

# Art Award Interview

RUTH GOUBRAN (HEAD OF COMMUNITY AFFAIRS AND SPONSORING OF ERSTE GROUP)

ALEXANDRA GRAUSAM (DIRECTOR DAS WEISSE HAUS)

CHRISTINE MOSER (DIRECTOR AUSTRIAN CULTURAL FORUM NEW YORK)

BORIS MANNER (MODERATOR)

## **Boris Manner:**

Today I would like to welcome Ruth Goubran, Alexandra Grausam, and Christine Moser. They are heading three different art institutions. Ruth Goubran is responsible for the sponsoring department of Erste Bank.

**Ruth Goubran:** As I assumed control of the Sponsoring Program of Erste Bank in 2010, it was important to me to clearly and fundamentally define our field of activities. In this way, we could refine the ExtraVALUE Sponsoring Program of Erste Bank, which is active in art and culture as well as in social affairs and education. Within art and culture we focus on music, film, and fine arts. It's important to us to support different, yet complementary, positions such as das weisse haus, which is an example of a young experimental platform. In contrast, there's the Secession, where we have a long-standing cooperation dedicated to the support of established artists.

**Boris Manner:** Alexandra Grausam is the director of



Boris Manner, Alexandra Grausam, Christine Moser, Ruth Goubran

das weisse haus. Is the term director the appropriate description of your activity?

## **Alexandra Grausam:**

Historically I'm one of the co-founders, since we started as two people in the very beginning. However, since 2011 I have managed das weisse haus on my own. Five years ago, I founded a residence and studio program operating under the name studio das weisse haus as an independent project. Since its focus is primarily on the mobility of local and international artists, it is the cooperation partner of the Erste Bank ExtraVALUE Art Award.

**Boris Manner:** How can the structure and financing of das weisse haus best be described?

## **Alexandra Grausam:**

We are a Kunstverein (art association) and non-profit organization funded to a large degree by the Austrian Federal Chancellery as well as the City of Vienna. Furthermore, we receive support through the ExtraVALUE Sponsor-

ing Program of Erste Bank, and, for the second time, Phileas – A Fund of Contemporary Art, is sponsoring a grant program for exhibition organizers. We also receive support from some of the members of das weisse haus. We try to gather our financial resources from different places.

**Boris Manner:** What's the central focus of das weisse haus?

## **Alexandra Grausam:**

Right from the beginning the focus was on the support of young art, that is, artists without galleries, right after their graduation, looking for a springboard. As the artists I feel more connected with are growing older together with me, I appreciate the cooperations with art universities and

collaboration with students. At studio das weisse haus, we take care in creating a heterogeneous mix: currently we offer studio space for fifteen artists living in Vienna. There are recent graduates as well as established artists among them, but also an artist from South America. In spite of different artistic practices, they have one thing in common: they seek a platform, a network, and an exchange. In addition to this, we offer a residence program for international artists, curators, and theorist. Furthermore, we also try to invite critics since in my opinion the discussion of the current art scene in Vienna is in urgent need of revitalization. In principle, the residence program has no age limit; still, the average age is between 25 and 50, which is probably related to our limited resources as well.

**Boris Manner:** das weisse haus is therefore a module that opens up to various areas and facilitates projects therein. One of these is a cooperation with the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York. Christine Moser is the director of the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York. What kind of program are you pursuing there?

**Christine Moser:** I felt wonderfully connected to the kind of program that Alexandra just described: residencies, exhibitions, concerts, film screenings and festivals, design or architecture. The Austrian Cultural Forum is located on 52nd Street in the heart of Manhattan and showcases Austrian art across all disciplines. We can count ourselves very lucky to be housed in Raimund Abraham's iconic landmark building whose architectural vision mirrors the mission of the Forum: the support of young contemporary art.

**Boris Manner:** Have you introduced a personal emphasis under your direction – be it on fine art, literature, or music – or do you try to cover all disciplines equally?

**Christine Moser:** While my predecessor's focus was primarily on fine art and new music, expanding to different disciplines seemed crucial to me right from the start. In the course of the re-definition of sponsorship activities, architecture, design, and film have been added, since the Forum is, in my understanding, a complete service for all artists. The selection should be determined only by quality. We organize and present a hundred projects per year with partners from New York, the rest of the USA, and Austria, which makes us one of the big cultural players with a reputation for offering a diversified contemporary art program. Moreover, we support numerous cultural projects throughout the USA.

**Boris Manner:** How does the Austrian Cultural Forum New York finance itself and is the budget sufficient to implement your program?

