
Report: Engadin Art Talks

SEPTEMBER 19, *by Chris Fite-Wassilak*
2011



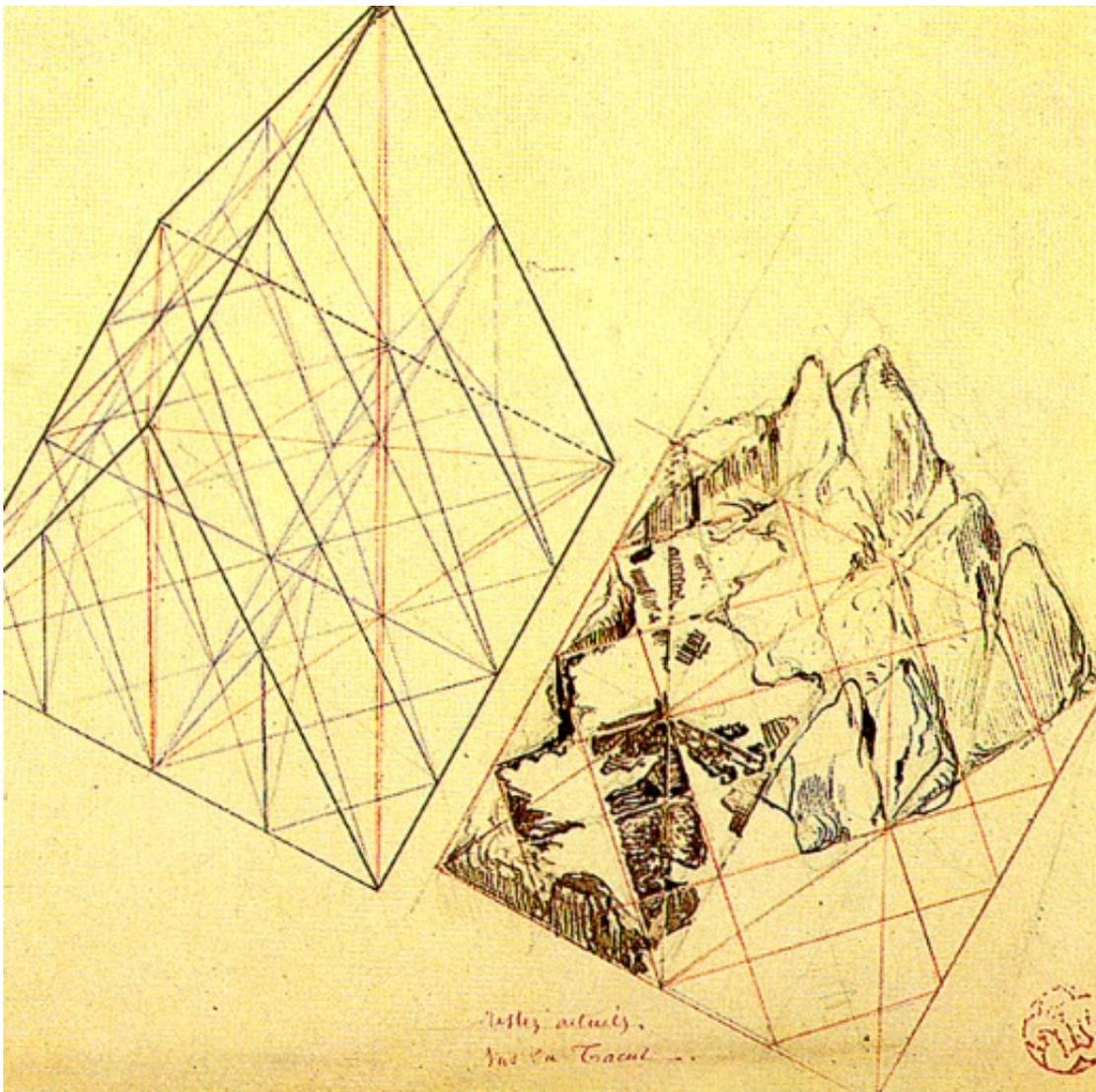
Hinzert Documentation Center. Photographer: Norbert Miguletz

It's not unusual for cities to have some form of regeneration project – some dilapidated, run-down area that is deemed to be in need of re-branding, a rough patch of town that's in want of a bit of a brush up. A few shops, some tourist footfall, a few bright billboards to turn the place around. It's slightly more uncommon, though, to find the inverse – a small, seemingly idyllic rural area nestling more than a mile above sea level in the mountainous south-east of Switzerland, that has the shops, the tourism and the cheque books, trying to rebrand itself as a destination 'not just for rich people'. Since the late 19th century, the Engadine valley has been an upscale spot for skiing and escape, and not surprisingly a number of Zurich and Milan galleries have branches open there in the summer and winter (no need to bother with the months in between). The annual St. Moritz Art Masters summer festival was in its fourth year as a further attempt to instate the cultural currency of this corner of the world as not just another lavish spa resort.



Alejandro Diaz, Cardboard signs, St. Moritz Art Masters (2011)

For ten days, artists were set amidst the five-star hotels and designer boutiques, and apparently felt they had to speak loud to be heard: neon and fire were popular media. Underneath all the shouting, there were a few interesting murmurs: a potent but overcrowded exhibition of Yves Netzhammer's videos and sculptures, and an underwhelming outdoor presentation of parts of Jules Spinatsch's *Plan B* (2010) project, consisting of surveillance photos taken at a Vienna opera. Hidden down one hill, so as to be sure that no random passers-by could see them, was one of the few pieces in the programme that tried, at least jocularly, to question the context for this extravaganza, in Alejandro Diaz's set of scribbled cardboard signs blown up to billboard size. One read, 'World's Largest Bank Account 10km', an arrow pointing westwards. The ironic hyperbole, though, in this setting seemed to take on the tone of smug truism.



