

International News

Hirschhorn's Dis Miffs Swiss

For the second time in as many years, the Swiss Cultural Center in Paris has become a hot spot of public conflict. The center's staff publicly protested director Michel Ritter's emphasis on conceptual-art programming in 2003, but that imbroglio paled in comparison with the strife ignited by the opening last December of Thomas Hirschhorn's solo show "Swiss-Swiss Democracy." Charging that the exhibition attacked Switzerland's core national values, the country's senate slashed the budget for Pro Helvetia, the federal agency that promotes Swiss culture internationally.

Among Europe's most notoriously uncompromising artists, Hirschhorn had vowed not to show in Switzerland after Christoph Blocher, an ultranationalist politician, was elected to the nation's seven-person federal council in late 2003. But Hirschhorn accepted when Ritter asked him to propose a Swiss Cultural Center exhibition in Paris and secured a \$150,000 production budget (the artist took no fee) from Pro Helvetia. Constructed of Hirschhorn's usual elements—cardboard, packing tape, and other inexpensive materials—the installation occupied the entire building and in-



Thomas Hirschhorn's Paris exhibition "Swiss-Swiss Democracy" prompted arts-funding cuts in his homeland.

cluded a daily philosophy lecture, theater performance, and publication of a small newspaper.

The promotional poster used an image from Abu Ghraib torture footage, superimposed with insignias of three conservative cantons, the Swiss cross, and the slogan "I ♥ Democracy!" Equally controversial, in the play an actor pretends to urinate on a sculpture of Blocher and to vomit into a ballot box. After tabloid papers falsely reported the simulacra as actual onstage urinating and vomiting, the mainstream press took up the controversy. Soon after that, Christian Democratic legislator Peter Bieri proposed an \$850,000 cut from Pro Helvetia's \$29 million budget. While the lower house of the Swiss government sided with Pro Helvetia, at the federal level the vote went against the agency by a 25-18 margin.

Hirschhorn says the dispute stunned him. "I understand that the tabloids sensationalize this exhibit," he explains. "But I can't believe that the politicians reacted in such an illogical, unprofessional way." But Bieri says Pro Helvetia has no one to blame but itself: "If they had just admitted they should have been more careful, then I would not have insisted on the budget cut. Instead, they started publicly comparing us to East German autocrats."

—Marc Spiegler