

# Mind over matter

ArtForum, Nov, 1996 by Hans-Ulrich Obrist

At the Kunsthalle Bern, where Szeemann made his reputation during his eight-year tenure, he organized twelve to fifteen exhibitions a year, turning this venerable institution into a meeting ground for emerging European and American artists. His coup de grace, "When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head," was the first exhibition to bring together post-Minimalist and Conceptual artists in a European institution, and marked a turning point in Szeemann's career - with this show his aesthetic position became increasingly controversial, and due to interference and pressure to adjust his programming from the Kunsthalle's board of directors and Bern's municipal government, he resigned, and set himself up as an Independent curator.

If Szeemann succeeded in transforming Bern's Kunsthalle into one of the most dynamic institutions of its time, his 1972 version of Documenta did no less for this art-world staple, held every five years in Kassel, Germany. Conceived as a "100-Day Event," it brought together artists such as Richard Serra, Paul Thek, Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, and Rebecca Horn, and included not only painting and sculpture but installations, performances, Happenings, and, of course, events that lasted the full 100 days, such as Joseph Beuys' Office for Direct Democracy. Artists have always responded to Szeemann and his approach to curating, which he himself describes as a "structured chaos." Of "Monte Verita," a show mapping the visionary utopias of the early twentieth century, Mario Merz said Szeemann "visualized the chaos we, as artists, have in our heads. One day we're anarchists, another drunks, the next mystics." Szeemann's eclectic, wide-ranging shows evince a boundless energy for research and an encyclopedic knowledge not only of contemporary art but also of the social and historical events that have shaped our post-Enlightenment world. Indeed, in the last few years he has mounted a number of shows that reflect his penchant for mixing artifact and art, combining as they do inventions, historical documents, everyday objects, and artwork. Two of the largest offered panoramic views of his home country and the one across the Alps: "Visionary Switzerland" in 1991 and "Austria im Rosennetz" (Austria in a net of roses), which recently opened at the Museum fur Angewandte Kunst in Vienna.

Szeemann now divides his time between the Kunsthaus Zurich, where he occupies the paradoxical position of permanent freelance curator, and the studio-cum-archive he calls "The Factory," located in Tegna, the small Swiss Alpine town where he lives. What follows is a record of the conversation I had with Szeemann last summer, in which he reflected on his more than forty-year career.

HANS-ULRICH OBRIST: Until 1957 you were involved in theater. Then you began organizing exhibitions. What prompted this transition?

HARALD SZEEMANN: When I was eighteen, I started a cabaret with three friends, two actors and a musician. But around 1955, sick of intrigues and jealousies, I began to move away from ensemble work until I was doing everything by myself - a one-man style of theater that reflected my ambition to realize a gesamtkunstwerk.

At the time I had already been visiting the Kunsthalle Bern for five years. Bern is a small city where everyone knows each other, and when Franz Meyer (he took over as director from Arnold Rudlinger in 1955) was asked if he knew anyone who could show Henry Clifford, then director of the Philadelphia Museum, around Switzerland, he proposed me, knowing my interest in all the arts, but particularly in Dada, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. We visited museums, private

collections, and artists; it was a wonderful month of "vagabondage."

In 1957 Meyer also suggested me for an ambitious project, "Dichtende Maler/Malende Dichter" (Painters-poets/poets-painters) at the Museum in St. Gallen. Four people were already working on the show, but the two main directors had health problems and the other two were reluctant to take on an exhibition of this size alone. So they asked Meyer if he knew someone who could take care of the contemporary section, and he said, "I only know one person. It's Szeemann." I was the ambitious understudy who ended up getting the main part.

The intensity of the work made me realize this was my medium. It gives you the same rhythm as in theater, only you don't have to be on stage constantly.

HUO: What drew you to contemporary art to begin with?

HS: Until I was nineteen I still wanted to be a painter, but the Fernand Leger exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern in '52 impressed me so much that I said to myself, "I'll never get that good." Through Rudlinger's exhibitions - ranging from Nabis to Jackson Pollock - at the Kunsthalle Bern, one could really learn the history of painting. He was the first to show contemporary American art to a European public and later, when he became director of the Kunsthalle Basel, he bought paintings by Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, and Barnett Newman for the Basel Kunstmuseum. He was friends with many artists - Alexander Calder, Bill Jensen, and Sam Francis - and through him I met a lot of artists in Paris and New York. In Bern he did a series of exhibitions called "Tendances actuelles 1-3" (Contemporary tendencies, 1-3), a splendid survey of postwar painting from the Paris School to American abstraction. When he moved to Basel he had more space and more money, but his real adventure was in Bern.

Meyer served as director until '61. He mounted the first exhibitions in Switzerland of Kasimir Malevich, Kurt Schwitters, Matisse's cutouts, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, and he showed Antoni Tàpies, Serge Poliakoff, Francis, and Jean Tinguely. By the time I took over the Kunsthalle in '61, I was faced with this venerable past, so I had to change direction.

