

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 32 (2005)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Culture : dance, art and literature are all export hits
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906599>

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Dance, art and literature are all export hits



Around the world there is major interest in culture and artists from Switzerland. The Pro Helvetia cultural foundation plays a key role as a cultural intermediary whose aim is to promote intercultural understanding.

BY HEINZ ECKERT

IN 2003, 30,000 people worked to produce art in Switzerland in the fields of music, literature, film, as well as in the performing and visual arts, for a total of CHF 5.3 billion. If one adds the related fields of media, recording and handicrafts, the figure comes to 82,000 employees and CHF 17 billion.

This corresponds to almost two percent of the labour market, according to statistics compiled on Swiss taxpayers and employees. And the growth curve for cultural production is steeper than in all other branches of the economy.

"The culture business is booming," says Yvette Jaggi, President of the Foundation Board of Pro Helvetia in a foreword to the latest activity report of this organisation, which is also responsible for exporting Swiss culture. Continual growth, according to Jaggi, is part and parcel of the trend towards cultural internationalisation and commercialisation, and she goes on to draw further parallels between culture and business. While the industrial sector is gradually giving way to services, the importance of true artistic production is also waning. It is being overtaken by activities which promote

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Performance and provocation: Hirschhorn art with actor.

sales and dissemination, and is developing at the spectacular pace of new markets. In all fields of art, says Jaggi, dissemination and communication play a decisive role, and cultural creativity is increasingly performing a supporting function, as a pretext or vehicle for economic interests. And she goes even further: "Will culture perhaps soon be regarded as a genuine export arm of the Swiss economy?," asks the Pro Helvetia President.

Culture has become big business and a competitive battle between numerous different providers and producers: a market that is increasingly dictated by the laws of supply and demand.

The need for financial support from public funds has also increased. For instance, the annual number of applications to the Pro Helvetia Foundation between 1972 and 2003 rose by 215 to 3500. Federal contributions increased over the same period from CHF 5.5 million to CHF 35 million per year. While the number of applications has in-

creased by a factor of 16, the funds available to Pro Helvetia have only risen by a factor of six during the same period.

Although cultural policy is the responsibility of the cantons and no national Swiss policy on culture exists, the government contributes some CHF 230 million every year towards promoting culture. The government, cantons and communes together spend an annual CHF 1.8 billion on cultural activities.

At the federal level, the Federal Office for Culture (FOC) with its 470 part-time employees, and the public-law Pro Helvetia Foundation with a staff of 119, are responsible for the promotion of culture. The FOC, to which the Swiss National Museum and the Swiss National Library belong, supports cultural umbrella organisations, such as Cinéma theque, by contributing funds for operations. The FOC is also active in monument conservation and film promotion, and is responsible for cultural dissemination and the promotion of reading.

Pro Helvetia, founded in 1939 for national defence of the intellect, also has a legal mandate to ensure cultural exchange with countries abroad.

On a smaller scale and with different objectives, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and Presence Switzerland act as cultural communicators and promoters. SDC spends an annual CHF 12 million in poor countries on "the formation and preservation of unique and varied cultural landscapes", and Presence Switzerland uses culture to enhance Switzerland's image and promote its economy.

All the above-mentioned institutions share a common objective, which David Streiff, outgoing Director of the Federal Office for Culture, defines thus: "They aim to spread awareness of Switzerland abroad, facilitate dialogue, promote the exchange of ideas between nations, and demonstrate that Switzerland is a creative and original country."

Pius Knüsel: "We promote intercultural understanding"

Switzerland exports more than just clocks, chocolate and cheese. It also exports culture. What is the aim behind this?

We asked Pius Knüsel, Director of Pro Helvetia, a foundation that promotes the international exchange of culture.

"Swiss Review": What can and should cultural promotion achieve abroad?

Pius Knüsel: Cultural promotion abroad, or rather the dissemination of culture abroad, strengthens relations between Switzerland and other countries, forges links between artists, and promotes intercultural understanding.

