



Galerie Philia

Dec 4th, 2023

This time our guest is Ygaël Attali from Galerie Philia, which made a big sensation at this year's Milan Design Week with its exhibition that boldly used a church space on the edge of Milan. He launched the gallery with his brother in 2015 and now has locations in Geneva, New York Singapore, and Mexico City. Their academic background in philosophy, history and archaeology sets them apart from their peers, and their philosophy is strongly reflected in the selection of works they handle and the regular exhibitions the gallery holds. Our relationship with Ygaël has continued with the introduction of Heap chair of we+.

Φ PHILIA

Galerie Philia

Launched in 2015, Galerie Philia is an international contemporary design and modern art gallery representing emerging and established designers and artists. The gallery is the brainchild of two brothers who share a lifetime passion for art, literature, and philosophy. Their distinct academic background sets them apart from their peers, as it sees them following a rhizomatic and transcultural approach in the way they select works. Galerie Philia has a strong international presence, with galleries in Geneva, New York, Singapore and Mexico City. In addition to their permanent spaces, the gallery organizes temporary group exhibitions and artist residencies in first-class locations around the world.

Reflecting on philosophical issues and themes through the gallery

Toshiya First of all, could you tell us about the background and concept behind the establishment of the gallery and your educational background?

Ygaël Galerie Philia was founded in 2015. It was set up by me and my brother. I have a PhD in philosophy and a background in literature, philosophy and political philosophy, and the name Philia comes from the concept of Aristotle's book 'Nicomachean Ethics'. This is a Greek concept, which means friendship or love, but also love for art, which is a very interesting concept for me. I always want to connect the gallery's activities with philosophical questions and themes.

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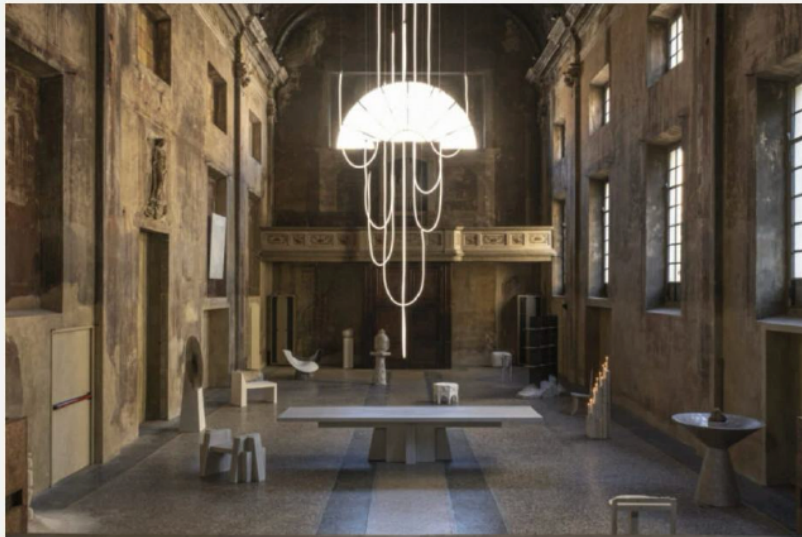
Toshiya Very interesting. What background does your brother have?

Ygaël He studied history and archaeology.

Toshiya I see. That's why the works selected by Galerie Philia are always linked to philosophy and history.

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Ygaël Yes, but first of all, I am attracted by the aesthetics of the work. Then I ask myself about the way it was made and the reflection behind it. It is very important to me that the theme is not superficial or repetitive, but is truly the result of reflection. That's why the Galerie Philia exhibition has a theme, which is always linked to my philosophy. For example, the exhibition we did in Milan in April this year was the last in a trilogy exploring SACRED, which is about DESACRALISED.



Courtesy of Galerie Philia and Maison Mouton Noir

What sets Galerie Philia apart from other

Hokuto I was really surprised that the gallery was established only eight years ago. I believe Galerie Philia is gaining increasing recognition each year, and this year's exhibition in Milan was particularly remarkable among numerous exhibitions. Could you shed light on the strategic approach Gallery Philia is taking as a design gallery?

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Ygaël I think the main difference between us and competing galleries is our commitment to have a philosophical theme behind everything we do. We also organize things that other design galleries don't do. For example, under the theme of Transhumances, we organized residencies in the south of France and Florence where we invited designers to create and exhibit their work with local materials. We would like to expand such projects to other areas. Last year, we also organized a design project for children called 'Design Brut' and made a documentary about it. In this project, we invited children aged 6-7 to draw design pieces and then work with a professional designer to give it a shape. This year, we did the same in Paris with older children. Of course, we sell the works as a business, but it is not just business. These projects are also about reflecting on societal questions and trying to express ideas through design.