HUO: You wrote that Bern was something like a "situation." A kind of "mental space."

HS: I found art to be one way of challenging the notion of property/possession. And because the Kunsthalle had no permanent collection, it was more like a laboratory than a collective memorial. You had to improvise, to do the maximum with minimal resources and still be good enough that other institutions would want to take on the exhibitions and share the costs.

HUO: In the '80s the Kunsthalle became more structured. The exhibition program was reduced from more than a dozen exhibitions a year to between four and six. And the introduction of "midcareer retrospectives" turned the Kunsthalle into an extension of the museums themselves - its elasticity was lost.

HS: Yes, everything was flexible, dynamic, and then suddenly everything changed. To hang an exhibition, to produce the catalogue, used to take us one week, and then suddenly you needed a four-week period between shows to photograph everything; with this slower pace came institutional pedagogies, restoration, and guards. In the '60s we had none of this. For me, if there was a pedagogy it was about the succession of events; documentation was not important.

My approach attracted a younger public and a very young photographer named Balthasar Burkhard started to document exhibitions and events, not for publication but just because he liked what I did and what was happening at the Kunsthalle. That's how I prefer to work. Actually I stopped publishing catalogues and just printed newspapers, which were anathema to the bibliophile collectors.

HUO: And that worked out?

HS: Of course. the Kunsthalle had an exhibition program but it also welcomed all kinds of participation. Young filmmakers showed their films, the Living Theater made its first appearance in

Switzerland there, young composers performed their music - groups like Free Jazz from Detroit played - young fashion designers showed their creations.

Naturally this provoked reactions. The local newspapers accused me of alienating traditional audiences, but we also attracted a new audience. The membership increased from about 200 to around 600, with an additional 1,000 students paying a symbolic Swiss franc to belong. It was the '60s and the zeitgeist had changed.

HUO: Which exhibitions influenced you most as you were starting to curate your own shows?

HS: Well, I already described some of what I saw in Bern and in Paris. Also very important was the German Expressionism show in 1953, "Deutsche Kunst, Meisterwerke des 20 Jahrhunderts" (German art, masterworks of the twentieth century), at the Kunstmuseum Lucerne, and, of course, in Paris "Les Sources du XXe siecle" (The sources of the twentieth century, 1958), and the Dubuffet retrospective at the Musee des arts decoratifs in 1960, as well as Documenta II in '59, curated by its founder, Arnold Bode. I also visited a lot of studios - those of Constantin Brancusi, Ernst, Tinguely, Robert Muller, Bruno Muller, Daniel Spoerri, Dieter Roth, among others. I saw the most fabulous show of Picasso in Milan in 1959. From the beginning, meeting artists and looking at important shows was my education - I was always less interested in formal art history.

Of my peers, I admired Georg Schmidt, director of the Kunstmuseum Basel until 1963. He was absolutely focused on quality, able to choose the work he wanted for his collection and to incite fabulous gifts like the La Roche collection. But I also admired William Sandberg, director of the Stedelijk Museum until 1963, who was Schmidt's opposite. Sandberg was obsessed with information. Sometimes he exhibited only part of a diptych, for instance, or left a good work out of the show altogether because it was reproduced in the catalogue. For him ideas and information counted more than the experience of the object.

In a sense, I combined both approaches in my shows to achieve what I like to think of as selective information and/or informative selection. This is how I view my Kunsthalle years. In putting together an exhibition, I took both connoisseurship and the dissemination of pure information into account and transformed both. That's the foundation of my work.

HUO: Tell me more about Sandberg.

HS: Amsterdam in the '60s was the meeting point, the whole art world converged in the Stedelijk cafeteria under a mural by Karel Appel. Sandberg was very open-minded. He let artists curate exhibitions such as "Dylaby" with Tinguely, Spoerri, Robert Rauschenberg, and Niki de Saint Phalle; he was enthusiastic about new artistic directions: kinetic art, the California "light sculptors," new synthetic materials. When Sandberg left, Eduard de Wilde took over and painting filled the Stedelijk. De Wilde was much more conservative.

I also have to mention Robert Giron, who had been exhibition director at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels since its inception in 1925, an exemplary institution. Everyday at noon curators, collectors, and artists met in his office to exchange the latest art-world news. When I met Giron, he had been running the Palais for forty years and he said, "You are too young, you'll never hold up as long as me." But out of my generation and the next, I'm the only one still going. It gives me pleasure.

HUO: What about Johannes Cladders, the former director of the museum in Monchengladbach?

