

Alexandra–Maria Toth in conversation with Katharina Wendler

Email Vienna / Berlin, September–October 2020

*KW: What is spouse and with what kind of concept did you apply to Haus Wien with?*

*AMT: spouse is a curatorial project that I founded in 2019. Collaborations, writing and the attempt to connect different disciplines such as activism, social sciences and art are in focus. spouse currently operates as a nomadic space and works closely with galleries and artist-run spaces to implement exhibitions, talks and readings. To go beyond borders with my projects is a great challenge and with the help of many artists, curators and writers I have been able to exhibit artists from L.A., Paris, Germany or Great Britain in Vienna and Vienna-based artists in Palma de Mallorca. The next show will bring Ed Fornieles, Max Kolten and Gašper Kunšič together to discuss ideas on masculine identities.*

For Haus Wien I developed a research project to investigate the chosen location in terms of memory, home and identity. The idea came to me pretty naturally, since I had been offered the building for temporary use two years earlier, but I declined, due to the fragile condition of the house. So I knew the place and also a little bit of its history and the family that had lived there. I started meeting the former owner to learn more about the time when he used to call this place his home. Together with Jacqueline Neubauer, a Vienna-based photographer who focuses on social documentary, we created photographs and a text to store his memories, feelings and the history of his family (which includes four generations) in an artwork.

*KW: As a curator, what is your relation to the spaces that you work with?*

*AMT: That's a tricky question. It all depends on the space I'm working with. Some spaces have extraordinary architecture or history; both of these aspects can't be ignored and should be included in a curatorial proposal. Gallery spaces are suitable for mid-career artists and artist-run spaces are great to exhibit emerging artists. Due to the COVID pandemic, I have been developing and implementing a show in my own apartment, where my everyday life highly influenced the choice of artists I exhibited and the words I wrote about each artwork. It became very personal. When I'm in Mallorca I also set up exhibitions in apartments or even in outdoor places due to the summer weather and the relaxed vibe an island can convey.*

*KW: For your project spouse, do you consider spaces or formats that are physically non-existent (such as the Internet)?*

*AMT: I strongly support writings by artists, curators and activists and some of these writings are not related to any of the exhibitions I've done so far. So these writings are artworks themselves and can be read online. I aspire to publish these writings sooner or later, because to me a book can be considered a space as well.*

*KW: How would you describe the curator-artist relationship and what is your personal approach as a curator to the artists that you work with?*

**AMT:** The task of the curator is to put the works of the artists in an appropriate context and to present these works appropriately; ideally, artists may convey their work to the curator. The joint work should result in a mediation to the viewer.

The relationship between the artist and the curator is therefore a collaboration in which a common idea is presented. As a curator, my approach is to get to know the artist on a personal level in order to get a better understanding of their practice. I try to find out who they are, where they come from, which events shape and influence their ideas and how they view the world, politically, economically and socially. It is also important to me that the artists get to know me, so that a collaboration is encouraged by both sides. I also focus on long-term collaborations and tend to work repeatedly with the same artists, since a single collaboration is usually not enough to show the entire thinking of an artist. Plus, despite the many artists, curators, galleries, art spaces and institutions that exist, we have to admit that the art world is a very small bubble, and it is my personal belief that each cultural worker, artist or curator should get engaged in long-term collaborations for mutual support, understanding and learning.

*KW: What brought you to Mallorca? Are art scenes on islands different from the mainland and if so, in which way?  
(I have myself spent a lot of time in Iceland and would assert that the art scene there is quite special, although it's not that easy to put a finger on its specifics.)*

**AMT:** Mallorca became a well-known vacation spot for German, French and British holiday makers since the introduction of mass tourism in the 1960s. It is often overlooked that the island had a rich cultural history before that and used to be an inspiring haven for creative minds such as Joan Miró, Frédéric Chopin or Thomas Bernhard. I have been spending each summer with my family in Mallorca since early childhood, so the island is like a second home to me. When I started to work in the arts I began to explore the Mallorcan art scene and discovered a well-known residency program at the Centro Cultural in Andratx (CCA) and some great galleries, such as L21 or Gallery Pelaires, but also great contemporary art spaces such as Jelato Love run by Ché Zara Blomfield and Javier Esteban. Compared to a city like Vienna, the art scene in Mallorca is manageable which makes it very easy to get in touch with the local art community. Working together develops very easily and quickly in such a small place, where hecticness and stress is not an issue. Because of COVID-19 my usual Mallorcan routine has been postponed but I do hope to catch up with my work there soon.