Courtesy of Galerie Philia and Maison Mouton Noir

Toshiya I see. Much like design, I believe art also reflects philosophy. However, it seems you prioritize functional design and contemporary design over art. What is the reason for this choice?

Hokuto What do you consider to be the difference between art and design?

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Ygaël When we talk about design pieces, people generally think of items with functionality. However, sculptural and culturally infused designs, while functional, also possess sculptural aesthetics and significance, placing them in the realm between sculpture and design. What we deal with fundamentally are thoughtfully crafted functional pieces. They have a distinct aesthetic, are sculptural in nature, and exist in the intermediate space between design and art. The initial question of ‘Why is Gallery Philia in the world of design?’ is quite intriguing. The space between art and design is fascinating, as when we plan exhibitions, we always strive to practice design within an architectural context. For instance, this year’s Milan Design Week took place in a church, in Florence at a palace, and in New York at an iconic building. Each time, we seek out highly distinctive architectural structures and their surroundings. Context is essential in creating spatial art, and it is an integral part of our exhibitions. For me, design embodies Eros—the impulse to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty—which is something beyond fine art.

Three design trends important to Ygaël

Toshiya On the other hand, as a gallery it is also important to understand design trends, what do you think are the current trends and how do you keep up with them?

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Ygaël There are always multiple trends that either conflict or complement each other at any time. If I had to pick the three most important trends for me, one would be 'organic design'. It involves using natural materials, expressing their unicity, embracing irregularities, and sometimes disrupting the beauty of unblemished things of things. It is also heavily influenced by the Japanese culture of wabi-sabi. The second trend is 'minimal design', which already existed in the 1960s or even earlier, but has become a very important trend in the contemporary design scene. And the third one is 'digital design'. Many designers are now working on futuristic designs expressed digitally. The surrealistic creations they create using programming languages are very blurred between reality and unreality, and I like that a lot – I'm very interested in people creating surreal worlds in 3D and implementing their designs in them, and I think it's an innovative trend. This trend is accompanied by a lot of questions, such as how we perceive meta-universe and what is the difference between reality and virtual reality. If we are already living in virtual reality, then it is our reality.



Hokuto What are the key factors in selecting the works to be represented in the gallery?

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Ygaël The first focus is aesthetics. Whether it is aesthetically appealing and evokes interest. Then materiality is also important. When looking for new talents, I am always looking for designers and artists who work with materials in a very particular way. I like people who master one material and express a sense of unity and specificity. This also requires craftsmanship that allows them to express the full depth of the material. The most important thing for me is the sense conveyed by the work. For example, when I first saw the we+Heap chair, I was very intrigued. The materials and the way they are used, the sculptural form and the theme that it was inspired by falling snow – a structure found in nature – were also very interesting. The chair fulfilled three criteria: aesthetics, materiality and the sense. With these criteria, we are looking for new designers and artists.

Toshiya When you think about those three criteria, are there any differences depending on the origin of the designer or artist or where they live, for example, in Asia, Europe or the US?

Ygaël When I go to another place, I am interested in the cultural peculiarities of that place. For example, since we have established a branch in Mexico, we have had exhibitions in Mexico and the Dominican Republic with Latin American designers, and I was very inspired by the presence of traditional craftsmanship there. The same is true when I visit other countries. I want to know their cultural backgrounds and historical relationships. Of course, I don't want to bind designers and artists to their origins, and if their work is not related to tradition, that's fine, but the connection with the cultural background is very suggestive.



Promoting talents that are not yet known to the public

Toshiya How do you find new talent?

Ygaël I think I found your studio in Milan or on Instagram, and then I went to Tokyo to meet you. There are many ways to find talent: exhibitions, Instagram, through friends. When we started the gallery, we found a lot of designers who had finished their graduation work at university. We also went to universities and small design fairs for students. One of the particularities of the gallery is that we like to promote designers who are not yet totally known. There are a lot of designers for whom Philia is their first gallery, and I like to see them evolve. The gallery can orient them in the right direction or help them to become professionals.

Hokuto Is that stance still the same now that the gallery has become more renowned?

Toshiya Is that stance still the same now that the gallery has become more renowned?

Ygaël It's not changing. But in any case, I choose the works based on the three criteria I mentioned earlier. Because I believe that the work will still be as good in 30 years. But at the moment, I limit the work with new designers because I want to concentrate on promoting the designers I'm currently working with. Still, if I meet a really young and interesting talent, I would love to work with them.



Courtesy of Galerie Philia and Maison Mouton Noir

Japan is home to many talents and sources of inspiration

Toshiya You are a frequent visitor to Japan. I suppose that you feel the market for contemporary design in Japan is not that big, although there are a few design galleries. Why do you think that is? And how do you feel about Japanese design?