HS: Cladders was always an idol for me. I knew him when he was still in Krefeld. He did not rely on grand gestures. He had a love of precision but precision based on intuition. His first space was an empty school building on Bismarck Street. It marked a great period. James Lee Byars presented a golden needle in a vitrine, the windows to the garden were open, the birds were singing. Sheer poetry. And Carl Andre did a catalogue in the form of a tablecloth. I asked Cladders to participate in Documenta V. He said, Okay, but I won't take over a section, I'll just work with four artists - Marcel

Broodthaers, Joseph Beuys, Daniel Buren, and Robert Filliou - and integrate them into the rest of the show. It was his way of working. This was a period when everybody was fighting to establish the significance of their institutions. In the late '60s, art and culture started to be promoted by politicians and it became important which party you belonged to, especially in Germany. Cladders established his importance quietly, with artistic deeds at the museum in Monchengladbach, while the nearby Dusseldorf Kunsthalle did it with power plays.

HUO: You said you went to Amsterdam every month. Were there other places you visited regularly?

HS: Yes, there was an itinerary of hope and ambition: Pontus Hulten's Moderna Museet, in Stockholm; Knud Jensen's Louisiana, near Copenhagen; and Brussels. In 1967 Otto Hahn wrote in The Express magazine: "There are four places to watch: Amsterdam (Sandberg and de Wilde), Stockholm (Hulten), Dusseldorf (Schmela) and Bern (Szeemann)."

HUO: At the Kunsthalle Bern you not only organized thematic exhibitions but also many solo shows.

HS: The Kunsthalle was run by artists - they were a majority on the exhibition committee, so I had to deal with a lot of local art politics. There were Swiss artists I loved - people like Muller, Walter Kurt Wiemken, Otto Meyer-Amden, Louis Moilliet - but in my view they were not well-known, so I organized their first solo shows. I also showcased international artists: Piotr Kowalski, Etienne-Martin, Auguste Herbin, Mark Tobey, Louise Nevelson. Even Giorgio Morandi had his first retrospective in Bern. I usually did a thematic exhibition first - for example "Marionettes, Puppets, Shadowplays: Asiatica and Experiments," "Ex Votos," "Light and Movement: Kinetic Art," "White on White," "Science Fiction," "12 Environments," and finally, "When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head" - with both established and emerging artists, and then showed single artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Max Bill, Jesus-Rafael Soto, Jean Dewasne, Jean Gorin, and Constant. It was logical for a small city to do it this way, to alternate between solo and group shows. In a couple of exhibitions I showed the work of young artists - young British sculptors or young Dutch artists.

HUO: You mentioned "When Attitudes Become Form" which was a landmark show of post-Minimalist American artists. How did you put it together?

HS: The history of "Attitudes" is short but complex. After the opening in the summer of '68 of the exhibition "12 Environments" (which included works by Andy Warhol, Martial Raysse, Soto, Jean Schnyder, Kowalski, not to mention experimental film and Christo's first wrapped public building), the people from Philip Morris and the PR firm Rudder and Finn came to Bern and asked me if I would like to do a show of my own. They offered me money and total freedom. I said, Yes, of course. Until then I had never had an opportunity like that. Usually I wasn't able to pay shipping costs from the States to Bern, so I cooperated with the Stedelijk, which had the Holland American Line as a sponsor for transatlantic shipping, and I only had to pay for transport in Europe. In this way I was able to show Jasper Johns in '62, Rauschenberg, Richard Stankiewicz, and Alfred Leslie, and many more Americans later on. So getting this funding for "Attitudes" was very liberating for me.

After the opening of "12 Environments," I was traveling with de Wilde (then director of the Stedelijk) through Switzerland and Holland to select works by younger Dutch and Swiss artists for two group shows devoted to each nationality that took place in both countries. I told him that with the Philip Morris money I intended to do a show with the light artists of Los Angeles: Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, Doug Wheeler, Turrell. But Edy said, "You can't do that. I've already reserved the project for myself!" And I responded, "Well, if you reserved that idea when's the show?" His was still years down the road, but my project was for the immediate future. It was July and my show was scheduled for March.

That same day we visited the studio of a Dutch painter, Reiner Lucassen, who said, "I have an assistant. Would you be interested in looking at his work?" The assistant was Jan Dibbets, who

greeted us from behind two tables - one with neon coming out of the surface, the other one with grass, which he watered. I was so impressed by this gesture that I said to Edy, "Okay. I know what I'll do, an exhibition that focuses on behaviors and gestures like the one I just saw."

That was the starting point; then everything happened very quickly. There is a published diary of "Attitudes" that details my trips, studio visits, the installation process. It was an adventure from beginning to end, and the catalogue, discussing how the works could either assume material form or remain immaterial, documents this revolution in the visual arts. It was a moment of great intensity and freedom, when you could either produce a work or just imagine it, as Lawrence Weiner put it. Sixty-nine artists, Europeans and Americans, took over the institution. Robert Barry irradiated the roof; Richard Long did a walk in the mountains; Mario Merz made one of his first igloos; Michael Heizer opened the sidewalk; Walter de Maria produced his telephone piece; Richard Serra showed lead sculptures, the belt piece, and a splash piece; Weiner took a square meter out of the wall; Beuys made a grease sculpture. The Kunsthalle became a real laboratory and a new exhibition style was born - one of structured chaos.

