

Helmhaus Zürich  
24 February – 22 April 2012

## **BIGGER THAN ZÜRICH**

### **Art in Aussersihl**

**Aussersihl is the creative hub of Zurich: nobody who is interested or involved in art can miss it. Helmhaus Zürich is hosting an exhibition of works and an extensive fringe programme of events with more than 300 artists, complete with an accompanying book published by Scheidegger & Spiess: “Grösser als Zürich – Ein kleines Psychogramm des Zürcher Stadtquartiers Aussersihl”.**

The exhibition is set firmly in the present – and looks back at the past. For once, quantity really does mean quality: 222 art positions, 48 performing artists and authors, 6 concerts and 12 films, to be screened at Kino Stüssihof. All share a single source, atmosphere, background and vision: Aussersihl, Zurich’s District 4, where the artists have lived and worked, or still do.

When the community of Aussersihl was incorporated into the municipality of Zurich in 1893, it was bigger, both in area and population, than the entire city itself at the time. Aussersihl, which now forms District 4, was an industrial area of factory and railway workers, many of them immigrants – and is still seen today as a multicultural melting pot of innovative creativity and human dignity.

Because so many artists live and work here within such a small area, making it a wellspring of creative potential, District 4 is bigger than Zurich when it comes to ideas and artistic productivity. It is a hive of activity, teeming with innovative workshops and survival strategies, where creative people share office space and contracts, helping each other out, connecting and networking across all disciplines. Everyone seems to know everyone else here, fostering a real sense of community with a live-and-let-live approach. As the creative heart of the city, District 4 contributes significantly to Zurich’s cultural development. What is produced here resonates far beyond the bounds of Aussersihl. It is a sociocultural environment unparalleled in Switzerland and indeed exemplary on a wider international scale, where Zurich’s cultural vibrancy can blossom.

This city within a city conjures a magical realm between village and city, constantly navigating an ever-changing maelstrom of control and anonymity, identity and otherness. Contrasting poles of morality and liberty are well staked out and acknowledge one another without ignoring the contrasts between them. The seedier side of Aussersihl provides a bulwark against over-gentrification, and within its boundaries there is a tangible sense of integration, with no pressure to assimilate. According to the Zurich Office of Statistics, there are currently citizens from 99 different countries living in District 4 – 100 if you include Switzerland. Multicultural and parallel communities exist here side by side, in what is a unique experiment in intercultural living. The tone here may be a little rough and ready at times, but everyday conflicts are resolved in a way that is direct and upfront – and, with that, perhaps more resistant to crisis.

It is high time to show this district in a different light. Aussersihl, known locally as “Kreis Cheib” (in reference to the district’s former use for the disposal of animal cadavers, or “Cheib”), doesn’t have the best of reputations. Its backbone is the local red light district, branching out into drug-dealing, corruption and criminality. Artists of every hue have always felt at home in this place where the one thing people have in common is that they are all different. It is the birthplace of artists such as the three Gubler brothers, the haunt of James Joyce and Robert Walser, of Gottfried Honegger and René Burri. In recent years, many creative people have begun to settle here again, working in all

manner of disciplines, from art, music and fashion to graphic design, architecture, literature and film. Today, as in the past, it is a hotbed of theoretical discourse, sometimes with practical repercussions. This is where social tensions have always tended to surface – from the workers' movement that was so brutally crushed in 1918 to the social and cultural liberation movements of 1968 and 1980, and Reclaim the Streets today.

The exhibition is accompanied by a wealth of fringe events, including performances by internationally renowned jazz pianist Irène Schweizer and experimental duo ./morFrom/. at the Helmhaus. Readings by Melinda Nadj Abonji, Catalin Dorian Florescu, Dieter Meier and many others, talks by Valentin Landmann and Emilio Modena, as well as discussions with Guya Marini, Max Dudler, Gottfried Honegger, Anna Schindler and more besides. Kino Stüssihof is the venue for an exquisite programme of short and feature-length films from District 4: Christoph Schaub's "Dreissig Jahre", Markus Imboden's "Bingo", vintage newsreel footage of the 1913 funeral procession of August Bebel, and Fabienne Boesch's documentary about the Lochergut housing complex, "Der Komplex".

To coincide with the exhibition, but as a publication in its own right, a book will be published by Zurich-based Scheidegger & Spiess entitled "Grösser als Zürich – Ein kleines Psychogramm des Zürcher Stadtquartiers Aussersihl". Journalists Caspar Schärer and Thomas Wyss have invited some thirty authors to contribute texts, and have selected pertinent illustrations. The result is a rich and vibrant panorama of District 4 that is as provocative as it is thought-provoking.

The overall project follows on from the "Kult Zürich Ausser Sihl" series of exhibitions and publications launched by Silvio R. Baviera at the Galerie Museum Baviera in District 4, which was subsequently shown at the Alte Malzfabrik in Berlin and can be seen later this year at the Deutschvilla in Strobl near Salzburg.

With "Bigger than Zurich", Helmhaus Zürich has created more than an exhibition. It is a veritable District 4 Festival – with some unique contributions that were possible only thanks to the local energy and commitment of all concerned. The show at Helmhaus Zürich is a rambling, exuberant, generation-crossing bonanza that can make no claim to be definitive – because it is already bursting at the seams. It marks a brief pause for reflection in the frenetically paced stream of life. Where are we heading? What comes next? What will happen to the district when the Europaallee development makes its mark? What will happen to those who are also part of wider society – the prostitutes and drug addicts? Where will they end up if gentrification pushes them aside? And how will that same trend affect the much-vaunted creativity of the area? Where will they go? Given this uncertain future, the exhibition captures an exciting, and perhaps even final, moment in which District 4 is still many things to many people: red light district, entertainment district, multicultural melting pot and hub of creativity.

Silvio R. Baviera, Michael Hiltbrunner and Guido Magnaguagno, curators of the exhibition and fringe programme; Simon Maurer, director of the Helmhaus Zürich