

Hans Rudolf Reust

Trad. Mike Evans

L'amour de la démocratie est un état d'esprit¹

Love of democracy is a state of mind

Swiss-Swiss – Win-Win: Entrails of a Democracy

The very repetition in the title of the exhibition was of itself a clear statement of intent. It added a new intensity, the last ounce of eagerness, to the question about the political values and *modus operandi* of one democracy in particular – a democracy which claims to be amongst the world's oldest, and a direct democracy to boot. Yet another article branded as "Made in Switzerland".

Rien, heureusement, n'est moins prévisible que la démocratie.

Nothing, fortunately, is less predictable than democracy.

The immediate impression on entering the exhibition was one of being besieged. The three-dimensional show occupying every bit of space available inside its pastel primary-coloured cardboard mould gave us no time to dwell on the fact of having arrived. Just one step and we were already right at the heart of a pluriversal world of the intellect, whose mainstream tendency spawned counter-tendencies and sub-tendencies, in a labyrinth-like system of narrow passages, packed with information, in a collage held together with sprays, foam and adhesive tape and comprised of facsimiled texts and illustrations, videos, objects, models, tables and diagrams. It placed us in the midst of a theatrical performance, on live

¹ Except where another source is given, the intermediate headings are quotations from texts that actually figured in the exhibition.

television, in a bar, in a library, attending daily readings, in a daily newspaper and in a permanent network node. The cavernous and grotto-like ghost train redefined the perimeters of the Centre Culturel's rooms and courtyard, so that outdoor and indoor spaces merged with each other and were rent apart again, reminding us of huge underground cavities and of the tunnels driven through the Alps. These also kept recurring in the technical drawings and model-railway layouts held together with masses of brown adhesive tape along the signposted route through the exhibition. "Tenir le siège" ("Keep up the siege") – a siege is what Thomas Hirschhorn called his event, lasting fifty days, in eight scenes. Moments of contemplation were a rare luxury in the endless moving picture and only came when the camera on the front of a mountain railway, scanning the panorama of landscapes with sparse vegetation, plunged with its soothing rhythm into the blackness of the tunnels.

"Less is less / more is more" (Exhibition newspaper, No. 44).

I felt the all-pervading galaxy of analogue data had set its sights on me, and there was no escaping. The meaning of it all only struck me when I became a thinking, active subject in the inescapably flummoxing topography of possible associations. Passivism, conniving in a loss of overall perspective, was inevitably going to lead to an information collapse, and the mushrooming inflation of signs was going to be the undoing of my emancipation. Hirschhorn's inundation strategy thus afforded me empowerment: I was forced to choose, to decide on those links where I could begin to speak through the inputs.

Nous vivons dans une société qui valorise la précision, mais qui s'accommode d'une démocratie floue.

We live in a society which exploits precision to the full, but which contents itself with a fuzzy democracy.

Surprise was not the only reaction to the immersive collection of materials. The better-known stereotypes about Switzerland were all given their place too, with bigotry, cheese and heraldry sandwiched in between mountains. Swiss-Swiss: the duplex term was meant to be an allusion to the optimised conflict situation of win-win, in which no one comes out a loser. The Helvetian democracy, so the myth runs, would be the ideal constitutional arrangement for striking a balance between everybody's interests, through permanent dialogue machinery at grass-roots level, leading to a viable compromise that is to the mutual advantage of all. The exhibition used historical and present-day materials alike to probe all this myth-making about the nature of the glue that holds this patchwork, multicultural country together.

„Das Parlamentsgebäude der Hauptstadt war unter der Blümlisalp genau nachgebildet, samt der Geheimanlage darunter und den Funkanlagen. Sogar die gleiche Aussicht. Dekorateur vom Stadttheater hatten mit vergrößerten Fotografien und Scheinwerfern dafür gesorgt. Um die Anlage herum waren die Wohnungen, die Kinos, die Kapelle, die Bars, die Kegelbahnen, das Spital und das Fitness-Center in die Blümlisalp gebaut. Darum herum lagerten sich die drei ‚Ringe‘: der Versorgungsring mit den Lebensmitteln und den Weinkellern (besonders Waadtländer), der innere und der äussere Verteidigungsring. Unter der ganzen Riesenanlage die Tresorräume mit den Goldbarren der halben Welt, und unter diesen ein Atomkraftwerk. Die Regierung und das Parlament tagten in Permanenz. Die Behörden arbeiteten auf Hochtouren.“ (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Der Winterkrieg in Tibet* (ca. 1964-1981), a.a.O. S. 69f.).