**Christine Moser:** We are an independent department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which finances our program. Furthermore, we have excellent contacts to the Ministry for Arts and Culture within the Federal Chancellery. The richness and quality of our program is, however, only possible through numerous cooperations with the major institutions of the Austrian art scene. Institutions in New York have their own 'development departments' (e.g. Carnegie Hall with 150 employees) doing permanent fundraising. And fundraising is a difficult matter in New York because the perception of Austria in certain

circles is very classical – especially in regards to music. It's for this reason that I have the goal of supporting other art forms as well in order to communicate a modern, cosmopolitan, and authentic image of Austrian culture. In the context of the 15 year anniversary of the Raimund Abraham building, I tried hard, investing a lot of time and energy, to get a special anniversary supplement, for fundraising opportunities, in the *Der Standard* newspaper. And then, in the course of the preparations, spontaneously, a very promising cooperation arose with Christian Scheib and Elke Tschalkner of Ö1 radio and the musikprotokoll at the steirische herbst festival, ultimately leading to a six-hour marathon concert and culminating in a live recital at my residence. So cooperating with other art and cultural institutions and partners has been proven successful. The emerging synergies allow for greater efforts with, typically, smaller financial investments and are also a bonus for PR work and networking.

**Boris Manner:** Perhaps one can simply describe the cooperation in the art award process as follows: Alexandra Grausam has the required expertise in the support of young artists, Ruth Goubran supports the project financially, and Christine Moser supplies a presentation platform for the award winners in New York. How could you describe this synergy more precisely? What additional benefits for all participants are generated by this collaboration?

## **Alexandra Grausam:**

My experience has shown that the reasons for a sponsoring commitment are numerous, and the person in charge can influence the cooperation tremendously. The collaboration with Ruth Goubran

is amazing in every aspect, since the cooperation is supportive without being judgmental about our activities, with the same idealism prevailing on both sides. From the perspective of Erste Bank, I further find it exceptionally bold to launch an art award together with an alternative art space such as *das weisse haus*. The award is also intended to strengthen the public perception of *das weisse haus*.

**Boris Manner:** The award winner receives support from Erste Bank for a one-month residence at the Austrian Cultural Forum New York and for an exhibition. What are the reasons for your involvement in a cooperation with *das weisse haus*?

**Ruth Goubran:** As already mentioned, *das weisse haus* is an important starting point for young artists. Cooperations are always influenced by the people standing behind the projects. On the one hand, through professionalism and competence, and on the other hand, through support and trust. The development of projects is a constant part of our activities, and with communication on an equal footing, new ideas can be realized together. The longstanding and positive collaboration with *das weisse haus* can be seen as a foundation for this. Basically, the further development within our cooperations is an ideal structure for fulfilling my goals for the connectivity and expansion of the program – because our budget is limited too. Granting an award is a great opportunity to cooperate with several institutions. Also, this is about an individual grant for artists that we haven't offered elsewhere in our program. Supporting through an award structure is something I pursue in other cooperations as well. Furthermore, we have the opportunity via the *ExtraVALUE* Award to attract the attention of the media.

**Christine Moser:** In addition to the synergies of sponsoring, I would like to point out the diverse situation of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York, because we exhibit Austrian and American artists in parallel. Due to the abundance of cultural offerings, there has to be a relevance to lure the New York audience into our exhibitions. In New York one can only attract attention with a particularly loud sound, a flashy colour, or via permanence; and in order to achieve that, everybody does the same thing: organize awards and festivals that are repeated in a certain rhythm. We receive over 2.000 requests per year from individual artists or institutions – an unmanageable number, and that's why the cooperation via an award functions as a beneficial filter for me in covering the younger range of Austrian art. The current Martin Roth exhibition, where President Trump's tweets control the light intensity and consequently the growth of a lavender field, became one of our best visited exhibits and was reviewed in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *Hyperallergic*. A further example of a successful cooperation is the Austrian American Short Film Festival initiated by us, where the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, and the Vienna Film Academy together with Columbia University, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and the School of Visual Arts nominate promising candidates. It's precisely these structures that give me the opportunity to offer a broad-ranging program, and the cooperation with *das weisse haus* and the Erste Bank is certainly an example of this.

**Alexandra Grausam:** How is the project perceived in New York?

**Christine Moser:** Overall, embracing the International Studio and Curatorial

Program, which I initiated, is decisive in creating a sustainable core and providing the artists with visitors and a network. And a well-chosen date for the exhibition is a crucial factor as well, because the city switches to summer holiday mode after the 4th of July. Apart from that, it greatly depends on individual personalities to make the best use of the time in New York and establish connections. I also notice that art works that need more time and silence are hardly visible in New York – a situation that has to be questioned from various viewpoints, such as: Is the New York audience more superficial or is art in New York more centred on personality? In any case, for every exhibition I have to consider how great the probability is of Austrian artists being noticed by the New York art scene. The supposed cultural proximity often hides the fact that the art market in New York works in a very different way.

