

first published in **Fucking Good Art-zine** / June 2008
Fucking Good Art #20 – The Swiss Issue / a field study on Art and Art market.
www.fuckinggoodart.nl

No Overview Anymore – A Chance for Art

by Barbara Basting

As an editor of the cultural magazine *du*, I spent two weeks in New York in the summer of 1993 doing research on the current literary scene for a themed issue. I had only a few contacts but acquired many more thanks to the snowball effect. I travelled all over the city meeting older and younger, budding, well-known and forgotten, black writers and white ones, some living in upmarket luxury, others in considerably more modest circumstances, as well as colleagues at publishing houses and editorial offices.

Obviously, the idea of covering the literary scene in New York in 14 days was out of the question and, in fact, positively reckless! But I did have a key experience at the time that occurs to me now when faced with the task of surveying the art scene in Switzerland or in Zürich. Poetry Slams had become popular in New York and I learned that the Nuyorican Café was one of the preferred venues. When I met Alice, the then poetry editor of the *New Yorker*, in her office piled high with stacks of mail and books, I asked her what she thought of Slam Poetry. By then even small German publishers had already taken note of it but, to my surprise, she'd never heard of it. In my report I had written: "Suddenly it became clear that specialists who are constantly compelled to filter information don't have a chance in the chaotic proliferation of activities in this city. Little islands of great diversity exist side-by-side separated by sheer insurmountable differences in their notions of culture and aesthetics."

Hence, although people like Alice in her poetry Wonderland occupy what seems from outside to be a privileged position, where they receive a steady stream of information, they still miss out on things that may be happening right on their doorsteps – possibly because they keep having to clear a path for themselves through the steadily mounting clutter.

For several years now, as cultural editor at the *Tages-Anzeiger*, I've been sitting in an Alice office that might best be compared to a purification plant for mountains of incoming mail and books. This is where the daily Sisyphus battle of the cultural editor is played out against the frenzied production of a cultural industry and a creative economy flanked by the overheated manoeuvrings of public relations. This is also where more time may well be spent warding off inquiries than looking into them.

A few years ago, I felt I could still feasibly sit perched on my little lookout, survey the art scene in Switzerland and write a relatively informative summary about the way it operates. But for some time now I've been unable to shake off the increasingly persistent impression that the enterprise is utterly futile. "Give it up": Kafka's parable should occupy a place of honour on my bookshelves bursting with art catalogues of work by debut artists, those on the way up or even some that have recently been unearthed again. Incidentally, the observation I made at the time – that Switzerland's still reasonably small art scene is governed by a complex fabric of unconcealed dependencies and hierarchies – still applies.¹

¹ Barbara Basting, „Der Filz saugt alles auf – Über das Kunstnetzwerk Schweiz“, „du“, Heft 747, Juni 2004. S. 56-58.

As chance will have it – the relative kind of chance that plays a distinctive role in the art trade today – I recently ran into Rob Hamelijncck, co-editor of *Fucking Good Art* at Binz 39. That in itself demonstrates the relativity of that chance encounter because, despite its modesty, Binz 39 is still one of the most important talent pools in the aspiring Swiss art scene – in fact, the exchange with guests from abroad is part of its agenda, otherwise Rob wouldn't have been there. Having heard about the survey I had published, Rob in turn came up with the idea of asking me to do a repeat performance.

After thinking it over for a few days I told Rob: I can't do that with a good conscience. I can no longer ignore the fact that there just isn't enough time (a reflection of the ever-growing pressure on a structurally straitened daily press) to pay regular visits to all the institutions and venues – not simply in Switzerland but even in Zürich, with its proliferation of alternative venues, very small galleries and the occasional flash of public actions.

It is, of course, easy to list a few of the “players” in Zürich like Walcheturm, Cabaret Voltaire, Perla Modes, Binz 39 and the Shedhalle (an almost venerable institution by now), which act as forums for new ideas. I obviously know about the deeply committed “kulturblog”, the idiosyncratic *Journal für Kunst, Sex und Mathematik* or shrewd video enterprises like www.agent-provocateur. You can literally see the growth of internationally active art publishers like JRP-Ringier with its substantial backing and run by Lionel Bovier, a director as ambitious as he is committed, and there are others of no less import like Edition Fink, Scheidegger & Spiess or Kontrast. Did I forget anyone?

