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## IF you didn't exist...

### *Interview with Marc-Olivier Wahler, Director of the Swiss Institute in New York.*

The SI (Swiss Institute - Contemporary Art), in New York, is presenting the exhibition "Extra" until April 26, bringing together French and Swiss artists such as Virginie Barré, Olivier Blanckart, Stéphane Dafflon, Wim Delvoye, Daniel Firman, Fischli & Weiss, Sylvie Fleury, Gianni Motti, Bruno Peinado, Stéphane Sautour, and Roman Signer. How did an association for the promotion of Swiss culture (see box) become an internationally renowned contemporary art center that presents artists from all backgrounds? Marc-Olivier Wahler, artistic director of the SI, explains his choices and exhibition policy.

#### *Why did you want to limit the SI's programming to contemporary art?*

From the moment I took office in October 2000, I argued that contemporary art, far from being a self-contained activity, naturally leads to an openness to other fields: literature, music, dance... Thus, our exhibition bringing together Ugo Rondinone, Urs Fischer, and John Giorno was a way of juxtaposing the practices of contemporary art and poetry. Moreover, in New York, you need a distinct identity to exist. The SI now benefits from a strong identity by positioning itself as a contemporary art center. I think this has been possible because the SI is an independent association whose funding comes two-thirds from private sources. Of course, that being said, our rather modest budget fluctuates considerably depending on the general economy, and it's a daily struggle to find money. My work is largely a matter of persuasion; It's about having radical and somewhat crazy ideas and getting them across.

#### *How do you define your programming?*

For me, running a contemporary art center is first and foremost about how to continually adapt it to reflect current artistic practice. I'm not interested in simply lining up good exhibitions one after another. Developing a program is an obsession. I wouldn't go so far as to say that a curator is an artist, but it's about developing an exhibition language. I designed the current program over four years, based on a question that interests me: what are the relationships, the connections, the tensions between art and reality? Today, for example, quantum physics has demonstrated that parallel universes can exist. If they exist at the quantum level, why not at other levels? It's a question that preoccupies physicists and philosophers as much as artists. I'm particularly fascinated by this constant interplay between these parallel universes of art and reality. In 2001, we transformed the SI into a polling station with Fabrice Gygi, an illegal casino with Sislei Xhafa, a papal visitation site with Gianni Motti... The culmination of this exploration is the "Extra" exhibition. Today, art is a platform that can lead to anything, from quantum physics to proctology, by way of a shooting range and an iodine competition...

#### *What is the public's reaction to the young European artists exhibited at the SI, who are often unknown in the United States?*

Eric Hattan's exhibition, for example, was reviewed in the New York Times, which is extraordinary for an artist who had never exhibited at the États-Unis. This means that the SI projects an image of quality. I think one of the primary functions of an art center is to promote emerging artists. But for the New York public, it's all the same whether you exhibit a very young, unknown artist or an artist like Gianni Motti, already known in Europe. On the other hand, when you exhibit an unknown artist after Jim Shaw or Ugo Rondinone, the former's work is enhanced because it's placed on the same level as that of more renowned artists. The goal is precisely to acquire an international reputation so that young artists can benefit from it.



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***Now that you've achieved the goal of making the SI a recognized contemporary art center, what's the next challenge for the venue?***

It's to expand the SI's reach and increase the number of exhibition spaces. This work has already begun, notably with the "Liquid Sky" exhibition at the FRAC Bourgogne in Dijon, linked to another at the SI. Starting from the observation that the art space can be located anywhere, we conceived the "Extra" catalogue as such, offering twenty-eight artists free space across ten to twelve pages. If the exhibition space can be activated regardless of location, what then becomes of the very notion of an exhibition? This is a challenge that interests me. For the Jutta Koether and Steven Parrino exhibition at the end of 2002, we asked ourselves what the Cabaret Voltaire might look like today. Their installation served as a stage for a series of "noise" concerts. Every time I invite an artist, I ask them to step outside their comfort zone and collaborate as much as possible with a musician, a filmmaker, a taxi driver... These days, we talk a lot about events or projects at the expense of the exhibition, which has a somewhat old-fashioned feel. For my part, I really think in terms of exhibitions, but always with the idea of questioning how they operate.

EXTRA, until April 26, SI, 495 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, tel. +1 212 925 2035.

***The SI, a unique place in New York.***

Through its history and operation, the SI in New York is an atypical place. Its status is that of an American non-profit organization, founded in 1986 to promote cultural dialogue between Switzerland and the United States. Although it has received annual funding from Pro Helvetia, a foundation for the promotion of Swiss culture based in Zurich, since its inception, it is not directly affiliated with Pro Helvetia, as are Swiss cultural centers, notably the one in Paris. The SI's budget is primarily allocated by sponsors and patrons, but also, if the economy is favorable, by capital gains generated by its own foundation's funds, or by events organized to benefit it, such as dinners or auctions. In addition to the public subsidies granted by Pro Helvetia, since 1990 there has been aid from the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, equivalent to the French Ministry of Culture.