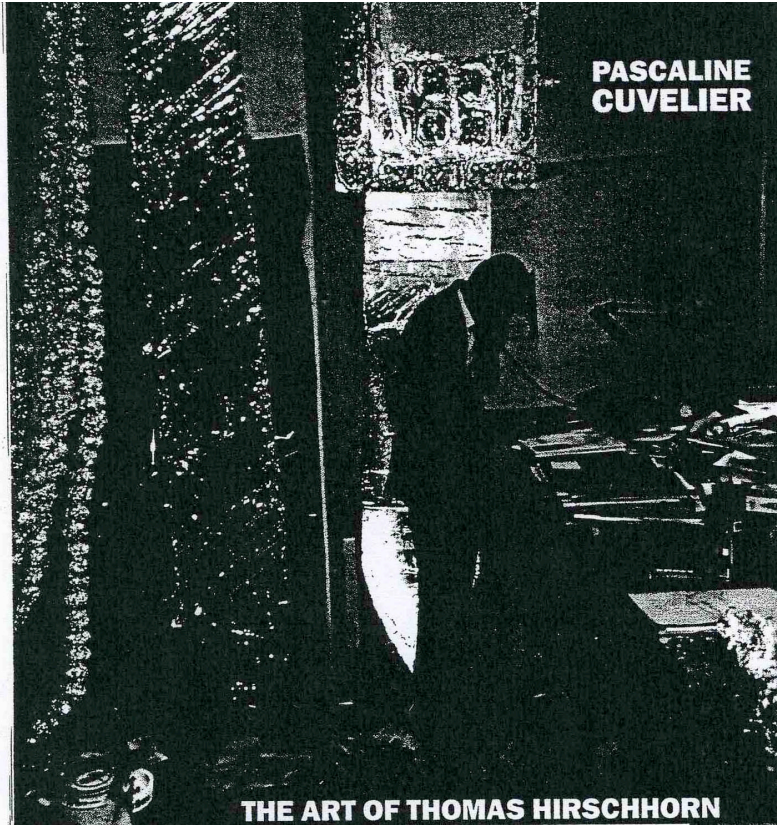


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cuvelier, Pascale, "Weak Affinities," *ARTFORUM*, May 1998



**PASCALINE
CUVELIER**

THE ART OF THOMAS HIRSCHHORN

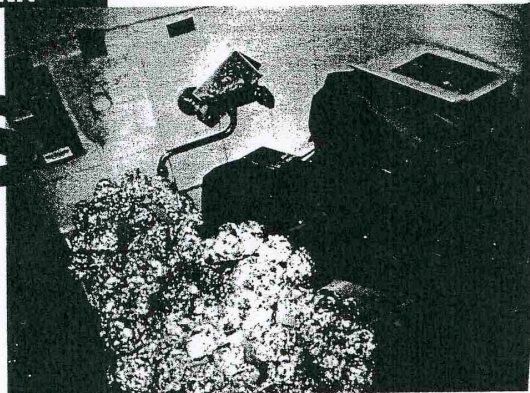
WEAK AFFINITIES

Above: Thomas Hirschhorn in his studio, Paris, March 1998. Photo: Pascaline Cuvelier. Bottom row, this page and opposite, left to right: Views of Thomas Hirschhorn's studio, February 1998. Photos: Pascaline Cuvelier.

THE MATERIALS

On the elevated Métro leading to Thomas Hirschhorn's studio in the working-class neighborhood of Barbès (where he has lived since leaving his native Switzerland in 1984), blurred images flash before my eyes as I tick off the stops on the outskirts of Paris. Pigalle, Anvers, Barbès—they all bring to mind the immigrant neighborhoods where populations in exile gather. Coming to France from Africa, Asia, and the Antilles, they've found a way to integrate themselves in the urban milieu, or at least to get by, if barely.

