Presentation of the concept, curator and artists of the Austrian contribution to the 59th International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale 2021

Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl are conceiving the Austrian Pavilion for the International Art Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia 2021. Karola Kraus is the curator.

The team and the artistic concept for the design of the Austrian pavilion in the Giardini in Venice 2021 have already been established, and the person responsible for Austria’s contribution is the curator and museum director Karola Kraus. The design will be provided by the artists Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl.

Based on the recommendations of a specialist jury, the Secretary of State for the Arts and Culture, Ulrike Lunacek, decided in favour of the concept of Jakob Lena Knebel and Ashley Hans Scheirl in cooperation with the curator Karola Kraus. “The liveliness, the energy and the comprehensive communication programme of the contribution of Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl particularly convinced me. It shows how cosmopolitan they are, and their artistic commitment. In addition, there is no lack of humour and satire.” commented the Secretary of State Ulrike Lunacek on the reasons for her decision.

She also made reference to the open and comprehensible procedure used in the selection process. The selection procedure has been redesigned in accordance with generally accepted international standards and transparent criteria. The members of the jury were Silvie Aigner (Editor in Chief of the art magazine Parnass), Hemma Schmutz (Artistic Director of Lentos Art Museum Linz), Jasper Sharp (Curator for modern and contemporary art at the Art History Museum Vienna / curator of the Art Biennale 2013), and Erwin Wurm (artist and Austria’s representative at the 2017 Biennale).

“I would like to thank the jury for their professional and amicable cooperation as well as the experts of the Arts and Culture Division of the Ministry for their good specialist support,” said Lunacek. During the three-stage selection process which began in October 2019, a total of 60 submissions for the realisation of the Austrian contribution to the Biennale were examined and discussed.

“The decision in favour of a proposal for the pavilion in Venice is a decision for a specific position which has convinced us, not one against the other proposals which did not win this time. In our
discussions we all noted with gratification the wide range of very good submissions, which did not make the selection process easy,” explained the juror Hemma Schmutz.

Schmutz also noted that “the discussions within the jury were characterised by an objective and productive dialogue between its members. Our decision was unanimous and was oriented towards the criteria of an innovative approach, relevance to the current international and Austrian discourses in the field of the arts, the realisation of the project on the basis of the specific spatial circumstances of the pavilion, a clear communication concept, adherence to the cost guidelines, specialist and methodological competence, and the professional and communications experience of the curator.”

In the end, the jury was ultimately convinced by the content-related and formal density of the submission by Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl. Various factors were combined in an ideal way here: addressing and playing with gender identities in the tradition of feminist and queer approaches to art, the formally convincing way in which the spatial conditions of the pavilion were dealt with in the form of a ‘Raumcollage’, the involvement of the visitors in Venice who will become part of the total work of art, the planned comprehensive supporting programme, and the experience and competence of the curator who submitted the proposal, Karola Kraus.

“It is a great honour and joy for me to take on the responsibility – together with the Biennale office and a well-chosen team – for Austria’s contribution to the 59th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale. I want to thank the members of the jury and Secretary of State Ulrike Lunacek very much indeed for their trust in me. My decision for Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl is based on the topicality and particular relevance of their issues, which they deal with in sensuous works with a broad impact. Their works, which are characterised by manifold entanglements between art, performance, design, fashion and architecture, draw attention to current discourses which are experiencing an international reception,” said Karola Kraus.

“I am overwhelmed to be given the opportunity, together with Ashley Hans Scheirl, to represent Austria at the Biennale Venice. In the last few days I have had the strange experience of a feeling that I have never had before in this form: a happiness shock,” said Jakob Lena Knebl.

“I am also extremely pleased that the jury and the Secretary of State have chosen our proposal from among the many submissions. At this point I would like to thank Karola Kraus especially for believing in us and for wanting to follow this path with us. My thanks also go to our many other supporters, who have enabled us to get this far. We will not disappoint you,” said Ashley Hans Scheirl.
About the artists

Jakob Lena Knebl was born in 1970 in Baden near Vienna and worked for ten years in the care of elderly people before she studied fashion with Raf Simons at the University of Applied Arts and then Textual Sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna with Heimo Zobernig.

In 2017 she led a highly-acclaimed reconfiguration of the collection of modern and contemporary art at the mumok (museum of modern art) in Vienna, which she presented on two floors of the museum along with her own recently conceived works and Mut zur Exzentrik (The Courage to be Eccentric). Oh... Jakob Lena Knebl and the mumok collection was, at the same time, her first comprehensive museum exhibition, which enjoyed an enthusiastic reception from the press. In the same year, Jakob Lena Knebl won the Outstanding Art Award in the category of fine art from the Federal Chancellery. In 2019, she was listed among the ‘best curators of the decade’ in ArtNews. Jakob Lena Knebl currently has individual exhibitions at Galerie Kargl in Vienna and at Lentos Linz. She has also been invited by Marc Olivier Wahler, the Director of the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Geneva, to organise his inaugural exhibition next year.

The point of departure of her ‘spatial strategy’ approach is frequently a photographic mis en scene which relates the body and constructions of identity and desire to sculptures and material and social spaces. In this way, expansive and partially accessible installations, settings or stagings are created which are characterised by various aesthetics, media, materials and intense atmospheres. Her reference points come from the history of art and design and the movements which connected them.

Ashley Hans Scheirl, born in 1956 in Salzburg, studied at the Vienna Academy of Fine Art from 1975 - 1980 and completed a Master’s degree in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins College in London in 2003. She has had numerous individual exhibitions in recent years, most recently at Kunstverein Salzburg in 2018 and at Künstlerhaus Graz, and has participated in international group exhibitions, such as that at the documenta 14 in 2017. Her artistic work began at the end of the 1970s using a wide variety of media. Following that she concentrated on moving pictures for twenty years. With over 50 films and the transgender cult film Dandy Dust, she has since been regarded as one of the pioneers of the queer movement in the field of the arts. Since the mid-1990s, painting has become the main focus of her interest – painting which is installation art and is experienced via the involvement of architecture, context, objects, video loops, and not least the movement of the visitors to exhibitions. In 2019, Ashley Hans Scheirl was awarded the Austrian Prize for Fine Arts by the Federal Chancellery.
Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl appear in individual projects and together as an artistic duo, with their last such event being a brilliant expansive installation at the Biennale in Lyon. For 2021 they have been invited to make a joint exhibition at the Musée d’Art de Joliette in Quebec.

The two artists share an intensive exploration of the construction and deconstruction of identities. In keeping with a conscious and active participation in the development of their own personalities, in their artistic work the identities of media, styles, disciplines and gender constructions are questioned and set in motion, hybridised, transformed and decontextualised by queer operations. In this process, two generations as well as two different approaches come together.

For the Austrian pavilion, Jakob Lena Knebl and Ashley Hans Scheirl are designing stage-like installations in which their entire artistic cosmos is displayed – from paintings and textile works, photographs, objects and sound works to videos, holograms and interactive apps. These ‘spaces of desire’ contrast with conventional concepts of presentation in museums and undermine the hierarchies of art and design. They open up a space for the construction of identities, desires and sensuous experience, and can be understood as a liberation from conventions – for themselves and the viewers. In parallel to their spatial interventions, the artists are planning a wide-ranging accompanying programme.

For enquiries please contact:
Heike Warmuth
Press Spokeswoman of the Secretary of State for the Arts and Culture
Mobile: 0664-610 45 01
heike.warmuth@bmkoes.gv.at
Photos at: www.bmkoes.gv.at