“The capital's parliamentary building was reproduced as a high-precision model beneath the Blümlisalp, along with its secret basement and radio installations. Even the view was the same. Scene-painters from the municipal theatre had made sure of that with photographic enlargements and powerful spotlights. Around this central fortress, the dwellings, cinemas, bars and nine-pin bowling alleys, and also the chapel, hospital and fitness centre, were built in the Blümlisalp. All of this was then surrounded by the three “rings”: the supply ring with food stores and wine cellars (with a particular emphasis on *Vaudois* wines) as well as the inner and outer defensive rings. Underneath the whole gigantic installation were the strong rooms, holding half the world's gold bullion and, under all this, a nuclear power station. The government and parliament were locked into a permanent session. The official bodies were working as hard as they could.” (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *“Der Winterkrieg in Tibet”* (Winter War in Tibet) (approx. 1964-1981), pp. 69ff.).

„Zitadellen waren Festungen, von denen aus Städte, Zentren des Handels, der Kultur und der Macht, nach aussen gegen Angriffe von Feinden verteidigt und nach innen vor dem Aufstand ihrer eigenen Bewohner gesichert wurden. (...) Die Zitadellenkultur zeigt Zentren der Macht, deren funktionale Geschlossenheit sich nach aussen bedrohlich, nach innen repressiv darstellt, die jedoch zugleich die Möglichkeit ihrer Auflösung vorspiegelt.“ (Otto Karl Werckmeister, Zitadellenkultur, Die Schöne Kunst des Untergangs in der Kultur der achtziger Jahre, München / Wien, 1989, S. 11 / 153/ 144).

"Citadels used to be fortresses, which served to defend towns, as centres of trade, culture and power, against enemy attacks from without and uprisings of their own populace from within. (...) The citadel culture shows centres of power, whose functional tightness appears menacing on the outside and oppressive on the inside, but which, at the same time, feigns the means of its own disintegration." (Otto Karl Werckmeister, Zitadellenkultur, Die Schöne Kunst des Untergangs in der Kultur der achtziger Jahre, Munich / Vienna, 1989, pp. 11, 153 and 144; published in English as "Citadel Culture" in 1991).

As an event, Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibition did break down the contradiction of the citadel tearing apart established facts and established edifices. The artist himself, for instance, was present every day during opening hours, in the role of newspaper publisher and as a ready-made opponent who can be made to bear the blame in spontaneous diatribe. Through his presence, he underscored the function of the exhibition as a place for being creative, as a rendezvous for the neighbourhood and as a platform for airing controversies. In addition to the philosophical readings by Marcus Steinweg, theatre was also used for the first time as an integral part of the public utterances made in the room. By way of contrast to the television station next to the Bataille Monument in Kassel, the live theatre made it possible to address the exhibition visitors directly:

„was mich interessiert im theater ist der direkte dialog, das sich ans publikum, an die ‚öffentlichkeit‘, an den anderen (wie in der kunst) adressieren, die frontalität, das deklamieren einer botschaft (durch die schauspieler). ... bei ‚Swiss-Swiss Democracy‘ ging es mir darum, theater integriert IN DIE AUSSTELLUNG zu machen, zu produzieren – (...) die vorgabe an gwenaël morin war, mit den in der ausstellung vorhandenen elementen (licht, sitzmöglichkeiten, ‚dekor‘, informationen usw.) zu arbeiten (...)" (Thomas Hirschhorn in einem Mail an den Autor, 18.2.06).

"What interests me in theatre is direct dialogue, speaking to the audience, the "public", the others (as in art); it is the frontality, having a message recited (through the actors). ... What I set out to do at "Swiss-Swiss Democracy" was to have theatre integrated IN THE EXHIBITION, to perform it, to create it – (...) the remit given to Gwenaël Morin was to work with the elements already present in the exhibition (lights, seating, "décor", information, and so on (...))" (Thomas Hirschhorn in a mail sent to the author on 18 February 2006).

Every evening, the Compagnie Gwenaël Morin staged a free performance for a broad public, repositioning the symbolic Helvetian figure of "Tell". Being forced to fire an arrow at the apple on his own son's head and the killing of the tyrant for privatistic motives were not the acts of a hero. The heroic parts were actually left uncast and were to be filled by the actors or from amongst the audience itself. The theatrical element was taken from the stage out into the exhibition architecture, and this made it into a stronger instrument of appropriation: "Il faut s'appropriier le message" ("you've got to appropriate the message"). The motto of the Grapus graphic movement, which was active in France between 1970 and 1991 and which Thomas Hirschhorn also worked with, perceived of this appropriation as "aesthetic vandalism". In his borderless self-appropriation of art transcending space and image, Hirschhorn operates a "technique of awakening" out of a long dream of facts. He seeks out moments of shock:

„Zum Denken gehört nicht nur die Bewegung der Gedanken sondern ebenso ihre Stillstellung. Wo das Denken in einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation plötzlich einhält, da erteilt es derselben eine Choc..." (Walter Benjamin, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, XVII, in: W.B., Illuminationen, F.a.M. 1980, S. 260.)