In the great chaos of his installations, Hirschhorn draws on this precariousness, betting across the board on the slapdash and conditional rather than the permanent. From the beginning the artist has been committed to common materials. Cardboard is his staple; easily found, easily cut, it's an everyday material children play with, the homeless salvage, the destitute use to scrawl their pleas for change. He crumples aluminum foil into various formless forms—balls, drops, stalactitic shapes—or he rolls it into a creeping vine, an Ariadne's thread connecting every object in his labyrinthine installations. Attached to a video monitor, the foil becomes an octopus linking the various panels and snippets of text to thematically arranged images. His networks seem to seek out some impossible coherence—an Internet that is no longer virtual but real. Then there's the brown packing tape Hirschhorn uses to border drawings and collaged images. He binds their edges clumsily, suggesting make-do frames that mock good taste and the sanctity of the work of art. There's also the recycled plywood he uses to construct the ramshackle shelters and precarious cabins he calls sorting stations. Lit like a strip-mall convenience store, these stations are the clearinghouses in which he sorts the



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cuvelier, Pascale, "Weak Affinities," *ARTFORUM*, May 1998

riot of components that make up his sculptural installations.

As I arrive at the Barbès stop I bear the artist's words in mind: "May voluntary weakness defeat imposed weakness."

THE STUDIO

The steps up to the studio are cluttered with taped packages ready for shipment to Cologne and New York, sites of this forty-one-year-old artist's upcoming shows. Going up the stairway, I think of the artist's pet phrase to describe his way of working: "Everything is handmade." Or the words he frequently repeats—"Nothing is enlarged, nothing is reduced"—to emphasize that he doesn't intervene in the reality he finds, the images that spill forth from magazines of all sorts, which he cuts up and assembles thematically on panels. He's fond of pointing out, too, that anyone can find something of interest here, whether it's surfing or the old masters.

The floor of the rectangular studio is littered with the materials Hirschhorn uses. On a table, there's an immense Rolex made of gold and silver aluminum foil, its linked band fashioned from the lids of shoe boxes. In the back hang oversized "jewels," necklaces, and bracelets. Propped against the window, already packed up, is a monumental Swiss army knife.

Hirschhorn shows me sketches of the exhibition spaces for his upcoming shows and begins to talk intensely about his various obsessions. It seems bizarre, but at this moment I'm struck by the fact that journalistic distance is somehow impossible to maintain. What Hirschhorn says seems like the verbal equivalent of *art brut*: a phenomenon to be taken simply as is, like his works. The notion is linked to a phantom—Robert Walser, the vanished Swiss poet

from the beginning of the century who has shaped Hirschhorn's artistic path, a writer who, in the maw of social chaos, was half-mad, half-coherent. So I decide to let the words speak for themselves. He begins by telling me about his exhibition at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne: "*Rolex, etc., Freundlich's 'Aufstieg' und Skulptur-Sortier-Station-Dokumentation*," which opened at the end of April.

ROLEX

"In the museum, my show's installed in the enormous Hall of Heroes. It's a huge space, 52 by 52 feet, 32 feet high. It's like a swimming pool you can look at from above. I'll hang my twelve watches, all Rolexes, in gold and silver. I'm 'reactualizing' one of [Otto] Freundlich's bronze abstract sculptures that's in the museum's collection. The wall is covered in cardboard, which contains notation—what I find interesting in Freundlich's work, and so on. It's all housed in a shed lit in neon. The watches are connected to folding screens covered with schematic explanations: cutouts of images, texts, graphics, like flowcharts.

Along the walls I'll hang a sheet in three colors—colors used in workout sweats. I hate gym sweats. They're suddenly like the official 'cool' uniform of leisure activity. I hate uniforms, I hate CEOs wearing shorts in the summer.