Viollet-le-Duc, *Moitié d'un rhomboèdre* (c.1870)

In a reverberating gymnasium a few kilometres down the road, in the slightly less surreal village of Zuoz, was the apparent critical wing of the festival, a sort of justifying 'see, we're serious' clause. Initiated by Cristina Bechtler, with Beatrix Ruf and Hans Ulrich Obrist as the artistic directors, the Engadin Art Talks (EAT) were two days of presentations by artists, architects and academics around the theme of 'Mapping the Alps', and the range of panellists promised an array of perspectives on the particular intersection of geography, leisure, commerce and contemporary art found in the heights of the Engadine. And a few speakers did actually manage to do this: art historian Jan Van Brevern spoke of 19th-century crisis in geology, when scientists were struggling to determine the origins of mountains (plate tectonics wasn't developed as a theory until the 1960s). Gothic revival architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc – who had restored Notre Dame – began accompanying geologists on regular Alpine expeditions to sketch the mountains. Approaching the terrain as he might a building, Viollet-le-Duc postulated that mountains were the worn down ruins of giant, rhombus-shaped crystalline structures. Viollet-le-Duc's findings didn't take much hold, but Van Brevern's positing of his use of drawing as a form of cross-disciplinary insight and knowledge seemed to bridge a gap that remained silently open throughout the weekend.

alpi trailer

from **Armin Linke** PRO

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HD

Armin Linke, trailer for *Alpi* (2011)

A thankful last-minute addition to the line-up allowed Italian photographer and filmmaker Armin Linke to screen a section of his collaborative film *Alpi* (2011). The artful documentary seemed to embody the unspoken promise of EAT in its approach to the Alps more as a concept than a geographic fact; though, perhaps tellingly, *Alpi* was free of commentary. The film never gives the breathtaking panoramic view, but instead quietly observes a series of scenes that include an Austrian ore mine, this year's World Economic Forum, and the indoor resort Ski Dubai.



Hans Ulrich Obrist and Beatrix Ruf at Engadin Art Talks, Zuoz. Photographer: F. Rosengart

The only expressly political angle came from architect and curator Nicholas Hirsch with the provocative title of 'Mountains as Prison', looking at the Hunsrück range that help make a part of the west German border. Casting the mountains as 'fully integrated into the geo-political context', the terrain proved a

defensive asset, but also an ideal isolated location for the Hinzert prison and concentration camp. Hirsch helped to design the Hinzert Documentation Centre that now stands on the site, and he at least had the insight to interestingly connect his own work to the issues ostensibly on the table. Lawrence Weiner in his own talk emphasized that now was the time in the art world for 'knowing what's on the table is upon the table', but it would seem that most of the speakers had brought their own table. By and large, the setting was taken as an idealized fact, and participants were happy to speak of their own work whether even tangentially related to the Alps or no. Weiner, Sarah Morris and Walid Raad all gave solid presentations, but these were more floating, set artists talks unrelated to the wider framework of the weekend. A common follow-up question was the hopeful: 'You have a mountain experience, would you like to share that?' As Raad answered, 'I'm not going to force a link, because there isn't one frankly.'

The most insightful exchange of the talks had to be the presentation of Annalisa and Peter Zumthor, who gave an account of their plans to build a hotel in a high-altitude Swiss pasture. Showing photos of the lush landscape and the sweeping views, Zumthor read a list of notes written by his wife, a poetic tourism that sounded not unlike a Richard Long text. It was all very cosy, like we were sitting in their kitchen listening to them dreamily project into the future. But Zumthor was talking as if the buildings wouldn't be there, where 'the topography remains unchanged', and at this point the fact that he wanted to build a hotel in a rural setting started to sink in a bit more. One audience member questioned him about the precedent he would be setting with the project, and the inevitable imitations that would arise. Zumthor was astounded by the idea ('I cannot be copied!'), insisting his hotel would be different and 'in good taste' – without connecting to the fact that the Badrutt family, who invented winter tourism and built the Palace Hotel just down the valley in St Mortiz in the 1890s, would have said the same thing.

To Zumthor himself, his hotel was a conservation project, and his plans brought to the fore many of the issues simmering beneath the surface of the talks. There was a strong thread of traditional conservatism taken for granted and never discussed, from the flat opening talk of German architect Kai Schlerer on Kyrgyztani yurts, Hamish Fulton's walking practice, to Ritu Sarin and Tenzig Sonam's short film on traditional Himalayan mud and stone hut building. All suggested a use of the past to go forward without articulating what that new form might be, and seemed to assume that the invoking of 'tradition' was in and of itself a political stance, or that, like Zumthor, thinking that these invocations would not have an impact of their own. The presence of experimental Italian architect and author Gianni Pettena mediated this somewhat, speaking on how colloquial forms – such as yurts and mud huts – had helped create the architectural experiments and his own urban interventions of the late '60s. But surely the debate has developed since then? In a 1972 conversation with Pettena, Robert Smithson said, 'I'm interested in bringing a landscape with low profile up, rather than bringing one with high profile down.' This weekend suggested that perhaps the difference is current practitioners willingness to unquestioningly submit to, rather than reformulate, the branding campaign.

About the author



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