HUO: Speaking of new structures for exhibitions, I wanted to ask you about the Agentur für Geistige Gastarbeit (Agency for spiritual guest work). I know that it served as a kind of base from which you mounted a number of significant shows in the early '70s, but I'm unclear how the agency was founded.

HS: "When Attitudes Become Form" and the following exhibition "Friends and their Friends" provoked a scandal in Bern. To me, what I was showing were artworks but the critics and the public did not agree. The city government and the parliament got involved. Finally they decided that I could remain the director if I didn't put human lives in danger - they thought my activities were destructive to humankind. Even worse, the exhibition committee was mainly composed of local artists and they decided that from now on they would dictate the programs. They rejected the Edward Kienholz show and the solo show of Beuys, to which he had already agreed. Suddenly it was war, and I decided to resign, to become a freelance curator. It was during that period that the hostility to foreign workers began to manifest itself; a political party was even founded to lower the number of foreigners in Switzerland. I was attacked since my name was not Swiss but Hungarian. In response, I founded the Agentur für Geistige Gastarbeit, which was a political statement since the Italian, Turkish, and Spanish workers in Switzerland were called "guest workers." The agency was a one-man enterprise, a kind of institutionalization of myself, and its slogans were both ideological "Replace Property with Free Activity" and practical, "From Vision to Nail," which meant that I did everything from conceptualizing the project to hanging the works. It was the spirit of '68.

Since I wasn't under contract at the Kunsthalle, I was free from my duties in September of '69 and then I immediately began a film project called "Height x Length x Width," with artists such as Bernhard Luginbuhl, Markus Raetz, and Balthasar Burkhard. But soon offers to do shows started arriving at the agency. I organized an exhibition in Nuremberg "The Thing as Object," 1970; in Cologne, "Happening and Fluxus," 1970; in Sydney and Melbourne, "I Want to Leave a Nice Well-Done Child Here," 1971; and, of course, Documenta V.

HUO: Let's talk about your 1970 exhibition "Happening and Fluxus" in Cologne. In this exhibit, time was more important than space. How did you decide on this approach?

HS: During the preparation of "Attitudes" I had long talks with Dick Bellamy at Leo Castelli about the art that preceded what I had grouped under the rubric "Attitudes." Of course Pollock was evoked, but also Alan Kaprow's early Happenings and Viennese actionism. So when I was asked by Cologne's cultural minister to do a show, I thought, This is the place to retrace the history of Happenings and Fluxus. Wuppertal, where Nam Jun Paik, Beuys, and Wolf Vostell had staged events, was nearby. So was Wiesbaden, where George Maciunas organized early Fluxus concerts, and in Cologne itself Heiner Friedrich promoted La Monte Young. I chose a three-part structure. Part one was a wall of documents that I put together with Hans Sohm, who had passionately

collected the invitations, flyers, and other printed materials that related to all the happenings and events in recent art history. This wall of documents divided the space of Cologne's Kunstverein in two. On each side, there were smaller spaces where artists could present their own work - this was the second part of the show. All kinds of gestures were possible: Claes Oldenburg put up posters and publications, Ben Vautier did a performance piece in which he provoked the audience, Kudo imprisoned himself in a cage, and so on. A third part consisted of environments by Vostell, Robert Watts, Dick Higgins, as well as Kaprow's tire piece. To cap it all, there was a Fluxus concert with Vautier, Brecht, and others, as well as happenings inside and outside the museum with Vostell, Higgins, Kaprow, Vautier, and of course Otto Muhl and Hermann Nitsch.

During the preparations, I felt something was lacking. So a couple of weeks before the exhibition opened, I invited, against Vostell's wishes, the Viennese actionists - Gunter Brus, Muhl, and Nitsch - to add some spice to what was in danger of becoming a reunion of veterans. It was the first public appearance of the Viennese and they took full advantage of the opportunity. Their spaces were filled with documents concerning the "Art and Revolution" event at the University of Vienna which was followed by a trial. Brus, Muhl, and Oswald Wiener were given six-months detention for degrading state symbols. Their sentences were later reduced except for Brus'. It was after that that Brus and Nitsch emigrated to Germany and founded the "Austrian Exile Government" with Wiener. Their films for sexual freedom and body-oriented art, and their performances caused a scandal.

It was all very messy. Vostell who had a pregnant cow in his environment was forbidden by the Veterinary Institute to let her give birth. So he wanted to cancel the show. But finally after a night of discussion we decided to open. Since the exhibition was upsetting the authorities, it had to open and stay open.

Beuys was not in the show, but of course he came knocking on the museum's door in the name of his "East-West Fluxus." The same happened in "Attitudes" with Buren. Though I didn't invite him, he came and glued his stripes throughout the streets around the Kunsthalle.