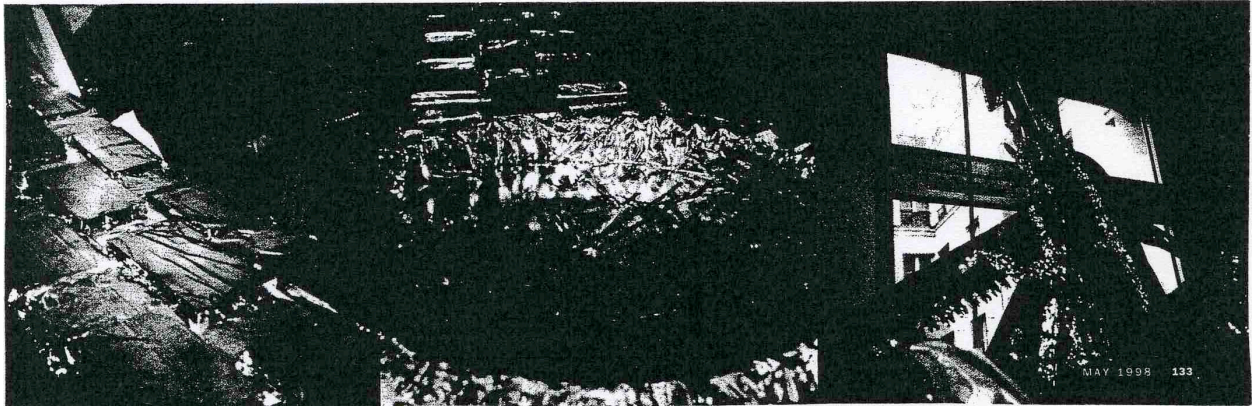
"The tricolored sheet simply indicates that there are three different works. I don't want people coming in off the street to know it's an art exhibition right away. Maybe they'll think it's a watch show. I don't use readymades; everything's always fabricated by hand. I never want there to be a mystery or for people to wonder how something's made. People understand that it's just cardboard covered with aluminum foil."

SWISS ARMY KNIFE

Next Hirschhorn discussed his installation, entitled *Spin-Off*, for the upcoming Gramercy Art Fair in New York, a display that revolves around the giant Swiss army knife in the middle of the suite. "What interests me is the multifunctionality of the Swiss army knife, the practical, 'just in case' side. The knife's in the center of the room, and rolled on to each of its functions is a 'stalk' of aluminum foil extending to the bed, the toilet, the armchairs, the TV. Each piece of foil is linked to a different thematic tableau—obesity, weight loss, the problems in Northern Ireland, sun protection, the process for coloring tires, Israel and the Arabs. These things don't have anything to do with each other, as others have noted. They are their own documentation. The themes cover all the activities one might engage in: sports, technology, aesthetics, philosophy. I'm always fascinated when I read the titles of theses at the university—but I don't go *that* far. Plus these investigations are a little refined for my tastes."

ARMY KNIVES

Now Hirschhorn talks about his show at the Kunsthalle in Bern, which opened at the end of March. The exhibition is titled "Swiss Army Knife," but in this case the artist is using the trope of the knife not as a mnemonic for the alpine nation as seen through foreign eyes but as a Trojan Horse smuggled into his native country's capital. "Actual army knives are not like the Swiss army knife, but I decided to stick with the latter, to develop the 'just in case' side, with fifteen points of 'condensation.' At each point I formally develop a different theme. Each subject is separated by partitions with tables containing documentation—videos, sculptures, and draw-



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cuvelier, Pascale, "Weak Affinities," *ARTFORUM*, May 1998

ings. For example, at the 'Gold' point, there are images of a little girl eating chocolate in the form of an ingot, Olympic gold medals, and the Swiss gold of the Nazis. At the 'Mirror' point, you see a society photo next to your own reflection. At the 'Booster-Video' point, a machine explains unexplained phenomena. 'Art-Brut-Schickeria' concerns *la gauche caviar*, very, very chic limousine liberals who occupy themselves with *art brut*; at that same point I've fabricated a bas-relief image of a stag in aluminum foil. 'Concrete Video' is about the Swiss theory of Pure Art and statistical abstractions based on calculus; it's very Swiss. 'Balloons' makes reference to protesters in demonstrations and advertising with hot-air balloons; both are seen as 'blunders,' things that hang in the air like unresolved problems. 'Hole' is everything that goes beyond, everything that's too crazy or too narrow—notably in Switzerland, all those who want to go beyond, like writers."

ARMY

He continues, showing me his sketches: "There is the 'Militärstück' point, which concerns Switzerland; there, as in Israel, everyone must be ready for war. I was a lieutenant in the army, and I'll display my military record. You have to obey, know how to give orders, be athletic, know how to shoot. In the army I was very good with a pistol. Next to the 'Militärstück' is 'Wasserbombe,' water bottles wrapped in adhesive tape like faux Molotov cocktails. The piece deals with war—a serious subject in Switzerland, a matter of reactionary thought. I refused to continue my military service and was sent to prison for six months. I was twenty-five—it was just before I came to France.