I certainly did: a glance at the incoming mail, not mention all the other sources, is proof positive of myriad groupings, ad hoc initiatives and meeting places that come and go, for instance, in squatted buildings. So much is happening that not even superficial “scanning” can take it all in – to use a term deceptively reminiscent of the exhaustive nature of surveillance techniques. And – to stick to the metaphor – some activities probably don't even register a blip on the radar of editorial desks. Not every event sends out media invitations and there is no time to do one's own research.

So should my boss fire me? Hardly. Editorial desks have the same problem across the board and, besides, the last thing chief editors of a major daily are interested in is the pseudo-ideal of comprehensive coverage. Nowadays it's all about radical selection.

That points to a change in paradigm that has taken place over the past few years. In the 90s and in the early 21st century, editorial desks covered the mushrooming arts scene with great enthusiasm and curiosity. Weren't we finally seeing the fruits of demands made since the 60s to introduce an expanded concept of art, to popularize culture, to subvert the distinction between high and low? Consequently, editors wanted to cover as wide a spectrum as possible. Special attention was and still is paid to popular culture. Originally embraced with subversive intent, it has long since become mainstream, commercial and thoroughly recreational – a development that now ails only those cultural editors who still cling to the logic of the avant-garde, according to which quality (almost) always begins underground and has to be cared for and cultivated like a seedling.

And, as if that were not enough, in view of growing cultural diversity and dwindling editorial perspectives, the media are resorting to the logic of the so-called attention cluster. In other words, they define priorities, focus their energies and, in some cases, even concentrate on events as media partners, which is inevitably detrimental to broad, representative coverage.

Since major newspapers do not primarily target special interests, it is easier for the mainstream to hit the headlines – the same mainstream that a critical cultural elite once despised and tried to oppose by promoting many small niches. That agenda has backfired. The resulting overkill has led to rejecting anything that might seem elitist or demanding. Quite understandable – after all, aren't we all overextended, overfed, overtired?

This does not mean that niche productions – there's no denying that we have become a society of niches – no longer attract the attention of the media. But when they do, they have to pay the price of being hyped. It's still possible to report on a small exhibition in a smallish Kunsthalle, but only if it is touted as “exemplary”, as an insider tip, if not as a sensation.

This in turn is producing new criteria for selection that are more closely related to the supposed target groups of the respective medium. On the other hand, the subjective opinions of editorial staff are carrying more weight. Given the wealth of events, I am compelled more than ever to devote my time and attention – apart from required and mainly major events in the immediate vicinity – to what I think is significant both aesthetically and socially, aspects which to me are inseparably coupled. Compromises are out. Obviously, I overlook and neglect a great deal in the process, like Alice in New York, who also entertained specific notions about the nature of poetry.

From the perspective of current cultural production, this dynamic is remarkable. For one thing, it is painful because a great deal has to be ignored – sometimes justifiably, sometimes not – due to the ignorance and the necessarily restricted horizon of editors. On the other hand, the reduction, the extreme parcelling and particularization of the media, in turn stimulates zones of cultural production that are not widely perceived, but of great interest to a small “community” that has learned to rely on its own specific channels of communication.

The positive spin-off is that quality is given a chance to develop away from the bullish world of trendiness and hype, to acquire a depth of focus that is not governed by the standards of the mass media and, ultimately, to work out new independent standards, along with strategies for communicating and establishing them.

At the same time, the parameters of orientation are changing. Because it is so hard to get an overall picture, not only in art but in every field, personal networks, recommendations and contacts are paradoxically coming into their own again. This takes us back to the beginning of the story, to the snowball effect and the coincidences that are becoming more important in the current state of cultural entropy.

In view of such a wealth of options, recommendations from people one trusts, from communities of people united by similar interests and ideologies, become an important means of orientation, and I am no exception. Feeling guilty because that entails excluding many things is futile. Other people prioritize other things and in the end there are enough intersections among the various filtering manoeuvres.

Since interconnectedness now goes far beyond local or regional contexts, many such communities are becoming less self-contained and less tangible. Superficially they may often be conspicuously visible, for the rules of the game or the code of the system stipulate that curators, institutions, galleries and artists draw attention to related circles and friends on their homepages via links, bibliographies and even the choice of publisher for exhibition catalogues. They are laying the scent, establishing a kind of corporate design, or – as in popular culture – cultivating and communicating a style. This makes it possible to draw

conclusions about the “community” in question; it is typically the kind of ersatz family that the art world loves. From outside these codes can be very difficult to decipher, which is intrinsic to the system and, in fact, a form of selection: those who are not familiar with the codes and their underlying structures remain outsiders. This applies to other social circles as well but it plays an especially important role in the art world with its dearth of generally binding, objective criteria for defining value.