HUO: But Buren was invited to Documenta?

HS: Yes. And of course I knew that he would put me on the spot by choosing the most problematic locations for his striped paper. He was very critical of Documenta. He said curators were becoming superartists who used artworks like so many brushstrokes in a huge painting. But the artists accepted his intervention, which took the form of discrete white stripes on white wallpaper. It's only in retrospect that I heard that Will Insley was offended by the wallpaper along the base of his huge utopian architectural model. Beuys participated with his Office for Direct Democracy, where he sat throughout the run of Documenta discussing art, social problems and daily life with visitors to the show. He chose the well-known medium of the office to show that you can be creative everywhere. He also intended by his presence to abolish political parties, to make each man represent himself.

This was the first time that Documenta was no longer conceived as a "100 Day Museum" but as a "100 Day Event." After the summer of '68, theorizing in the art world was the order of the day, and it shocked people when I put a stop to all the Hegelian and Marxist discussions. With Documenta, I wanted to trace a trajectory of mimesis, borrowing from Hegel's discussion about the reality of the image [Abbildung] versus the reality of the imaged [Abgebildetes]. You began with "Images That Lie" (such as publicity, propaganda, and kitsch), passed through utopian architecture, religious imagery and art brut, moved on to Beuys' office, and then to gorgeous installations like Serra's Circuit, 1972. You could lie down under the roof and dream to a continuous sound by La Monte Young. All the emerging artists of the late '60s were present. And their works formed an exhibition that included performances by artists such as Vito Acconci, Howard Fried, Terry Fox, Byars, Paul Cotton, Joan Jonas, and Rebecca Horn. I also decided to use only the two museum spaces and forget about putting up sculptures outdoors. The result was a balance between static work and movement, huge installations and small, delicate works.

I always felt that it was the only Documenta possible at that time, though during the first two

months the reception in Germany was devastating. In France they immediately grasped the underlying structure of moving from the "reality of the image," such as political propaganda, to "imaged reality," Social Realist work or photorealism, for example, to "the identity or non-identity of the image and the imaged," Conceptual art, loosely speaking. I also wanted to avoid the eternal battle between two styles, Surrealism versus Dada, Pop versus Minimalism, and so on, that characterizes art history, and so I coined the term "individual mythologies," a question of attitude not style.

HUO: Your notion of an "individual," self-generated mythology began with sculptor Etienne Martin.

HS: Yes, this expression was born when I organized an Etienne-Martin show in 1963. His on-site sculptures called "Demeures" (Dwellings) were for me a revolutionary idea, though the surfaces were still in the tradition of Rodin. The concept of "individual mythology" was to postulate an art history of intense intentions that can take diverse shapes: people create their own sign systems, which take time to be deciphered.

HUO: What about Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipe* (*Anti-Oedipus*)? Did it influence your way of conceiving Documenta V?

HS: I only read Deleuze for "Bachelor Machines," not before. I've never read as much as people think I have. When I curate exhibitions I barely have time to read.

HUO: After Documenta, you founded what you called the Museum of Obsessions. How did it come about and what was its function?

HS: I invented this Museum, which exists only in my head, to give direction to the Agentur für Geistige Gastarbeit. It was Easter '74 and the agency had already existed for five years. Documenta had been a brutal exhibition: with 225,000 visitors, fragile pieces were easily damaged if you did not pay attention. I reacted to that by organizing a very intimate exhibition in an apartment called "Grand-Father," which consisted of my grandfather's personal belongings, and the tools of his profession - he was a hairdresser, an artist. I arranged these things to create an environment that reflected my interpretation of who he was. I have always maintained that it is important to try new approaches.

In "Bachelor Machines," for instance, the show was slightly different in each museum to which it traveled. New things were constantly added, in tribute to the various towns where the show was held: it went from Bern, to Venice, Brussels, Dusseldorf, Paris, Malmo, Amsterdam, and Vienna. After Documenta, I had to find a new way of doing exhibitions. There was no sense in proposing retrospectives to my colleagues at the institutions; they could as easily do these shows themselves. So I invented something else. In the Museum of Obsessions I settled on three fundamental themes, metaphors that had to be given visual form: the Bachelor, la Mamma, and the Sun. "Bachelor Machines" was inspired by Duchamp's *Large Glass* and similar machines or machinelike men, such as those in Franz Kafka's short story "In the Penal Colony," Raymond Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique*, and Alfred Jarry's *Supermale le Surmale*, and it had to do with a belief in eternal energy flow as a way to avoid death, as an erotics of life: the bachelor as rebel-model, as antiprocreation. Duchamp suggested that males are only a projection in three dimensions of a four-dimensional female power. I therefore combined works by artists who create symbols that will survive them - like Duchamp - and those artists who have what I would like to call primary obsessions, whose lives are organized around their obsessions such as Heinrich Anton Müller. Of course, I also wanted to abolish the barrier between high art and outsider art. With the Museum of Obsession, the word "obsession," which from the Middle Ages up to Jung's "individuation process" had negative connotations, came to stand for a positive kind of energy.

