. She initially worked as a cleaner, then she studied art history, after finishing these studies she was accepted at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Today she is Professor for Media Art at the State School of Art and Design/ZKM in Karlsruhe and an artist with an international reputation. By Antje Mayer*

### **Antje Mayer: Since 1989 Vienna has moved from the absolute perimeter to the centre of a new (old) cultural region in central Europe. Your life has been influenced by Vienna but Vienna in turn has been formed by your biography and by that of many others from the East Bloc and former Yugoslavia ...**

Anna Jermolaewa: I myself started as a cleaner in a Polish firm in Vienna. Vienna is the city of Yugoslav janitors, Polish construction workers and cleaners, Caucasian vegetable sellers at the Naschmarkt, Ukrainian prostitutes on the Gürtel ring road, and Russian oligarchs in the first district. But this is not all. After the fall of communism many young people - like me - emigrated from Eastern Europe to study art in Vienna and a lot of them stayed. With their Slav temperament and unusual biographies that often range from a childhood under communism to flight or war they all shape the city. Without them the art scene in Vienna wouldn't be what it is. In Vienna contact with neighbouring and nearby cities such as Bratislava, Prague, Sofia, and Bucharest is extremely intensive, at least behind the official scenes – incidentally this is due to a considerable extent to the good connections (at least by air) between Vienna and Eastern Europe. Budget airlines such as Skyeurope do their bit in this respect. Their advertising slogans play ironically with clichés about the east: To Warsaw: “Why not pay a visit to your electrician or plumber?”

### **But don't you think that Vienna hasn't really yet recognized its potential as a hub in the Central and Eastern Europe region?**

When I received the relatively generous T-Mobile Art Award a tax inspector soon came knocking on my door. He asked my tax consultant: »What do we need Russian artists for, haven't we enough of our own?« When I told the story to a colleague she gave me a tip: »Try explaining to him that you do the work that your Austrian artist colleagues don't want to do.«

### **You were born in Petersburg and in 1989 you had to flee from there for political reasons. You had attracted the attention of the authorities as co-publisher of the legendary samizdat journal *Democratic Opposition*. In fact you landed in Vienna more or less by chance. Is life as an artist guest worker in Vienna that pleasant?**

A summons for our arrest had been issued in Russia, so we practically had to flee over night. After our arrival my husband at the time and I lived for a week near the Westbahnhof railway station. All we owned was the clothes we were wearing. For fear of being caught by the police we hardly went out at all. We had no money to buy food, we spoke no German, and nobody took an interest in us. This city seemed foreign and unapproachable. I hated Vienna. But now I love the city. When I go to buy vegetables at the Naschmarkt I can chat in Russian to the people selling them there. Once a man at one of the stands asked what I did for a living. I told him I made videos. He winked at me. It was clear he had thought I meant that I make porn videos. This has all become a part of home for me.

### **But can't this little »metropolis« be stultifyingly slow-moving at times?**

I actually see that as something positive, an ideal environment for working in a concentrated way, or to develop yourself culturally, I mean the Film Museum alone is a treasure. In Vienna I can build up my energy reserves by swimming in summer on the Donauinsel, or ice skating in winter on the Alte Donau. It isn't by chance that a lot of internationally successful artists

live in this city: Franz West, gelitin, Elke Krystufek, Valie Export, Hans Schabus; Martin Guttman, Peter Kogler or Maria Lassnig, just to mention a few.

Everything is within easy reach. You meet people here face to face, not in a chat room. And in comparison to the relatively small size of the city the range of cultural facilities offered is enormous. Every day quite a number of good (!) cultural events take place, an off-space opens, a museum or a gallery has an opening. Traditionally the amount of music performed is amazing and a lot of things happen at the interface between music, fashion, performing and visual art, a lot takes place in institutions but also through personal initiatives.

### **Why does art flourish to such an extent in the Viennese biotope?**

There are only a few collectors of contemporary art in Vienna, art isn't bought in Vienna but it is communicated here. In Austria state support of contemporary artists compared, say, to Germany is exceptional. There are gallery subsidies, studios are financed, grants and scholarships awarded, prizes given and so forth. At times I toyed with the idea of moving to New York, because now my entire family has emigrated to the USA. But how should I make my art there if I have to work at three jobs just to pay the rent for my studio? My foreign colleagues envy me for living in this "artist's paradise".

Anna Jermolaeva (born 1970 in St. Petersburg), graduated in 1998 from the University of Vienna (Faculty of Art History) and in 2002 from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (Painting & Graphic Art / New Media). Since 2005 she has been Professor for Media Arts, State School of Design /ZKM Karlsruhe in Germany. She has had several international solo and group exhibitions.

Selected exhibitions:

1999: *dAPERTutto (APERTO over ALL)* at the 48th Biennale di Venezia. 2000: Institute of Visual Arts, Milwaukee, USA (solo); 2001: *Recent acquisitions* at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; „*Ars 01* at the Museum of contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki; 2002: Ursula-Blickle-Stiftung, Kraichtal-Unteröwisheim (solo); 2003: *Nice and Easy* at the Sprengel Museum, Hannover; 2004: Museum Moderner Kunst, Passau (solo) 2008: XL Gallery, Moscow (solo).

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