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"Crossing borders is part of culture"

For six months now, Andrew Holland has been the director of Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, which plays a vital role in promoting the arts with an annual budget of over 34 million Swiss francs. Pro Helvetia spends over half of its funding abroad. An interview looking at the arts, provocation, a sense of home and Pro Helvetia's plans.

Interview by Barbara Engel

"SWISS REVIEW": *"Swiss Review", the magazine for the Swiss abroad, has to ask the question – what is your perception of the Swiss abroad?*

ANDREW HOLLAND: I have no doubt that the Swiss abroad are just as diverse as Swiss citizens living at home. After all, there are very many different reasons why Swiss people decide to live abroad. What I have always noticed on visits abroad is that the Swiss abroad have a strong attachment to their old homeland that often spans generations.

Pro Helvetia is known as the "Swiss Arts Council". As the director of this cultural council, how would you define typically Swiss culture?

There is no such thing as typically Swiss culture. How could it possibly exist in a country with four language regions, 26 cantons and around 3,000 communes all involved in cultural activities? What characterises Swiss culture is its richness and diversity.

In which areas of the arts is Switzerland strongest?

There are wave-like movements in the arts. Art often develops around individuals who carry others along with them, such as Maurice Béjart in dance or Christoph Marthaler in theatre, to give two examples of Swiss artists who had and continue to have great influence on cultural development. In terms of the visual arts, design and architecture, countless Swiss artists are currently among the best in the world, such as Pipilotti Rist, Roman Signer, Fischli/Weiss, Valentin Carron, Urs Fischer, Herzog & Demeuron and Peter Zumthor. Swiss exponents of the arts generally produce very high quality work and demonstrate great innovation.

"Confrontation must serve a purpose"

Pro Helvetia spends over half of its funding on promoting the Swiss arts abroad. Which regions are you focusing on, besides the, traditional offices abroad?

Pro Helvetia supports Swiss cultural projects in almost 100 countries. To do this, we establish geographical priorities. We launched an exchange programme in Russia last November that will run for two years. The aim is to build bridges and establish links between institutions in Russia and those in Switzerland during this period. We are investing additional funding and human resources there. We have employed a small programme team on-site to coordinate relations. But we are also planning further ahead. We aim to focus on South America from 2016 since we do not yet have a representation on this continent though there is great interest in and demand for Swiss artists there.

Migration is an issue that is currently causing heated debate in politics. What impact does it have on the arts?

Artists have always sought to establish international contacts. Crossing borders is part of culture. And the arts scene is obviously international today. The current situation in literature is very interesting as in Switzerland, but also elsewhere, we have lots of people with immigrant backgrounds who are currently among the most popular authors. I'm thinking, for instance, of the Swiss Book Prize winner, Melinda Nadj Abonji, who also received the German Book Prize in 2010. At the same time, many Swiss writers, such as Matthias Zschokke and Paul Nizon, also work in major European cities.

You arrived in Switzerland from England at the age of six. Do you still regard England as home?

I quickly became increasingly Swiss because of school, my friends and my mother. But I'm used to switching back and forth between two worlds. I have relatives in England. We often spend holidays there and I have wonderful memories of it. Regarding whether Switzerland or England is closer to me, that is shown by my football allegiance. I shout "Hopp Schwiiz" (come on Switzerland) and cheer on the Swiss. Even my father does the same now.

Do you have a favourite holiday destination abroad or perhaps even a dream destination?

I have a three-year-old son, so our travelling is a bit restricted at the moment. This means that most of my holidays are within Switzerland and neighbouring countries. As far as my favourite destinations are concerned, I love the mountains, the sea and the unexpected. I most like travelling from place to place. Australia is somewhere I want to visit in the medium term.

You have had close links with the dance scene in your professional career. Are you a dancer yourself?

No, I'm not. I worked as a dramatic adviser on the dance and theatre scene.

After your appointment as director of Pro Helvetia, you were presented as a unifying figure. That sounds good but also rather dull. In contrast to your predecessor, do you intend to avoid provocation and confrontation?

I am firmly in favour of conflicting views and debate over matters of substance. But confrontation must serve a purpose.

Pro Helvetia attracted criticism in the past over Thomas Hirschhorn's exhibition in Paris, which it supported. Do you believe that art should provoke politicians?



Andrew Holland has been the director of Pro Helvetia since 1 November. He was born in Dorchester in the UK in 1965 and moved to Switzerland at the age of six, where he grew up in Herisau. He studied law in St. Gallen and at Berkeley, and obtained his doctorate with a comparative study of cultural promotion in the USA and Switzerland. He worked at the Federal Office of Culture from 1996 to 2004. He then joined Pro Helvetia, becoming the vice-director in 2009. Holland lives in Zurich.

PRO HELVETIA

Pro Helvetia was founded in 1939 as a means of defending Switzerland's independent cultural identity. The Council today promotes the arts in Switzerland and raises their profile abroad with a budget of 34.4 million Swiss francs. Around 3,500 funding applications are received each year. Pro Helvetia has liaison offices abroad in Cairo, Warsaw, Cape Town, New Delhi and Shanghai. It manages the Centre Culturel Suisse in Paris and funds the cultural programme of the Swiss institutes in Rome and New York.

Around 24 million Swiss francs is spent on promoting projects – 37% on activities in Switzerland and 63% on activities abroad (58% in Europe). Pro Helvetia's range of activities was expanded significantly under Andrew Holland's predecessor, Pius Knüsel. Popular culture and video games, for example, were also included in the promotion of the arts. The book "Der Kulturinfarkt", which Knüsel wrote in 2012 with three German executives in the arts, was extremely provocative towards both artists and politicians. The authors put forward the view that half of all subsidised theatre, museums, libraries and similar cultural institutions did not deserve financial support and could be closed. Shortly after the publication of this controversial book, Knüsel resigned from his position as director of Pro Helvetia and became head of the "Volkshochschule" (adult education centre) of the canton of Zurich. <http://www.prohelvetia.ch>

Article 21 of our federal constitution states: "Freedom of artistic expression is guaranteed." Art may therefore certainly contain critical statements and make a contribution to the political debate. There are nevertheless clear boundaries – art, too, must not be defamatory or contravene the law in any other way. However, whether every piece of provocative work deserves support in this context is another question.

In terms of Pro Helvetia's promotion of the arts abroad, is the emphasis on providing culture for Swiss citizens living in the country concerned or is it more a question of raising the profile of the Swiss arts in a foreign country?

Our task is to raise the profile of Swiss artists abroad. We support participation at foreign events while at the same time proactively focusing on promotional activities to raise awareness of Swiss artists and their work among the organisers of cultural events abroad. We often work closely with the Swiss embassies and are delighted when the Swiss abroad attend the events.

I was told that Pro Helvetia employees celebrated when you were appointed director. What makes you such a popular boss?

That's a difficult question to answer. What certainly helps to create trust is that both my cultural and my professional backgrounds embody two worlds. I grew up in Switzerland but I'm an immigrant. It is exactly the same in my career; I studied at the University of St. Gallen but at the same time organised and managed cultural events myself – I played records and moved chairs around. This base helps me in my management of the Swiss Arts Council.

What would you do if you suddenly had a million Swiss francs given to you personally to spend as you wished?

Off the top of my head, I would donate some to a charitable organisation working on behalf of young people because they are our future. On a personal level, I would keep an eye out for a house with a garden and would put something aside for my son's education.