"The point of the exhibition is not hatred, but I do

want people to get pissed off; I don't want to leave them in peace with this story of gold in Switzerland. Switzerland is like a hedgehog when a car comes down the highway—it never budes in the face of danger. Switzerland acts like a hedgehog when it comes to globalization, the Euro, the question of open borders. With the 'Ferdinand Hodler' point—Hodler was a painter and critic of the Swiss military who died in 1918—I want to link my work to History. I want it to be a total exhibition, and the day after I will feel I've said everything." He ticks off other points—"Switzerland and the rest of the world," "Portraits," "Duties of conscience," "Luxury," and also something called "Robert Walser-Spray": "He wrote poems and novels. He was interested in little things and treated every element with equal relevance. He died in an asylum, forty years ago; he suffered from the Swiss lack of scale. A country that was too small for him."

POLITICALLY

Hirschhorn goes on: "I want to do my work politically, to speak about what concerns me: the economy, the human condition, forgotten people, injustice, the information one is subjected to in relation to Iraq, packaged by the United States and even by Iraq, packaged by the West. There's no possibility of getting different information—we're hostages to the information we're given. My work's also a struggle against intimidation and cynicism. These are my motivations as an artist. I want to work with what surrounds me and how I experience the world. It's not 'political work'; I'm trying to make art in a political way. To make everything by hand, to enlarge nothing, to reduce nothing. To connect all the elements, to isolate nothing, to leave nothing out. There is no hierarchy. This is not work 'about'

Gulf War I, II, or III. I want to make connections between things that have nothing to do with each other. Clinton said that he wouldn't attack Iraq before the Winter Olympics were over. Why wait if it's so serious? Sports become an element in the planning that could prevent a war. But this is not the source of my work. There are always links of energy that have something to do with each other."

BRICOLAGE

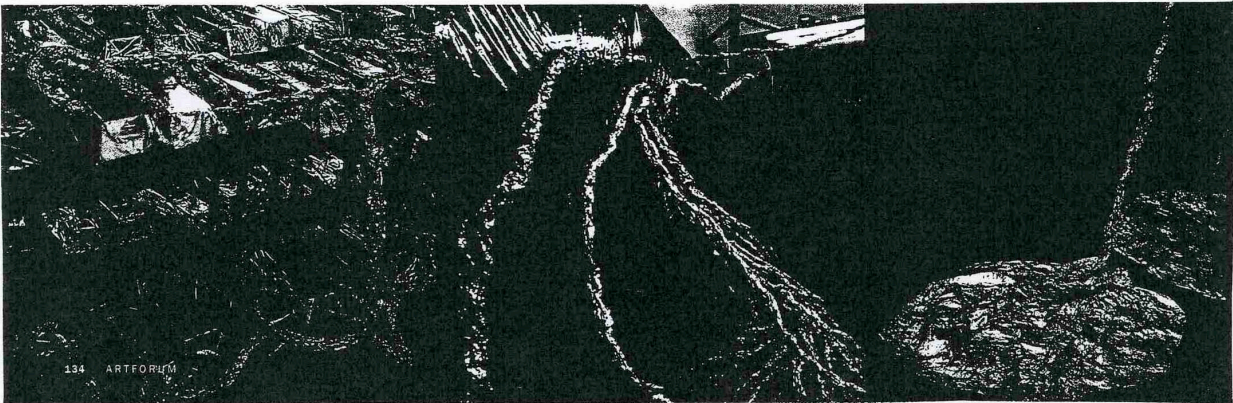
"I'm trying to connect things that I don't understand. I show it in my work in a stupid sort of way. I can work with material that has a meaning. As soon as you work with foil or cardboard, it doesn't stay clean; it's 'trash.' I want my work to be dense and full of energy. To arrive at that, you can't be overly preoccupied with questions of finish, form, exhibition, arrangement. I don't want to eliminate the question of form—when I do a show I must arrange things. These questions must be serenely neglected to make the work even more meaningful. When you work quickly, like me, you can't control everything. I'm not here to show that I'm able to control things well. This is also what I call working politically."

