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Culture: a Swiss export

Virtually no other country boasts such a rich and broad-based range of cultural offerings as Switzerland. Up and down the country, subsidised theatres and orchestras as well as numerous first-class museums vie to outdo each other with top-quality collections and repertoires. Added to this is a calendar of festivals that is virtually in a class of its own in terms of quality and variety. Fortunately, Switzerland is a rich country, and can afford to indulge in culture; because anyone aiming to offer world-class Western culture needs money. Indeed, some institutions (for example, the Zurich Opera) need so much cash that they can no longer maintain their traditional standards without private sponsors. According to the last statistical survey in 2001, Swiss companies supported culture through sponsorship to the tune of CHF 320 million a year.

In times when the state purse is empty, appeals by politicians to cut costs hang like the sword of Damocles over the cultural sector. The storm in a teacup over Berne artist Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibition in Paris put the wind up the Swiss cultural scene. What was the problem? Hirschhorn's exhibition, supported with a CHF 180,000 subsidy from Pro Helvetia, mocked Switzerland, Federal Councillor Blocher and direct democracy, prompting the Council of States to take unprecedented punitive action by summarily cutting Pro Helvetia subsidies by CHF 1 million.

While art critics were agreed that Hirschhorn's Paris exhibition could not be counted among the highlights of Swiss artistic creativity, the political reaction and associated sanctions triggered a broad-based discussion on artistic freedom and – once more – the existence of Pro Helvetia, whose actions are repeatedly questioned and debated by politicians. Thus the anger and punishment meted out by the Council of States was aimed more at Switzerland's most important cultural institution than at the political objectives of artist Thomas Hirschhorn.

Art and culture are favourite sources of controversial debate. What is art? Where does it end, which interpretation is correct, does it truly reflect Shakespeare's original intentions, what is art permitted to address and what should it leave alone, how much freedom should an artist be allowed, or should artists be subject to no constraints at all? Criticism is also frequently aimed at Pro Helvetia, which, by dint of its remit as a cultural promoter, continually supports cultural activities in Switzerland and exports such activi-



Heinz Eckert

Interest in Swiss culture is very high throughout the world.

ties to the world. The cultural foundation's task is not an easy one, and any judgement is always a question of personal standpoint and taste. Yet despite all the criticism, Pro Helvetia is an integral part of Swiss cultural life.

This issue of "Swiss Review" focuses on the activities of Pro Helvetia abroad and its task as a global ambassador of culture. In an interview, Pro Helvetia Director Pius Knüsel explains the aims of his foundation and author Martin R. Dean describes the experiences he acquired in Europe, Asia and the USA as a writer and linguistic ambassador at the invitation of Pro Helvetia. Cultural promoters are unanimous in the belief that interest in Swiss culture is very high throughout the world, and that Swiss artists are very welcome wherever they go. It is important that this asset continues to be leveraged to the hilt. *Heinz Eckert*

Translated from German.



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For 20 years, Swiss freerider Dominique Perret has been gliding down untouched slopes all over the world and has been named Freerider of the Century. Freeride skiing has become an important segment of the winter sports sector.

COVER PHOTO: Mark Shapiro

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