Another exhibition in this series was "Monte Verita," which embraced the themes of the "Sun" and "La Mamma." Around 1900 a lot of Northerners traveled South to realize their utopias in the sun

and in what they considered a matriarchal landscape. "Monte Verita" near Ascona, Italy, was such a place. Many of the representatives of the greatest utopias went there: the Anarchists (Bakunin, Malatesta, Guillaume); the theosophists; the creators of paradise on earth in the form of botanical gardens; the life reform movement, which considered itself an alternative to both communism and capitalism; then the artists of Der Blaue Reiter; the Bauhaus; the revolutionaries of the new dance movement (Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman); later on El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, Julius Bissier, Ben Nicholson, Richard Lindner, Spoerri, Erik Dietmann. Ascona is actually a case study in how what are now fashionable tourist destinations get that way: first you have romantic idealists, then social utopias that attract artists, then come the bankers who buy the paintings and want to live where the artists do. When the bankers call for architects the disaster starts. When I did the show with the subtitle "Local Anthropology to Form a New Kind of Sacred Topography," there was another goal: to preserve the architecture on Monte Verita, which, though it only covered a twenty-six year span, presented an entire history of modern utopian architecture. The life reformers who wanted to get back to nature built huts, the theosophists attempted to eradicate the right angle, then there was the crazy style of Northern Italian villas, and finally the rational style of the Hotel Monte Verita (first drawn by Mies van der Rohe but executed by Emil Fahrenkamp, who built the Shell Building in Berlin).

"Monte Verita" involved about 300 people who were either represented individually or in one of the sections, each devoted to a particular utopian ideology: anarchy, theosophy, vegetarianism, and land reform, to name only a few. You can imagine how much research it involved. Even during the exhibition new documents and objects kept arriving. To deal with them, I bought a bed made by an anthroposophical sculptor (who had worked for Rudolf Steiner's first Goetheanum) where I put all the newly arrived objects and letters before they were integrated into the show, in which documentation was grouped thematically, while the artworks were hung in a separate space.

HUO: Did "Monte Verita" map psychogeographical connections?

HS: It helped me to retell the history of Central Europe through the history of utopias, the history of failures instead of the history of power. Looking at Hulten's great shows at the Pompidou, I realized that he always chose an East-West power axis: Paris-New York, Paris-Berlin, Paris-Moscow. I chose North-South. It was not about power but about change and love and subversion. This was a new way of doing shows, not only documenting a world, but creating one. Artists were especially comfortable with this approach.

HUO: After "Monte Verita" you did "Gesamtkunstwerk"?

HS: Yes, needless to say a Gesamtkunstwerk can only exist in the imagination. In this exhibition, I started with German Romantic artists like Runge, a contemporary of Novalis and Caspar David Friedrich, and the architects during the French Revolution; then I included works and documents relating to major cultural figures like Richard Wagner and Ludwig II; Rudolf Steiner and Vassily Kandinsky; Facticeur Cheval and Tatlin; Hugo Ball and Johannes Baader; Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet and Schwitters' Cathedral of Erotic Misery; the Bauhaus manifesto "Let's build the cathedral of our times"; Antoni Gaudi and the Glass Chain movement; Antonin Artaud, Adolf Wolfli, and Gabriele D'Annunzio; Beuys; and in cinema Abel Gance and Hans Jurgen Syberberg. Once again it was a history of utopias. In the center of the exhibition was a small space with what I would call the primary artistic gestures of our century: a Kandinsky of 1911, Duchamp's Large Glass, a Mondrian, and a Malevich. I ended the show with Beuys as the representative of the last revolution in the visual arts.

HUO: Since the '80s you've focused on several big retrospectives which you organized for the Kunsthaus in Zurich: Mario Merz, James Ensor, Sigmar Polke, and more recently, Cy Twombly, Bruce Nauman, Georg Baselitz, Serra, Beuys, and Walter De Maria.

HS: Again I was lucky. After ten years of thematic exhibitions I felt the need to return to the artists I had always loved. When Felix Baumann, director of the Kunsthaus in Zurich, gave me a job with



the museum, I was able to offer artists a large retrospective or a special installation in one of the biggest exhibition spaces in Europe. Of course, I tried to make the shows as splendid as I could. Actually Serra and De Maria each did site-specific installations: *Twelve Hours of the Day*, 1990, and *The Zoo Sculpture*, 1992, respectively. With Merz we pulled down the walls and all his igloos formed an imaginary city. Having worked with these artists at the end of the '60s, it was great to do major exhibitions with them all these years later. After a twenty-four-year wait, I was able to realize the Beuys exhibition in 1993. I secured most of his important installations and sculptures. The show was my homage to a great artist: I had always thought that after his death one ought to make an exhibition reflecting his concept of energy, and I was pleased when his friends who came to the show told me they felt like Beuys had just emerged from one of his sculptures.