ANDY

He says all this in a single breath. The phone rings. Above it is a small piece of cardboard with something written on it. When Hirschhorn returns, I ask him what it says. He answers, "For twelve years I had a lot of experiences, a lot of struggles and failures. A quote from Warhol helped me get over the rejection and failure: 'Don't cry—Work!' " □

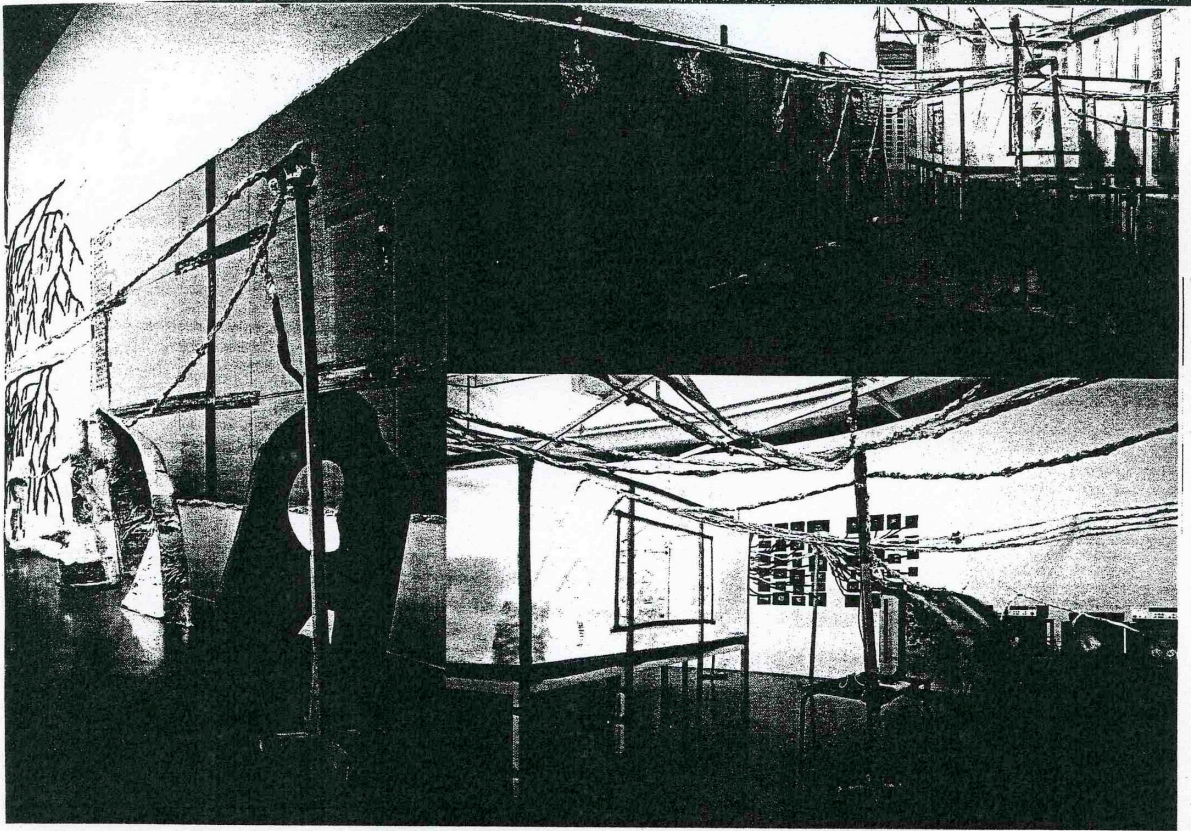
Pascale Cuvelier is a journalist based in Paris.

Translated from the French by Jeanine Herman.



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cuvelier, Pascale, "Weak Affinities," *ARTFORUM*, May 1998



Opposite page, left to right: **Thomas Hirschhorn, *Swiss Army Knife* (detail), 1998, mixed media. Installation view, Kunsthalle Bern, 1998.**
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Swiss Army Knife* (detail), 1998, mixed media. Installation view, Kunsthalle Bern, 1998.
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Swiss Army Knife* (detail), 1998, mixed media. Installation view, Kunsthalle Bern, 1998.

This page, clockwise from left: **Thomas Hirschhorn, *Time to Go*, 1997, mixed media. Installation view, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997. Photo: Florian Kleinfehn.**
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Time to Go*, 1997, mixed media. Installation view, ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1997. Photo: Florian Kleinfehn.
Thomas Hirschhorn, *Stalactites - Stalagmites avec Anciens Maîtres* (Stalactites-stalagmites with old masters) (detail), 1997, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Pascale Cuvelier.