Thinking is not just a matter of keeping thoughts on the move; it is also a matter of bringing them to a standstill. Where thinking suddenly stops in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives it a shock..." (Walter Benjamin, Thesis on the Philosophy of History, XVII, in: W.B., Illuminationen, Frankfurt. 1980, p. 260.)

In his "Cargo and Cult", Benjamin Buchloh discusses the tensions in Thomas Hirschhorn's work between the altar and the pavilion, between

the inner sanctuary and the street². In "Swiss-Swiss Democracy", there were also transitions or points of passage: between sales displays and museum cabinets, between a main room and a back room, between a large auditorium and a small one, all of them wallpapered to the ceiling with printed messages, so that Switzerland's political panorama was broken down into a kaleidoscopic media review, which, at the same time, was there to be read in the linearity of a wall newspaper. In this process, all the materials also became messages: they held, showed, isolated, combined, conducted or covered up – but only ever for a period of time, functionally, just for the moment, like a quick fix and just as short-lived as Marcel Duchamps' "Sculpture for Travelling" (1918), which was stretched across a space with a coloured elastic band and a length of string.

En démocratie, la politique est l'art de faire croire au peuple qu'il gouverne.

La démocratie est fille de l'envie. / Die Sprache des Geldes versteht jeder.

In democracy, politics is the art of getting the people to believe they govern.

Democracy is the daughter of craving. / Everyone understands the language of money.

For a few moments, an impromptu on-the-spot action breaks down the citadel of the mass media, which, even in the most direct of all democracies, steer election and referendum campaigns in accordance with the rules of financial oligarchies. The Berlusconi-isation of the channels of political decision-making, the private ownership of opinion markets in the hands of financial princes and their powers over television-viewing figures all undermine the initial egalitarian tenet of any way of playing the democratic game.

La propagande est aux démocraties ce que la violence est aux dictatures. / Il existe des despotes de la démocratie. / La faiblesse des démocraties, c'est qu'il leur faille trop souvent se renier pour survivre.

Propaganda is to democracies what violence is to dictatorships. / Despots of democracy do exist. / The weakness of democracies is that they too often have to betray themselves to survive.

² Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Cargo and Cult – The Displays of Thomas Hirschhorn, in: Artforum, November 2001, pp. 109ff.)

It is in this way that Christoph Blocher has also become a media icon, with an over-proportional impact handed to him on all information channels in Switzerland, far in excess of his real financial and political power. The exhibition reflected this media overkill. Reminding us that Tell had refused to bow in reverence to Gessler's hat was certainly one of the motives for belittling those in power. In the theatrical performance, this, frankly, went no further than insulting an effigy, but was played up into a scandal. The narrowly focused media debate about this one isolated scene culminated in an expression of parliamentary censure and even became a scene in its own right in a bizarre episode of democracy – an effective way of pre-empting any substantive discussion of art.

„Weil alles ausserhalb des Gefängnisses übereinander herfiel und weil sie nur im Gefängnis sicher sind, nicht überfallen zu werden, fühlen sich die Schweizer frei, freier als alle andern Menschen, frei als Gefangene im Gefängnis ihrer Neutralität. Es gibt nur eine Schwierigkeit für dieses Gefängnis, nämlich die, zu beweisen, dass es kein Gefängnis ist, sondern ein Hort der Freiheit, ist doch von aussen gesehen ein Gefängnis ein Gefängnis und seine Insassen Gefangene, und wer gefangen ist, ist nicht frei: Als frei gelten für die Aussenwelt nur die Wärter, denn wären diese nicht frei, wären sie ja Gefangene. Um diesen Widerspruch zu lösen, führten die Gefangenen die allgemeine Wärterpflicht ein: Jeder Gefangene beweist, indem er sein eigener Wärter ist, seine Freiheit. Der Schweizer hat damit den dialektischen Vorteil, dass er gleichzeitig frei, Gefangener und Wärter ist.“ (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Schweiz – ein Gefängnis, Rede auf Vaclav Havel*, in: a.a.O., S. *“It is because everyone outside of prison used to attack everyone else and because prison is the only place where they feel safe from being attacked that the Swiss feel free, freer than other people, free as prisoners, in the prison of their neutrality. There is only one difficulty for this prison, namely that of proving that it is not a prison but a sanctuary of freedom, since a prison seen from the outside is a prison, and its inmates are prisoners, and anyone who is locked in prison is not free. It is only the wardens whom the outside world considers to be free, since, if they were not free, they too would be prisoners. In order to resolve this contradiction, the prisoners introduced compulsory warden service: through acting as their own warden, each and every prisoner demonstrates their freedom. The Swiss thus have the dialectic advantages that they are free people, prisoners and wardens – all at the same time.”* (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Switzerland – a prison, speech in honour of Vaclav Havel*, p. 226).