According to which criteria are cultural ambassadors or cultural projects selected for "export"?

1. According to demand. The host country must demonstrate an interest. Generally speaking, event organisers assume part of the risk.

2. According to quality. Only culturally compelling projects are supported. Even if the artistic message has to be repeatedly re-interpreted, witness Paris in December 2004.

3. According to the potential of the message. We support only productions which we assume are understandable by the host country.

Where is the focus – in terms of content and geography – and why?

In terms of content, there are no focal areas since we respond to demand. Greater emphasis on individual disciplines is dictated by the way the international cultural

market functions, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the Swiss production. Currently there is a boom in architecture, visual arts and dance. But that may change.

Geographically, the lion's share of resources goes to our neighbouring countries, Germany, France and Italy, followed by the rest of Europe and then, much further down the list, the USA, Asia, southern Africa and the rest of the world. The weighting is directly linked to the strength of the markets in question. Countries such as those in Europe, which are well equipped with cultural resources, generate a larger demand for culture from Switzerland and are also grateful recipients.

How do you define the target public abroad?

People interested in and working in cultural areas, ultimately the intellectual and urban public associated with the host country's cultural institutions. In principle, we never initiate the event ourselves but rather rely on our partners' instigation.

Are there good and bad cultural exports? "No," says David Streiff, "the question is not whether an idea is good or bad, but whether it will be understood or not. Take, for example, a Swiss film that shows the fate of an extremely rich but depressive woman, how she suffers in her villa surrounded by luxury, and how she finally throws herself out of the window onto the lawn below. We cannot show this in countries where the majority of residents live their whole lives waiting for running water. The film would not be understood there. This is why it's very important, for the success of a cultural exchange, to work with local artists who are familiar with the local mentality."

According to Streiff, the various institutions coordinate their activities and work seamlessly alongside each other, since each of them has a clearly defined task to perform. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of harsh criticism from the media and parliament against the Federal Office for Culture

and the Pro Helvetia Foundation. In times of empty state purses, cultural subsidies repeatedly come under fire.

Last December an exhibition by Bernese artist Thomas Hirschhorn at the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris hit the headlines: "Star artist mocks Switzerland" screamed the front page of the tabloid "Blick", and the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" criticised the "Mistake in the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris". Pro Helvetia paid CHF 180,000 for an exhibition which not only put Federal Councillor Blocher in the firing line and made a farce of direct democracy, but also compared Switzerland to the Iraqi torture prison of Abu Ghraib.

Has Pro Helvetia spent its money unwisely this time? Centre-right politicians were outraged and shocked, and SVP President Ueli Maurer claimed that the cultural foundation's job was to promote Switzerland, rather than the opposite. Pro Helvetia immediately defended the Hirschhorn exhibition, citing the artistic freedom of an inter-

nationally-known artist to make his own statement on the cultural platform of a democratic state. The cultural foundation, however, distanced itself from the attack on Federal Councillor Blocher but stressed that it regarded it as one of the great virtues of a democratic society to support artists which criticised that very society. Federal Councillor and Minister of Culture Pascal Couchepin also showed understanding and said that it was petty to squabble over Pro Helvetia's contribution to the exhibition. "Politicians should not watch over all the details, like political commissars," declared Couchepin, who last summer denounced a state-promoted film in which his name was blackened. The Council of States, on the other hand, showed no sympathy for Hirschhorn's work and reduced subsidies for Pro Helvetia by CHF 1 million. A perfect shambles...

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Do Swiss schools also play a role?

No. Nor are Swiss Abroad a target public for Pro Helvetia. Both groups are too small to justify the expense. Usually, their interests cannot be addressed in the same way as those of interested partner institutions in host countries.

How important are the services provided to Pro Helvetia by Swiss embassies?

It varies. For large-scale programmes, the mediation and organisational services are essential. For smaller projects, embassies frequently act as relay stations.

Which area do you believe is the best example of outstanding, effective cultural export?