**Boris Manner:** Geographical places often have different areas of resonance. What's fashionable in Moscow will perhaps barely be noticed in Mumbai. A stronger academic or didactic approach like the one we pursue in Austria could be rejected in New York, where rather an Aristotelian approach, i.e. art that does not primarily generate (political) truth, is favoured. This of course has nothing to do with quality, in my opinion, but with differing concepts of artistic practice.

**Alexandra Grausam:** From my point of view, the parallel presence of people and art within the New York art scene exemplifies a more dynamic approach allowing for the artist to invite new contacts directly to their exhibition, thereby helping their works circulate in a vital process. That's why I see an efficient use of the stay in New York strongly grounded in the personality of the artist, with the first winner,

Ulrike Königshofer, being a perfect case study here.

**Boris Manner:** How do the cooperation partners co-define the identity of an institution?

**Christine Moser:** We cooperate with an enormous number of partners creating synergies in each collaboration that in turn reverberate back to the Forum and co-determine its identity.

**Ruth Goubran:** Banks are a controversial business nowadays, and we certainly have to contend with an image problem. Therefore the issue is of course relevant to us. However, a poll among our co-operation partners has shown that they are proud to be supported by Erste Bank and that we have in fact managed to gain in reputation with the *ExtraVALUE* Sponsoring Program. At the same time, we also have received public sympathy and publicity through our slogan 'Vermehrt Schönes!' (Increase Beauty!). Networking and cooperation between our partners are very important to us in our work and represent a large extra value of the sponsoring program that also is noticed within the community of program partners.

**Christine Moser:** For me, the *ExtraVALUE* Sponsoring Program under the leadership of Ruth Goubran is an outstanding sponsoring institution and the fact

that a bank stands behind it is irrelevant. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that Erste Bank has an exceptional praiseworthy position within the Austrian cultural landscape, where the number of reliable patrons is depressingly low and any increase would be very desirable indeed.

**Alexandra Grausam:** The *ExtraVALUE* Sponsoring Program gains a lot with Ruth Goubran as a leader with courageous behind the scenes decisions and in my opinion has grown into an established brand over the years.

**Boris Manner:** What kind of further developments of the award are possible?

**Christine Moser:** For me personally, the project can grow in all possible directions. Synergies that weren't foreseeable in advance enliven the project continuously, such as, for example, through the potential networking of an artist or a New York institution that can be added to the cooperation.

**Alexandra Grausam:** The cooperation is still very young and flexible and holds a lot of potential for further development, such as: Will the jury stay the same every year or will we change the members? Should the advertisement set a theme that the applicants have to engage with? Apart from improvements of the jury system, the applica-

tion process has to be constantly developed. This year, we have introduced a two-stage contest that has been met with very positive reactions and should facilitate an even better procedure. With regard to the external expansion of our artist pool, I don't see any urgency at the moment, because we constantly get artists through our annual program and those who currently live abroad can apply again as soon as they move back to Austria. And we want to include the New York perspective more into project development. In Vienna itself, I see a lot of potential for improving the communication and visibility of the award to increase public awareness of the cooperation.

**Ruth Goubran:** Until now we have primarily invested our energy and work into the implementation of the award – the basic structure is now established. In the next phase, we can concentrate on the communication of the award. So that the artists better profit from the honour and the *ExtraVALUE* Award becomes a milestone in an artist's biography. It's also wonderful that in the course of the jury discussion, the first granting in 2015 brought a second award into existence, i.e. a solo show in *das weisse haus* for a winning artist. So in the end, we in fact created two *ExtraVALUE* Art Awards, the project has become more extensive, and we still have a lot of potential for further development.

Since 2009, **Ruth Goubran** is head of Community Affairs & Sponsoring at Erste Group. Previously, she was working in cultural institutions, such as the Architekturzentrum Wien, the Viennale and the Wiener Festwochen. For five years Ruth Goubran functioned as managing director of the Gartenbaukino.

**Boris Manner** studied philosophy and cultural management in Vienna. He teaches at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna and works as Senior Curator at Stella Art Foundation in Moscow.

**Christine Moser** is director of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York. Her previous postings include Austrian ambassador to the Organization for Security and Development in Europe, deputy chief of the Austrian embassy in Paris as well as assignments in the fields of European integration and human rights.