*KW: Do you have an academic background in Curating, Curatorial Studies and/or Museum Studies?*

**AMT:** I do not have any academic training in curating or curatorial studies. I am a social scientist and studied International Development Studies and Gender Studies in Vienna. My education is based on social, economic and political issues with a heavy focus on Critical Studies and Post-Colonial Studies. My lack in Curatorial Studies made me anxious at times when I started to curate exhibitions – yet, I learned quickly that an academic background which is not related to art at all can be beneficial for developing interesting content. For me, curating is linked to curiosity, research, good writing and the ability to work in an interdisciplinary manner – and I do believe I possess all these skills.

I am, however, very much interested in Curatorial Studies, though I can't really rate its benefits, since I never participated in any curatorial class. Curatorial Studies were introduced quite recently in

Vienna and all of Austria and there are only a few institutions that offer this course. One critical point against Curatorial Studies is that it is very costly to attend, which makes this course very elitist.

*KW: Do you have a preferred exhibition format to curate yourself?*

AMT: I do not really have a preferred exhibition format but I would say that it is challenging to set up a group show and give attention to each artist involved equally. Plus, a group show requires more logistic work. A solo presentation allows to focus on one particular artist, which makes it way more easy to create a narrative around his or her work.

*KW: What is your preferred format to visit?*

AMT: I like community projects such as Haus Wien and can also enjoy institutional shows or a biennial. I rather visit non-commercial exhibitions, since their curation focuses more on content and education. A commercial show, such as a gallery show, has to focus on sales; that makes these shows sometimes less enjoyable and easier to forget.

*KW: How does one become a (good) curator? Is there any advice that you could share with others who are interested in curating?*

AMT: I'm afraid I don't really have an answer to that question. I am not sure what defines a good curator but I guess it does help to stay true to oneself. I would advise aspiring curators to be bold, to get out there and experiment. It is crucial to listen to other people, learn from different sources and think outside the box. Read books, read the newspapers, follow up on pop-culture and music, talk to political activists and develop your fields of interest. In the end a curator should be able to paint the bigger picture, meaning to get an idea of the world's greatest desires and the conditions of our societies. Curators should work on an interdisciplinary level.

*KW: Whose curatorial work do you look up to?*

AMT: I admire the work of Rebecca Lamarche-Vadel, Qu Chang and Ashley James. But I do also look up to all the artist-run spaces and independent spaces across Europe and beyond, such as EXO EXO or Sans Titre, both based in Paris, Bel Ami in Los Angeles, New Jörg and Kevin Space in Vienna, as well as Good Weather, a space based in Arkansas.

*KW: What makes a great exhibition?*

Difficult to answer, but I would say a great exhibition works on the pulse of time, evokes questions and emotions, is willing to take a risk and contributes to a current discourse with new knowledge or critical thoughts.

*Alexandra-Maria Toth* (born 1982 in Vienna, lives and works in Vienna) is a social scientist, curator and writer. She studied International Development Studies with a focus and Gender Issues at the University of Vienna. Prior to her curatorial work, Alexandra has been working four years in politics on the topic of combating human trafficking. She is also an editor for the Art Magazine Collectors Agenda.

<https://spousevienna.com/>

*Katharina Wendler* (born 1988 in Hamburg, lives and works in Berlin and Weimar) is an art historian and exhibition maker. She studied Cultural Sciences and Psychology at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg as well as Art History at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and the University of Iceland. From 2013 to 2017 she directed the project space Safn Berlin/Reykjavik and since 2014 has realised and coordinated numerous exhibitions, publications and other projects with German and international artists. She currently works as Curator of the Bauhaus University Gallery and Artistic Associate at the Faculty of Art and Design at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as well as a freelance curator and writer in Berlin.

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In early 2018 she initiated the exhibition format *\_\_in conversation with\_\_*, that takes as its goal to bring people into conversation and thus into collaboration. Artists are invited to enter into dialogue and to develop an exhibition from it. The conversations are formulated into texts and serve to accompany the exhibitions as text material. They enable the visitors to develop a deeper understanding of the working methods of the artist and their artworks.

*\_\_in conversation with\_\_* is based on the assumption that artists themselves are best able to provide information about their works, their working methods, their ideas and inspirations. One simply needs to ask.

## *Exhibition*

Das Haus

September 21–27, 2020

Haus Wien, Kobelgasse 3, 1110 Vienna

<https://haus.wien/>