"One world / one democracy" (Exhibition newspaper, No. 50)

In his work, Thomas Hirschhorn frequently takes up themes, motives and especially important outsiders from his homeland. However, as the English title of the exhibition clearly shows, Switzerland was actually only intended to be taken as a model representative of a conflict over a global theme. The cardboard wallpapering in anaemic primary colours brought out the modern utopia of abstraction as a world language; after all, this exhibition's platform was a world stage. On that stage, it is Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo that are the real metaphors for a universal claim by Western Democracy, pursued with aggressive missionary zeal, unable to stop its own potential for violence through democratic mechanisms, and thus taking its very principles to absurdity.

Der Glaube zementiert Berge.

„Der Krieg gegen die Dogmatiker der Gewalt geht weiter, mögen sie nun die Maske des Kommunismus, des Ultrakommunismus oder jene der Demokratie tragen" (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Die Schweiz – ein Gefängnis, Rede auf Vaclav Havel, in: a.a.O., S. 220)

Faith cements mountains.

"The war against the dogmatists of force continues whatever mask they may now don, that of communism, ultra communism or democracy." (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Switzerland – a Prison, speech in honour of Vaclav Havel, p. 220).

Democracy is a job to be done, not an institution. The exhibition destabilises the good old democratic conscience, not through constructive criticism in the established parliamentary mould, but by taking it to excess.

« L'excès, le dépassement de soi vers une altérité qui échappe au kratein (gouverner) du demos (pe peuple), à la souveraineté du peuple, serait-il indissociable de LA DEMOCRATIE EN TANT QUE SUJET et du SUJET DE LA DEMOCRATIE ? La démocratie serait ce qui court à son IMPOSSIBILITE. Elle ne serait que la TURBULENCE et l'INSECURITE d'un MOUVEMENT D'ANEANTISSEMENT ». (Marcus Steinweg, Conférence No 27 in: Journal No 27)

"Would excess, going beyond oneself to an otherness which escapes the kratein (rule) of the demos (people), the sovereignty of the people, be anything other than DEMOCRACY AS A SUBJET and the SUBJET OF DEMOCRACY? Democracy would be something that would run as far as its own IMPOSSIBILITY. It would be nothing but the TURBULENCE and INSECURITY of a MOVEMENT TOWARDS TOTAL ANNIHILATION." (Marcus Steinweg, Reading No. 27, published in the exhibition newspaper, No. 27)

„Unsere Freiheit läge darin, freiwillig das notwendige Neue zu tun, bevor wir es gezwungenerweise tun müssen. Doch wird freiwillig nur etwas getan, wenn die Einsicht in dessen Notwendigkeit vorhanden ist, aber die Einsicht allein genügt nicht, es braucht auch Spass dazu, etwas freiwillig zu wollen. Spass an der Demokratie ist Spass am Neuen, oder, ohne Spass gibt es keine Demokratie." (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Spass an der Schweiz (ca. 1968), in: F.D., Meine Schweiz – ein Lesebuch, Zürich 1998, S. 47.)

"Our freedom would reside in doing what has to be done voluntarily before we are forced to do it. However, things are only done voluntarily if there is an insight into the need to do them, but insight alone is not enough; doing something voluntarily must be fun too. Having fun with democracy is having fun with innovation, or: no fun, no democracy." (Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Spass an der Schweiz (ca. 1968), in: F.D., Meine Schweiz – ein Lesebuch, Zurich 1998, p. 47.)

Excess going in what direction? Towards a social practice that does not come from an abstract "people", not from the construction of a global or national body sovereign, but from specific subjects within the population, from individuals, from the sort of individuals whose acquaintances Hirschhorn made in person during eight weeks in his "Musée précaire d'Albinet" (2004) and whom he made known through eight works from the Beaubourg. Art is not democracy at grass-roots level, but it is a form of grass-roots to self-empowerment.

Egalité des chances.

Equality of opportunities.