

THE ART OF ABSENTEES

Independent galleries are known as the springboards for young, up-and-coming artists. They play host to an artist's first solo exhibition, which can generate valuable publicity. But what's the difference between a regular gallery and an independent one? Inside Switzerland goes to Berlin to talk to Urs Küenzi, the director of the Substitut gallery, which promotes Swiss art in the capital city. SS

photos: David Paprocki

Why do we need independent galleries?

In Switzerland, roughly 100 artists graduate from art school every year. But where can they exhibit their work? Curators in traditional galleries and museums want to gain an international reputation and often show just a few selected artists. So, for most young artists, independent galleries are the venues for their first solo exhibitions, which means these places launch them on the market. However, financing an independent gallery is difficult, and although the work we do is seen, its value isn't always recognised – so we struggle for funding.

What does the director of an independent gallery do?

I select the artists, create a concept and stage the exhibition. I'm independent and can work with the artists I want to and give the artists the freedom they need. There are so many artists that I'd like to show that, right now, I could write a five year programme of solo exhibitions. But that's not my goal. It's important to me to have an annual schedule that leaves enough space for spontaneous encounters.

How did you get involved in art?

I always had an interest in art. After my BA in communications, I decided to go to the University of the Arts in Zurich, where I studied art theory, concentrating solely on fine art.

How do you select which artists to exhibit?

Sometimes I choose an artist for their individual pieces. Or people spontaneously drop in to show me their work. I'm not interested in the purely aesthetic. It's not enough if a piece is pretty. It needs to generate a discourse with our time and society and it has to play with my perception. My view of the world should be altered after seeing the piece. This play with perception is unique to fine art.



Substitut in Berlin



Marc Bauer: Magda

What is the function of Substitut in Berlin?

There are a lot of Swiss artists in Berlin, but there's not enough space for exhibitions. There is a huge audience for fine art in Berlin, and where there's an audience there's the need to exhibit Swiss artists. I'm convinced that if you're not present in Berlin, you might miss the future. I've found a niche in this scene and want to develop the ideas we generated at White Space – the independent gallery I ran in Zurich.

Is running a gallery in Berlin a very different experience to running one in Zurich?

Berlin is much more laid back and there's much less antagonism and rivalry between different exhibition organisers. People are excited by ideas and think it's great if someone is active. In Zurich, there is always a lot of criticism. There are 400 exhibition rooms in Berlin, but because there's very little money to be made here, organisations tend to help each other. So, if I attract more customers, it's most likely that the galleries in the same street will benefit from that as well and vice versa. The interest in art here is astonishing. Fridays are normally the openings, and Saturdays, people tend to take a stroll through the galleries. On average, I have about forty visitors a day, which is many times more than in Zurich.

Do German and Swiss artists have very different styles?

My impression is that there's a long-standing tradition of painting in Germany. German artists tend to have more self-confidence. In the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Lausanne and Geneva), there is currently a Neo-Geo wave, but otherwise there is no such tradition in Switzerland. However, maybe because of this, art by the Swiss is subtler, there's more to read between the lines, with nuances and a lot of irony. They don't take themselves as seriously and come across as more relaxed.

Is there a need for an artistic exchange between Berlin and Switzerland?

Berlin is certainly the most important European city when it comes to the creation of modern art at the moment. In Zurich, the art scene is quite small and the city isn't a magnet for international artists, not least because they can't afford to rent an atelier there. In my opinion, there is a market here for Swiss art – in Zurich it is already satisfied.

How do you finance Substitut?

With public and private money. The main problem we face is that foundations don't give money for projects abroad. On top of that, foundations are interested in supporting the artists as individuals and not platforms for artists. My goal this year is to find enough financial support to be able to see through the entire planned exhibition programme, which will highlight a mix of known artists and newcomers.

Exhibitions at Substitut

22 February–29 March
'silhouette and installations'
Ana Strika

3 April–10 May
'Stomme Doos'
Marc Bauer

16 May–13 June
'As a guest by losers'
A Swiss-Austrian exhibition

www.substitut-berlin.ch