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ART IN THE PROVINCES: AN INSIDE PERSPECTIVE

The provinces are alive. In fact, they're booming.

Ellen Meyrat-Schlee Yesterday I attended the openArt 08 in Roverdo GR and before that the Exposition d'Art Contemporain au Château de Rue FR. Three weeks ago, I went to see a solo exhibition at the Schloss Kiesen, only open on Saturday and Sunday, and two weeks from now I could travel to the ArtPosition08 at the Payerne military airfield. Attracting some 500 people, the opening of the ArteBregaglia art course in Maloja was a true social happening.

Transporting art into the provinces is nothing new. It just happens more frequently now. Attention is focused less on the artists working in the region and more on the originality of the location for the presentation of works by recognized artists. The fact that younger regional artists benefit as well is a welcome side effect. The list of sponsors for the above-mentioned exhibitions is impressive. The exhibitions in the provinces have several things in common: contemporary art is shown; the artists include "big names" alongside unknown figures; the exhibitors are from the region, from all parts of Switzerland and from abroad; the venue where the exhibitions are held is distinctive and turns the presentation into an "event". The fact that the attendees come not only from the region but also from the cities and towns is intentional and perhaps surprising.

At the same time, it actually should come as no surprise because the distinction between provinces and cities has become obsolete. The word 'provinces' triggers immediate associations with the backwoods, with closed-mindedness, not being à jour – in other words, provincial. But it must be acknowledged that from London, Zurich looks like the provinces and from Zurich, Bern seems provincial. In turn, those in Bern see

Solothurn as provincial and from Solothurn, Payerne is relegated to the provinces and so on. Provinciality is a question of place and perspective. What venue am I looking upon? What venue serves as my vantage point?

Regarding the production and diffusion of art, Switzerland is certainly a special case. Art is created everywhere and is promoted everywhere. Every city and town – that is, those places with at least 10,000 inhabitants – boasts one or more museums, galleries and art associations, issues sponsorship, awards to artists and maintains an art scene. The scene may be small, but it exists. Not everyone keeps a cross-eyed focus on Zurich. Such a focus primarily concerns marketability: When an artist has arrived in Zurich, the chances of making the leap to the international art scene are greater, but not imperative. Isolation is not an inherent characteristic of the provinces, and information, exchange and being at the pulse of current happenings in art is possible anywhere today, not just in an urban setting. The channels proceed via publications and worldwide over the Internet. But channels are not networks; networks are formed through relationships. Building up, cultivating and expanding relationships is hard work, independent of the location – and yet dependent on the location for achieving success.

A statement attributed to an established Swiss curator observes: "The provinces are where the second and third division plays." This is meant to refer to the quality of artistic production. Now quality cannot necessarily be equated with the exorbitant prices that are paid in the international art trade for works of individual artists – there is a demand, there are collectors. We are back to the relationships, quite innocently and wit-

hout wanting to judge. It could be that a metropolis offers better opportunities for establishing relevant relationships, though there are many recognized artists who "come from the provinces" with works that meanwhile fetch unaffordable prices. How were they discovered? Did word about the quality of their works get around? Did they have a spot-on sense for feeling out, embracing and putting the Zeitgeist into practice? Why does X become a shooting star while Y would be lucky to have his lifetime of solitary and steadfast work rewarded with a retrospective at a local museum? And Z, much vaunted in his day, has completely fallen off the radar screen.

Ignoring the question whether it makes sense to subdivide artists into divisions like football players, one may well want to know who plays in the first division and why. All those who work as artists seek recognition, attention and success. Recognition can likely be had regionally but material success and attention on a grand scale are less easy or even impossible to come by. In fact, there is one big difference between the provinces and a metropolis here, namely, the potential for promotion. While the production of art is independent of location – with the "provinces" even offering superior working conditions such as calm, contemplation, networks of a manageable size and, not least, affordable workspace – the big city is the place to be when it comes to promotion. This is where trends are taken up and made accessible to wider audiences. The city is vibrant and alive. The trees can grow sky high and the media will cover it. This is not the case in the provinces: "In the provinces, you clench up and lose your freedom", an artist said, referring to the flip side of a manageable-scale existence. Everybody knows one another, every move

is closely watched and mutual animosities are widely known, causing courage to wane and the appetite for risk to slacken. "One's own work is locked up in the prison of the provinces" – quite an awful vision. What's to be done? An artist doesn't head for the city but instead goes abroad. "Standing leg in the provinces, free leg abroad", someone once said. And from a stint abroad, the artist returns home, inspired, with the attestation of international exhibitions in one's curriculum vitae and new relationships!

The decade of the 1970s, a time of general upheaval and revolts, saw the rise of numerous art biotopes, off-spaces for encounters and exchange, for production and for distribution that bypassed the conventional market system and had an impact extending beyond the regions. In those days, no one spoke of networks but that is what they were, and functioning ones at that. That's a thing of the past. "The provinces are becoming emptied of artists", someone commented. And "regional art no longer exists". And the youth? They have to and want to get away. The new academies of art, not all of which are in an urban context, serve as the current platforms for exchange and cooperation. These provide the venues for a new culture of art production and art promotion beyond the rules of the current-day art market. The nascent off-scenes meander, take shape spontaneously and link up with one another, location no longer plays a role. The problem of promotion remains.

Someone said: "Too much art is being produced today". Perhaps that is something worth thinking about.