HUO: How significant have group shows been to your curatorial practice?

HS: In 1980 I created "Aperto" for the Venice Biennale to show new artists or rediscover older ones. In 1985 I felt that a new kind of "Aperto" was needed, there was still a predominance of "Wilde Malerei," and I wanted to introduce the somewhat forgotten quality of silence. The show I mounted was called "Spuren, Skulpturen, und Monumente ihrer präzisen Reise" (Traces, sculptures and monuments of their precise voyage) and it was introduced by Brancusi's *Silent Muse*, Giacometti's *Pointe à l'oeil*, and Medardo Rosso's *Ill Child*, and included sculptures by Ruckriem, Twombly, and Tony Cragg at the end of the space, works by Franz West, Thomas Virnich, and Royden Rabinovitch in the center, and in triangular rooms works by Wolfgang Laib, Byars, Merz, and Tuttle. It was sheer poetry. This show was followed in Vienna by "De Sculptura," in Dusseldorf by "SkulpturSein" (To be sculpture), in Berlin by "Zeitlos" (Timeless), in Rotterdam by "A-Historical Soundings," in Hamburg by "Einleuchten" (Illumine). In Tokyo by "Light Seed," in Bordeaux by "G.A.S. (Grandiose, Ambitieux, Silencieux)." As you can see, the titles of the shows became very poetic. They don't weigh on the artists and their works.

HUO: You have gone back and forth, working both inside and outside official institutions. What's made you keep a foot in each world?

HS: I wanted to organize noninstitutional exhibits but was dependent on institutions to show them. That's why I often turned to nontraditional exhibition spaces. "Grand-Father" was done in a private apartment and "Monte Verita" in five locations never before used for art - including a theosophical villa, an ex-theater, and a gymnasium in Ascona - before it traveled to museums in Zurich, Berlin, Vienna, and Munich.

HUO: These shows demonstrate another tendency of your exhibits in the '80s: an increasing number of shows in unusual exhibition spaces.

HS: Yes, absolutely. The shows I did in the '80s were sometimes the first contact the local public had with new art, so by necessity they were group shows. At the same time, I looked for spaces that would be an adventure for the artists. These exhibitions also allowed younger artists to show internationally for the first time: Rachel Whiteread in Hamburg, Chohren Feyzdjou in Bordeaux. It's not a coincidence that they're mostly women. I agree with Beuys that at the end of this century culture will be the province of women. In Switzerland most Kunsthalle curators are young women and Pipilotti Rist and Mada Mathis are the liveliest artists. Their work has a truly fresh and courageous poetic aggression.

HUO: What about your current project "Austria im Rosennetz" (Austria in a net of roses) which just opened at the MAK in Vienna? How does it relate to the exhibition you did in 1991 on Swiss culture, "Visionary Switzerland"?

HS: "Visionary Switzerland" coincided with Switzerland's 700-year anniversary. At the center of the show was the work of great Swiss artists such as Paul Klee, Meret Oppenheim, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Giacometti, and Merz, juxtaposed with material on those who wanted to change the world such as Max Daetwyler, Karl Bickel, Ettore Jelmorini, Emma Kunz, Armand Schulthess, and, of course, Muller's autoerotic machine and Tinguely's art-producing machines, surrounded by the work of

artists like Vautier, Raetz, and so on.

This exhibition traveled to Madrid and Dusseldorf and was perceived as an homage to creativity rather than as a "national" exhibition. One thing that came out of it was the Swiss Pavilion of the World Exhibition in Seville 1992, where I replaced the Swiss flag with large banners by Burkhard showing parts of the human body representing the six or seven senses, and created a circuit of work that integrated information, technology, politics, and art, which began with Vautier's painting *La Suisse n'existe pas* (Switzerland does not exist) and ended with his *Je pense donc je suisse*.

The minister of culture from Austria saw these events and asked me if I would do a spiritual portrait of Austria. I called it "Austria im Rosennetz." It's a huge panoramic show of another Alpine culture. Austria is a complex place, once an empire with a flourishing capital where East met West, it is now a small country. In the Museum für angewandte Kunst, I begin with a room that examines Austria's dynasty; the second room has portraits by Messerschmidt juxtaposed with Arnulf Rainer's overdrawings of those photographic portraits and Weegee's photographs. In the third room are the now classical Austrian artists and architects of the Vienna Secession. The fourth and fifth rooms are devoted to narrative, showcasing works by Aloys Zottl, an unknown nineteenth-century animal painter, Fritz von Herzmanovsky-Orlando, who wrote the book *Gaulschreck im Rosennetz* (Terror of the horses in the net of roses), Richard Teschner's marionettes, and, finally, the carriage that transported the body of Crown Prince Ferdinand, who was killed in Sarajevo. The entrance hall is a kind of Wunderkammer with Turkish relics and Hans Hollein's couch from 19 Bergasse, where Freud practiced psychoanalysis. The upper floor shows Austrian inventions: Auer's lamp and its use by Duchamp; Madersperger's sewing machine with Lautreamont's poetic image and Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse*, 1920; Franz Gellmann's *World Machine* with Tinguely's late multicolored and brightly lit sculptures. Three screening programs are devoted to Austria's influence on Hollywood: Erich von Stroheim, Fritz Lang, Michael Curtiz, Peter Lorre, Bela Lugosi, and many others (all of whom emigrated), and Austrian experimental film (Peter Kubelka, Kurt Kren, Fery Radax). The seats in this cinema are a work by Franz West who is represented throughout the show along with other contemporary artists: Maria Lassnig, Eva Schlegel, Valie Export, Friederike Pezold, Peter Kogler, Heimo Zobernig, and Rainer Ganahl, to name a few.