The 17 exhibitions of contemporary Swiss art held in association with the ARCO 2003 art show in Madrid. Or the "0406 Swiss Contemporary Arts in Japan" programme, which will bring some 25 productions representing contemporary Swiss culture to various Japanese cities as part of the Aichi 2005 World Expo.

Pro Helvetia's activities do not always find favour with Swiss politicians. The Hirschhorn exhibition in Paris cost you one million francs in subsidies. Do you draw any conclusions from this unique incident?

There is no doubt that the political message behind the cutback will have a lasting effect on the Foundation. At the operational level, we will investigate how the decision was arrived at. We will also have to communicate more carefully. What is astonishing about the affair is the fact that the French public is reacting positively to the

Hirschhorn exhibition and cannot understand why the Swiss parliament was so angered.

The interview was conducted by Heinz Eckert

Translated from German.



Pro Helvetia Director Pius Knüsel: "Communicate more carefully".



...Talking of Hirschhorn... This type of subsidised land art is not to everyone's taste either.


Controversy is also continually reigning over the countries Switzerland should select for its cultural exports. Is it worth raising awareness of contemporary Swiss music in Kazakhstan, or would it be better to limit cultural exports to countries which are interesting to Switzerland from a tourism and economic standpoint? "No," says David Streiff. "It's not as simple as that. The presence of a Swiss artist in Kazakhstan may provide him with a larger audience and greater media feedback than an exhibition in New York, which is saturated with events of this kind. Culture can open doors even in economically poor countries."

Last autumn, Pro Helvetia announced that it would be changing its international strategy and redefining the principles of its activities abroad. With EU expansion, Pro Helvetia's local offices in Budapest, Bratislava and Prague have fulfilled their task. Moreover, over the past few years artistic interest has been on the rise in China, India, Brazil and Mexico, which are also strengthening their presence on the global cultural scene. "We must also address the needs of artists, and right now China, India and Latin America are more important for them than other parts of the world," explains Thomas Laely, Director of International Operations at Pro Helvetia. "In any case, no-one has criticised

our new geographic focus. Instead it has been unanimously welcomed and understood."

The new international strategy of Pro Helvetia is based on ten major cultural regions: Europe, Russia/Central Asia, Arabic cultures, Africa, China, India, South East Asia, Oceania, North America, and Latin America. "Switzerland is very welcome all over the world and continues to enjoy excellent prestige. Our cultural achievements are well accepted. The greater the cultural difference from another country, the more relevant it is to maintain a local liaison office with local employees," stresses Thomas Laely.

Again and again the question arises of whether and which cultural works should be promoted and which culture should be exported abroad. Must it be major names such as Swiss architects Mario Botta, Herzog & De Meuron, the Béjart Ballet of Lausanne, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande or artists Pipilotti Rist and Fischli/Weiss, or should unknown newcomers also be able to exhibit abroad? Both, say David Streiff and Thomas Laely. Big names are an excellent attraction world-wide and are always in demand. In addition to established culture, however, talented up-and-coming artists should be given the opportunity to show their works abroad: "Not only can this foster valuable contacts with foreign colleagues,

but it can also be decisive for the artists' future development," says Thomas Laely. Switzerland, he says, has an incredibly rich and varied range of cultural offerings, and this variety should be presented and promoted. Says Laely, "We don't want just window-dressing abroad; we want to promote platforms for cultural work." The most important project this year, costing CHF 2 million, is "0406 Swiss Contemporary Art in Japan". In conjunction with the 2005 World Expo in Aichi, Pro Helvetia will be showing Swiss contemporary art, design, comics, Internet art, film, performance, theatre, music and literature. Switzerland and Japan have always fostered a stimulating exchange of classical art repertoires. So far, however, when it comes to contemporary artists, the Japanese know only the works of Herzog & de Meuron, Pipilotti Rist and Fischli/Weiss. So there should be a great deal of curiosity about the broad spectrum of modern art. The aim is to forge long-term partnerships between Switzerland and Japan in conjunction with local organisers. 

Translated from German.