

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Forbes

Cutting Edge 54th Annual Contemporary Arts Festival Shakes Up Graz, Austria

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Image: Hirschhorn's memorial to Simone .Weill, Graz, Austria Credit: PAUL ALLEN.

Annual autumn arts festival Steirisches Herbst, on until 10 October 2021, has transformed the picturesque Austrian city of Graz into an exciting stage, with an imaginative, wide-ranging series of events. The contemporary arts festival began in a tumultuous year worldwide - 1968 and has been shaking things up ever since in Austria's second largest but otherwise quiet city.

Steirisches Herbst was founded in opposition to the resurgence of nationalist cultural initiatives gaining traction at the time and as a complete contrast to the traditional autumn harvest festival. In 1968, modern music, theatre and visual art which the Nazis had labelled "degenerate" three decades before was thought to be an effective barrier to the remnants of the totalitarian mentality in the world. The first festival enchanted, confounded and shocked audiences out of their complacency and it has continued to do so for over 50 years. It broke out of art institutions and tore down the barriers between art and life. This year is no exception, especially as the recent appointment of a Russian director, Ekaterina Degot, as the prestigious festival's first non-Austrian leader, must have been viewed as somewhat controversial. And heightening the already electric atmosphere, this year's festival opened in the run-up to local elections where the Conservative and Communist parties were vying for power (the Communist party has subsequently won).

One of the most intriguing installations, on a street corner in a working-class neighbourhood, is Thomas Hirschhorn's memorial to the late, great French writer Simone Weill. Among numerous images of Simone Weill, cheap furniture covered in brown tape, teddy bears, toys, plastic jewellery, books and pamphlets are all there to be viewed and used. On site caretakers replenish any items that go missing.