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Austrian Art on Show at Shchusev Museum

By Olga Kuzmina

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At the opening Austrian President Heinz Fischer spoke of the first time he heard Russian in the 1940s in Vienna. **Vladimir Filonov**

A day after visiting the Kremlin where he discussed the relaxation of Austria's visa policy with Russia, Austrian President Heinz Fischer made an appearance at another event of mutual cooperation, the opening of the joint exhibition "Austria Davaj! Creative Forces of Austria," which brings to Moscow the work of 17 leading artists in Russia's largest-ever presentation of contemporary Austrian art.

"When I was a 10-year-old boy in Vienna, I remember Russian soldiers yelling, 'davaj! davaj!'" Fischer said in a translated speech. "Now I know that word has multiple, more positive meanings."

The Russian давай loosely translates as "let's go" or "come on" and typically encloses a note of encouragement. And with "Austria Davaj!" which opened Friday, May 20, at the Shchusev

State Museum of Architecture on Ulitsa Vozdvizhenka, the creative forces of this country are given an energetic area in which to display their work, which ranges in media from Helmut Lang's tar and sheep-skin sculpture to wall-sized paper collage.

The exhibition engages with the museum's spacious, light-filled rooms to transform the entire area into a temporary work of art. Visitors walking through the venue form its final component. Among the standout pieces is Manfred Wakolbinger's "Resting Force," "Acting Force" and "Stretching Force," which appears as three massive copper seedlings stretching out from the floor and wall. Further down, Erwin Wurm's "Anger Bump," a life-sized, clothed statue of a male body with no head and a protruding erection, seems to be just another visitor when first approached from behind.

The exhibit is a cooperation between MAK Vienna, a leading institution for contemporary and applied art, the Shchusev Museum and the Austrian Cultural Forum in Moscow. It follows up on the successful 2002-03 MAK exhibition "Davaj. Russian Art Now," which presented works from Russia's radical arts scene in Berlin, Vienna and the Chuvashia republic.

"I've heard about so many contemporary Russian artists," said Johanna Braun, a Vienna-based painter whose mythical installation was chosen as the poster child for the current exhibit. "I think they are a really important cultural import for us."

Beyond reflecting the diversity of Austria's creative potential, "Austria Davaj!" is a form of cultural exchange that seeks to explore the different ways in which the changes occurring in the world can be expressed through the medium of art.

"We close our eyes to many things, but the artist never closes his eyes," said Yekaterina Selezneva, director of the Culture Ministry's international cooperation department. "I think it is important to see what young people are doing — how they see the world. When these exchanges become engrained, they will serve as a starting point, at least for the new generation, to the path of mutual understanding."

"Austria Davaj! Creative Forces of Austria" runs through Aug. 28. Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, 5 Ulitsa Vozdvizhenka. Metro Biblioteka Imeni Lenina. Tel. 697-3874, www.muar.ru.

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