Ygaël This is a significant question. When I went to Tokyo, I was surprised to find shops selling 1950s mid-century furniture and Dutch design furniture, but not many contemporary design galleries. This is because when you look at the international contemporary design scene, there are so many designers who are inspired by Japan. For example, Laura Pasquino, Jérôme Pereira and many other artists are influenced by Japanese aesthetics. Japan is one of the most inspiring countries in this aspect. There are so many things and techniques that inspire Western contemporary designers. On the other hand, there are lots of fascinating designers and talented ceramic artists in Japan, but they are not famous worldwide. Of course, prominent ceramic artists are well-known in Europe and the US, but many are not so well-known outside Japan. However, I believe that Japanese contemporary design has the potential to grow and become a leading country in the world. There is a lot of talent and inspiration, a certain perfectionism and a unique aesthetic. I am a big fan of Japanese culture and literature, 'In Praise of Shadows' is one of the books that has inspired me most in my artistic creation. I also like Daisetsu Suzuki and Basho, and there are many great films. Japan is a country with many inspirational poets and writers and a very rich culture, and I

think the same thing happens in design. Talking about Japanese designers, we work with Okurayama Studio, and I really like their specific stone and the way they handle it. They and we+ are making interesting things in Japan – the Heap Chair is lovely, and the latest collection, Refoam, is great. I appreciate the fact that it is made from waste material, which is not only environmentally friendly but also an excellent design piece. Many pieces made from eco-friendly materials are often aesthetically uninspiring, but Refoam is different.

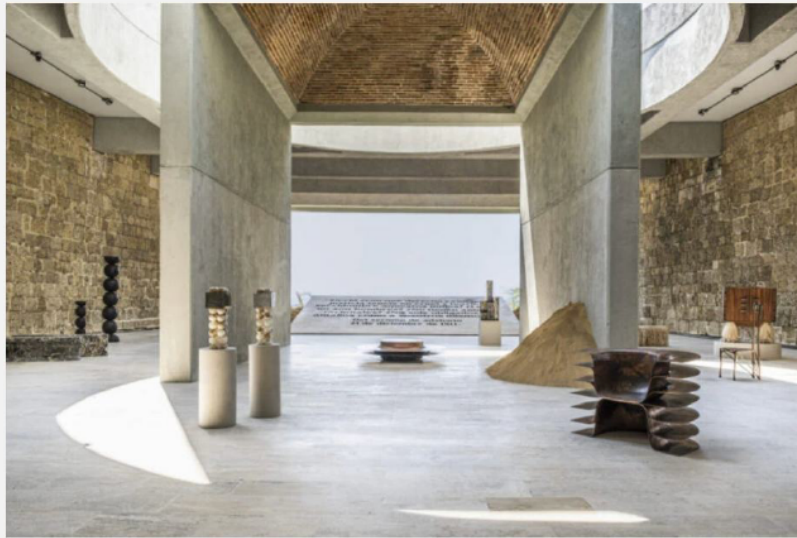


Courtesy of Galerie Philia and Maison Mouton Noir

Longevity and living in symbiosis with the digital world

Hokuto The market for contemporary design in Japan is still small, so we have to work harder. When the market grows, I am sure you will need a Japanese branch! By the way, how do you think contemporary design will change in the future?

Ygaël Many designers oppose the planned obsolescence of products, or making things that are designed to be replaced or discarded. It's about creating wonderful objects that will stay in the long term. The other is digitalization: with AI and the technological revolution, people will increasingly design digitally, and the digital and physical worlds will intertwine and there will be an exchange between the two. Ultimately you may not even know which world you are in and that will be a major issue for the design industry. Some designers may wish to specialize only in digital work, and how organic designs can be created digitally may require a different guide. I think these issues will become very interesting in the near future.



Exhibition planned in Japan

Toshiya I see. By the way, how was the audience reaction to your exhibition at this year's Milan Design Week?

Hokuto I was able to get in without queuing in the first half of the exhibition, but there were very long queues in the second half.

Ygaël It was amazing – 20,000 people visited and the queue was an hour and a half long at the weekend. Although the church was on the suburbs of Milan, I think we were able to create a more special immersive experience by being away from the city centre, and many people visited and commented in a positive way. It was good to receive positive feedback.

Hokuto Last year's exhibition was good, but this year's was even more wonderful. What will happen next year?

Ygaël The trilogy based on the concept of the Sacred is over, I want to do something completely different next year. The work I exhibited over the last three years was very organic, but very sober in terms of colour. I aim to take a completely different approach in that regard. However, I want to keep it all a surprise for the audience, so I can't share any more details about it yet."

Toshiya I am looking forward to it. Finally, could you give us a message for readers?

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Ygaël I hope that the contemporary design scene in Japan continues to grow, because Japanese culture and arts are really admired. Although it stopped during the pandemic, I have been thinking about doing an exhibition in Japan for years and would love to make it happen. For more information on Galerie Philia's activities, please visit our website and Instagram.

