

St Gallen versus London

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ST GALLEN VERSUS LONDON

Rachel Lumsden An art capital like London has an energy that sweeps you up immediately, but it can be a tough environment in which to survive. Competition is immense and one needs a good deal of luck, tenacity, quid pro quo exchange and dogged sticking power to survive. Countless artists who haven't and perhaps never will make that unequivocal breakthrough are squeezed to the margins, yet practitioners are inevitably, inexorably drawn from the province to engage with the wider urban art-circuit that London offers.

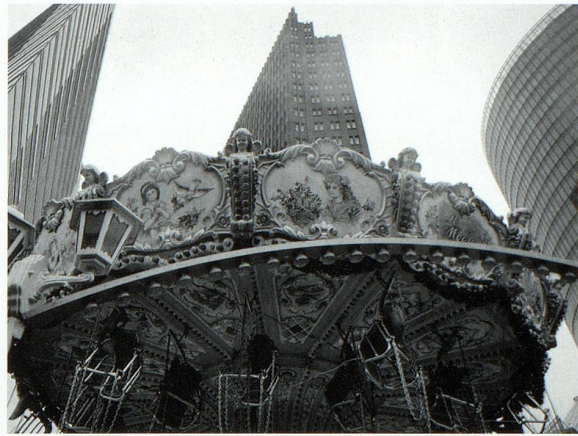
Generally speaking, there is an art trickle-down effect from capital to province, which seems to be a one-way mechanism. Only a big-city environment can bestow the acknowledged stamp of approval on an artist's work and reputation. An urban success eventually filters through to the province where art institutions and museums further distribute what has already been sanctioned in the art capitals. Provincial institutions are often reluctant to champion home grown artists who lack the urban stamp of approval, preferring instead to import tried and tested names from the art capitals, declaring themselves to be cosmopolitan in the process. It is thus a phenomenon of the province that the local artist has first to leave the nest and achieve a standing elsewhere, before being welcomed to the top echelons of the provincial art scene at home. The British province has therefore a glass ceiling, a threshold beyond which it cannot assist a local artist's career and sooner or later would-be «shooting stars» are forced to test their mettle on the urban stage.

My relocation from London to St. Gallen gave me a few surprises. On the one hand, a provincial Swiss town like St. Gallen provides a favourable, nurturing

environment in which artists can work and survive relatively well. It is possible to be noted in the province to a certain level because there are fewer artists competing for the same opportunities. To a British artist like myself, the level of serious representation given to contemporary art in a relatively small town like St. Gallen, via Kunstmuseum and Kunsthalle, is quite astounding – though the same principal of a one-way trickle down effect from capital to province applies here also.

One of the most remarkable things about Switzerland is how generously local artists are funded at a regional level. Funding opportunities are markedly higher than those in the UK-especially compared with equivalent provincial regions where very little funding exists for individual artists. Cantonal and City support in St Gallen affords its artists a legitimised and professional standing in their immediate environment, even if it cannot guarantee a cross-cantonal or national success. This merit system reflects a wider general attitude in the Swiss population, namely: artists are worth having, culture is worth supporting.

On the other hand, my relocation seriously challenged me in my core art territory as a painter. I quickly discovered that painting in Switzerland is potentially hazardous terrain for an artist to navigate, with a danger that one can be consigned to the hobby corner of the art scene, as though the term «contemporary painter» presents an oxymoron. A certain caution exists with regards to painting that is «painterly» i.e. painting that acknowledges the materiality of the substance – primarily because one fears work that is un-reflected and/or unschooled. This caution with regards to painting can be identified both in art schools and amongst curators.



«Carousel at Potsdamer Platz», 2008, Foto: Rachel Lumsden

As a result, artists are reluctant to declare themselves as painters – without serious qualification of the term. The accepted mainstream in the field of figurative painting is one that is generally characterised by a cool, measured, reduced approach to the medium in terms of palette, ductus and subject matter. Accordingly, many contemporary painters in Switzerland head deliberately in that direction, often using photographic or filmic source material to give an additional filter through which to view the work.

I come from another art heritage in which painting is regarded as a highly reflective process, one that is rooted in a long and established tradition. The term «Contemporary Painting» certainly presents no oxymoron; its ongoing relevance as an integral part of a wider, versatile art-scene and its ever-renewed contemporaneity is taken as read, whether en vogue or not. Thinking back to lecturers who taught me, amongst them Peter Doig and David Hockney, they conveyed the understanding that the language of painting is a fine negotiation between materiality, concept and contemporaneity. We are less cautious in embracing the inherent sensual properties of paint and though the British are not a sensuous nation per se, there is clear evidence of painterly sensuality in a Bacon as much as in a Gainsborough; and that is equally evident in much contemporary painting in London now.

The same working strategies employed by an artist in London are equally applicable in the Swiss province, based on the premise that work comes out of a permanent dialogue with the environment. The work one creates in the studio is just one part of an artist's practice; opening up a discourse with others and establish-

ing a profile are other significant factors. An artist's professionalism extends to documenting proposals and concepts very carefully in order to engage in a convincing dialogue with curators, art institutions, press and funding bodies. The principal of work, name, face, can be useful in considering strategy – with the inherent implication that an active participation with the wider art scene is necessary – that means networking and communication. Incorporating a curatorial strand into one's artistic practice can ensure a dialogue at least with other artists and collaboration often generates new ideas, energy and possibilities.

Moving from London to St Gallen meant giving up the status of artist in a major art-capital and having to prove my artistic credentials afresh in a new cultural environment – which has been hard work. In return, St. Gallen has offered a very sustaining and interesting environment in which to live and work, albeit within the capital-province trickle-down phenomena. The key question for any artist in the province is not whether it is enough to engage only at a regional level but how to engage cross-regionally and internationally.

ARTISTS VERSUS LONDON



Chantal Michel
Der stille Gast
Grand Hotel Bürgenstock, 2006
C-Print hinter Plexiglas
120x150 cm



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Grand Hotel Bürgenstock, 2006
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