HUO: Given a century in which the exhibit is more and more of a medium, and more artists claim that the exhibit is the work and the work is the exhibit, what would you say are the turning points in the history of mounting exhibitions?

HS: Duchamp's *Box in a Valise* was the smallest exhibition; the one Lissitzky designed for the Russian pavilion of the *Pressa* in Cologne in 1928, the largest. During *Documenta V*, I did a section "Museums by Artists" with Duchamp, Broodthaers, Vautier, Herbert Distel, and the *Mouse Museum* by Oldenburg, which I think was important. The master of the exhibition as medium is, for me, Christian Boltanski.

HUO: Which artists of the '90s interest you?

HS: I appreciate the intensity of Matthew Barney, although having seen his show in Bern I prefer his videotapes to his objects. I also like younger video artists such as Pipilotti Rist and Mada Mathis.

HUO: I know you have a huge archive. How do you organize the information you need for your work?

HS: My archive changes permanently. It reflects my work. If I do a solo show I make sure to have all the documentation on the artist, if it is a thematic exhibit I keep a library. My archive is a function of my own history. I know that I do not have to look for Wagner under the letter W, but under "Gesamtkunstwerk." I also sort museum collection catalogues by location, in order to have a mental portrait of the institutions. My archive is a collection of several libraries. There is one for Ticino, which originally grew out of "Monte Verita," one for dance, film, and art brut; of course there are multiple cross-references. The most important thing is to walk through with closed eyes,

letting your hand choose. My archive is my memoir, that's how I look at it. Too bad I cannot walk through it any more. It has become so full. Like Picasso I would like to close the door and start another.

HUO: Despite the current increase in information about art via the Internet and other media, knowledge still depends a lot on meeting people. I see exhibitions as a result of dialogues, where the curator functions in the ideal case as a catalyst.

HS: The problem is that information can be retrieved via the Internet, but you have to go to the site in question in order to see if there is something behind it, whether the material has enough presence to survive. The best work is always the least reproducible. So you speed from one studio to the next, from one original to another, hoping that some day it will all come together in an organism called an exhibition.

HUO: In the '80s hundreds of new museums opened their doors. But the number of significant venues did not increase. Why do you think that's the case?

HS: Whether a place is significant or not still depends on personality. Some institutions don't show courage or love for art. For many new museums today all the energy and money goes toward hiring a "star" architect and the director is too often left with spaces he doesn't like and no money to change them. High walls, light coming in from the ceiling, a neutral floor are still the best bet and the cheapest one. Artists usually prefer simplicity, too.

HUO: By establishing structures of your own, you initiated a practice which only in recent decades has come to be called curator or exhibition organizer. You were a pioneer.

HS: Being an independent curator means maintaining a fragile equilibrium. There are situations where you work because you want to do the show though there's no money and others where you get paid. I've been very privileged all these years since I've never had to ask for a job or a place to exhibit. Since 1981 I've been an independent curator at the Kunsthaus in Zurich, which has left me time to do shows in Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg, Paris, Bordeaux, and Madrid, and to run the museums I founded on "Monte Verita" with no state funds. But of course you work harder as a freelance curator, as Beuys said: no weekends, no holidays. I'm proud that I still have a vision and that, rarer still, I often hammer in the nails. It's very exciting to work this way, but one thing is sure: you never get rich.

HUO: Felix Feneon described the role of the curator as that of a catalyst, a pedestrian bridge between art and public. Suzanne Page, a curator at the Musee d'art moderne de la ville de Paris with whom I often collaborate, gives an even more humble definition. She defines the curator as a "commis de l'artiste." How would you define it?

HS: Well, the curator has to be flexible. Sometimes he is the servant sometimes the assistant, sometimes he gives artists ideas of how to present their work; in group shows, he's the coordinator, in thematic shows, the inventor. But the most important thing about curating is to do it with enthusiasm and love - with a little obsessiveness.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist is a Vienna-based curator currently living in London.

COPYRIGHT 1996 Artforum International Magazine, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning