



**A NOTE TO THE EXHIBITION**

In the last thirty years, the often strange and cumbersome terrain of New York City has nurtured a rich, steadily growing community of Swiss artists. *A Grand Tour* provides the map to these territories, a chart of the Swiss community and its roots in this city. The Swiss Institute wanted to understand the context in which this artists’ community works. It wanted to know its ramifications and learn how fast ideas travel along these arteries. The Surrealists, an international and diverse group, played their “Exquisite Corpse” and “Exquisite Landscape” games in Paris in the pre-War years. This game seemed to be the ideal metaphor for the transitions between different realms of cultural identity. Of the one hundred and twenty Swiss artists we have on record living in New York, over fifty embarked on *A Grand Tour* and passed on the game to two other artists they know. The game’s playful mood partially masks the more serious reminder of each immigrant’s debt to his or her cultural background.

I am very pleased that we could win Ingrid Schaffner as a guest curator for this show. In 1991, Ingrid Schaffner initiated a similar game at the Drawing Center in New York that has since taken on a life of its own and roams about loosely in international waters. “*The Return of the Cadavre Exquis*” will appear as an exhibition at the Drawing Center later this fall. To her, and to all the one hundred and fifty participating artists, go the Swiss Institute’s profound thanks.

— Carin Kuoni, Director

*We have had a glorious spectacle this evening, in the Eiger, partly covered with mist. Mist—mist—mist; give me mist, for scenery. Natural objects are as much aided by a little of their obscurity and indistinctness as the moral beauties of man are magnified by abstaining from a too impertinent investigation.* — James Fenimore Cooper

**— TOURING THE LANDSCAPE —**

As one of the most picturesque attractions of the 19th Century grand tour, Switzerland posed a natural fantasia en route to the cultural wonderland of its day, Italy. But this was not always the case. For much of human history, the Alps were a fearful impediment to travellers. The rough roads these parts presented campaigners like Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Hannibal and his elephants are cases in point. It was not until as late as the 1750’s that the mountain wilderness turned from obstacle to destination. For travellers eager to experience the aesthetic phenomenon prescribed in Edmund Burke’s influential treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the Alps epitomized it. American traveller James Fenimore Cooper—who went so far as to describe an avalanche as being “picturesque”—waxed eloquent over the beauties of Switzerland for two entire volumes. While English grand tourist Gerald Manley Hopkins’ description of the Rhone Glacier is an ornate gem of travel literature:

*Walked down to Rhone glacier. It has three stages...first, a smoothly molded bed in a pan or theater of thorny peaks: swells of ice rising through the snow-sheet and the snow itself tossing and fretting into the sides of the rock walls in spray-like points ... (second) was a rack of horned waves steep and narrow in the gut ... (and) third, the foot, a broad limb opening out and reaching the plain shaped like the fan-fin of a dolphin or great bivalve shell turned on its face ...*

*Glaciers should be traversed as early in the morning as possible, before the sun softens the crust of ice formed during the night over the crevasses. Experienced guides are indispensable for such excursions.* — Baedeker’s, p. xxvii

How well Hopkins’ words match the strange spectacle of Swiss artist Johann Heinrich Wüest’s painting of *The Rhone*

*Glacier*, ca.1775 (reproduced here). Both artist and author seem acutely aware of their subject’s sheer novelty, moving through their compositions like cartographers documenting unmapped territory. Overall, as odd as the glacier is awesome, these images are plainly surreal, even sexual, like something from an Ice Queen’s boudoir.

*In the case of Nervous Patients, with irritable conditions of their organs, the climate is not the sole factor to be considered in the choice of health-resort. The general social conditions also demand careful attention. Neurasthenics may be driven frantic by brass bands, by the rattle of the nine-pin alley, or by other noisy amusements; and the effect of the grandest Alpine air may in this manner be frustrated.* — (Baedeker’s, p.xxii)

Eager to behold such marvels, tourists came to Switzerland in droves and a tourist industry came into being, through which overpowering nature could be experienced in comfort and with convenience. Ever-comprehensive, Karl Baedeker’s exquisitely informative guide book to Switzerland approached the region according to all levels of athletic aptitude, from hiker, to biker, to bathchair convalescent. With regards to the latter, Switzerland was a veritable hospital for tourists traveling to restore their ailing health by taking the local waters, whey-cures, grape-cures, and fresh mountain air. For these visitors, the Alps were gradated according to atmosphere and altitude, with optimum conditions pendant on complaint.

A national treasure in itself, Switzerland offered something for every tourist. And with tourism accounting for a great percentage of the nation’s income, nature—in its purely visual form—proved the country’s most powerful economic resource. Images of the Swiss landscape can in this way be seen as a conflation of commercial and cultural identities. But the rise

of the tourist industry made its own mark on the landscape with a less-than-pretty picture of hotels, restaurants, spas, scenic outlooks, trams, railways, buses, to say nothing of attendant human traffic. Thus, images of untarnished Switzerland served both citizen and visitor alike with idealized visual vacations into the Swiss countryside.

*The traveller is cautioned against sleeping in chalets, unless absolutely necessary. Whatever poetry there may be theoretically in “a fragrant bed of hay”, the cold night-air piercing abundant apertures, the ringing of the cow-bells, the grunting of the pigs, and the undiscarded garments, hardly conduce to refreshing slumber.* — (Baedeker’s, p.xxvii)

The Swiss themselves, of course, have traditionally treasured their landscape as a point of national pride and identity. It is interesting to note that early on in the shaping of the Swiss constitution, there was no mandate providing for any cultural agenda. Nature, rather than art, was considered a sufficient source for expressive inspiration. However, as Swiss culture developed beyond nature’s monopoly, landscape played an important role in the emergence of a national painting tradition. At the academies, artists were admonished to consider the mountains—not the human figure—their Muse\*. But how to compete with such magnificent manifestations of rock, snow, ice, sky, with mere paint and brush? By embracing its very inhumanity—as nature’s scale and potential certainly exceed human compassion or comprehension—the Swiss artists Caspar Wolf (1735-1783), Johann Heinrich Wüest (1741-1821), and Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) created images reflective of the sense of awe the Eiger, Rhone Glacier, and Matterhorn inspired in travellers making their way across Europe through Switzerland on the Grand Tour.

*The exquisite corpse drinks the young red wine.* — *A Cadavre Exquis*

A thousand reproductions later, Swiss impressions may have lost some of their freshness and charm. While the truly post-modern simply give themselves over to the impossibility of achieving the new, and imbibe the kitsch of American roadside attractions, today’s tourist is hard-pressed to feel the thrill of discovery, the poignancy of a truly breath-taking view or to be touched by a local people’s indigenous dress and dwellings. One must travel geo-politically far afield to experience the wonders which were all so much a feature of travel in Switzerland during the 19th century.

It was thus with a post-modern sense of adventure that the Swiss Institute embarked on *A Grand Tour*. This exhibition is a collaborative drawing project in the tradition of the Surrealist game of “*Cadavre Exquis*” in which three artists work sequentially and in concealment from one another to create a unified image. While the majority of results from the Surrealist game were figurative drawings on a vertical ground, there are examples of “Exquisite Landscapes.” These horizontal works, featuring a flow of disjointed objects and images, were considered to be mappings of psychic space or interior landscapes.

*What actually exalted us in these productions, was the certitude that ... they had the mark of what cannot be generated by only one brain ... Finally we had at our disposal with the Exquisite Corpse an unfailing means for sending the critical spirit on holidays and setting the metaphorical activity of the spirit completely free ...* — André Breton

Aiming at unleashing the subconscious, the Surrealists played a great number of verbal and visual games. These games brought members of the movement together through shared creative experience. But more important was the spirit of play, that liberated artists from their own “critical spirits” to venture forth on imaginative new adventures. In search of the same, the Institute invited Swiss artists living in today’s cultural mecca, New York, “to traverse the face of previously

uncharted territory that you yourself will create in tandem with two artist colleagues of your choosing.” With the tour thus made international in scope, it mirrors the milieu in which Swiss artists are working today.

*Consider the knight in chess. Is the piece by itself an element of the game? Certainly not. For as a material object separated from its square on the board and the other conditions of play, it is of no significance for the player. It becomes a real, concrete element only when it takes on or becomes identified with its value in the game.* — Ferdinand de Saussure

To increase the potential for spectacular scenery—the mainstay of any successful tour—artists were instructed to hide their work from one another, except for a slim portion. In games of “*Cadavre Exquis*” this glimpse of a partner’s drawing was deemed a “slide” into his or her subconscious. Here it became a steppingstone from one landscape to another. Finally, with the unknown a viable destination on this tour, artists were encouraged to stray freely from the known territories of personal style of actual landscape images. However each of the artists who participated approached their leg of the journey, surprising new ground is certain to be discovered as these panoramas unfold on *A Grand Tour*.

— Ingrid Schaffner, Guest Curator

Karl Baedeker, *Switzerland and the adjacent portions of Italy, Savoy, and Tyrol*, (22nd edition) Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1907

André Breton, *Le Cadavre Exquis, Son Exaltation*, Milan: Chez Arturo Schwartz, 1975, p. 12

James Fenimore Cooper, *Sketches of Switzerland by an American*, (2 volumes), Philadelphia: Careyile and Blanchard, 1836, I, p. 99

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1983, p. 154

Gerard Manley Hopkins quoted from: John Russell, *Switzerland*, (rev. ed.) London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1962, p.100

\*Hans Ulrich Jost’s essay, “Nation, Politics and Art,” provided me with excellent historic background: *From Liotard to Le Corbusier: 200 Years of Swiss Painting, 1730 - 1930*, Atlanta, Georgia: High Museum of Art, 1988