There is no way to organize an exhibition of contemporary Swiss artists which would offer a completely fair representation of art in Switzerland today. Even though Switzerland is a very small country, it is not homogeneous; there are many cultural differences and traditions, rooted in many historical European trends. Four official languages are spoken in Switzerland (French, German, Italian, and Romansch), and the cultural products which emerge from these various regions and trends reflect such diversity.

However, some shared features in contemporary Swiss art emerge from its diversity and variety. We hope that works chosen for the present exhibition will convey two such shared features to the American public. These features appear simultaneously in most of the artists' works represented in the exhibition, although in some cases just one is present.

Meticulous . . .

Switzerland has few natural resources. Being obliged to import most raw materials, its inhabitants had to compete in business for a long time by the high quality of their workmanship, often effected on rather small objects. This is a partial explanation, along with long winters and traditional values, for the country's success in watch-making, exquisite lace production, porcelain painting, or high-quality printing. Things have since changed in industry and production of the goods, but the trend is still visible in art, and many Swiss works of art reflect a very precise training in fine arts.

Fanciful . . .

There is another factor. Swiss society is held together and molded by numerous rules and limitations, strong values, and serious enforcement of these rules. This is the Swiss way of making coexistence peaceful and orderly in a crowded and complex country. In our opinion, one cannot achieve this relative order without creating at the same time a strong need for compensatory expansion, rebellious thinking, surrealistic visions and imagery in the minds of some creators, as well as audiences. This is a partial explanation for the existence of such a dimension in Swiss art. Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that the surrealistic movement had so many active creators and enthusiastic adepts in Belgium and Switzerland at a certain point in history.

A Rainbow . . .

In Swiss art, these contradictory attitudes—the tradition of meticulous work and the need for creative imagination—still operate. Sometimes one of these two motivations appears and acts separately; sometimes both coexist in the same artist, in what one might perhaps call a specific Swiss way.

This exhibition, we think, shows these two trends quite clearly and through beautiful pieces. One would be misled, however, in thinking that the artists have been chosen to fit the rationale of (or to confirm) our theories on contemporary Swiss art. Our choice of artists is personal. Other artists in Switzerland could also have been appropriate for showing these trends or for showing other trends. Each artist has his or her unique and complex way of creating and communicating. All works in this exhibition are close to our hearts and have moved our spirit in one way or another.

We decided to show thirteen living artists and two important predecessors, who died relatively recently: Jaques Berger in 1977, and Albert Yersin in 1984.

Jaques Berger, born at the beginning of the century, lived through many trends in art, vacillating sometimes between abstract and figurative painting, until he reached the apex of his creativity. After dropping academical rules and conceptualized theory (this was clear when he had such difficulty answering theoretical questions in some of his interviews), Berger came to trust random chance or "hazard," although a hazard which one has to stimulate ("The only truth is the hazard. One must instigate it"), as well as a trust in speed and trial. This attitude and technique has been beautifully documented by a video showing Berger in his last years working on lithographic stones with speed and impulsive but precise gestures. The results are striking paintings and beautiful figures (the title of a series of late lithographs). These show the same quality one enjoys in calligraphy, the same reduction to the essential, conveying the same feeling of hieratic postures (he admired the Greeks). In his painting however, this amazing calligraphy is enriched by a feeling of patina, partly due to the use of distemper, a paint Berger made himself with egg, water, and glue from rabbit skin. It gave him the impression he was closer to what he mentions in an interview: "distaste for new things" . . . "A new pot has something inhuman about it. Slated roofs worn out by the rain . . . rust . . . moss-grown walls . . . that's where one finds its true nurture." 2

Interest in the hieratic representations of the human figure in classical antiquity, sensitivity to the trace of time on human tools, confidence in hazard and speed—these somehow summarize Berger's late work. Usually, a sudden and unconditional attraction is also how a viewer reacts to Berger's painting. As one of his friends said in describing his first contact with Berger's works:

The real discoveries, the ones which change us, usually are instantaneous. The stroke of lightning. It is the encounter of artwork tuned with some part deep in ourselves. It speaks to us, unveils a language which is innate, but which we weren't aware of, a hidden potential in us. Then you enter in it right away. 3

Even if he did not depict Swiss cows or the Alps or any folklore in his works, even if he spent part of his life in foreign countries, more particularly in the U.S., not many artists could be considered more "Swiss" than Albert Yersin in his production of meticulous prints.

To make a living, but not only for that, Yersin engraved plates for Swiss postage stamps with precision and skill. In his own prints though, his skill and meticulous way of working are geared towards extraordinary cosmic miniatures in which imagination and space open endless paths. Exuberant landscapes are liberated
but at the same time tamed by the genial cartographer.

The titles of the prints are interesting: some are a tribute to sensitive and visionary authors; others do not make sense, sometimes because they refer to private events which occurred during the making, like "Michel et moi" (Mike and I). The ambiguity enlarges the meaning of the print, or opens one more unknown dimension to the imagination, while still complying with the rule of giving a title to the print.

Although Yersin's work emphasizes the imagination, the creative multidimensional meaning should not detract from the precision of the technique. Using a binocular magnifier, his painstaking skills, and self-made tools, Yersin has been able to insert specific structures in the plate, grains or textures, meant to retain differently the various inks and colors, lighter or stronger, brought by the Gabber on the plate. These sophisticated structures produce in color printing a great visual effect, simultaneously with an immeasurable power of evoking feelings and experiences.

One might not be sensitive to the same duality in Hanspeter Kamm's work and first notice only the powerful imagination and wit. One might also be misled by the type of material which is occasionally used for some of the "objects," for example the Icarus or the Biker, and erroneously think of some casual production. A closer look, for example at the Letzte Krabbelkiste, and particularly at the Haus der Dinge would indicate the patient and meticulous production which characterizes many of Kamm's works. There is no use of scrap material. This is a deliberate way of handling wires or little pieces of material to give the feeling of a handmade construction, a human touch.

Kamm represents basic needs and basic means of locomotion which are not too far from nature. Not that Kamm is unaware of mass production and industry, or powerful engines and jets: in many works he shows a deep understanding of this, as well as a distance from it. During a short period Kamm included electronic parts in his works, which reacted to temperature or noise or viewer's motion around them, and activated some features in the art piece; for example, he built a working thermometer in the shape of a pyramid, which instead of giving a mathematical and impersonal number, kindly suggested how many hand-knitted sweaters to put on that morning. In one of his well-thought-out representations of Icarus trying to fly with his deep black wings made of wire and extra-light paper, Kamm added in front of them a pair of little propellers, made of thin wire and tin, purposely not connected to any engine and not trying to look real, but juxtaposed to suggest the mental image of a modern turbo-prop, creating a sense of the absurd.

Some people might be deceived by the apparent facility of Kamm's works and fail to grasp the multiple levels of his pieces. The old biker can be enjoyed as a colorful, extravagant figure, but there are at least two other levels of meaning: Many elements—the exuberant vegetables on the head, the happy face and wide smile, the polysemic white robe (a woman, a priest, whatever) worn by this slender dream crossing our world—contribute precisely to our feeling of light happiness, liberation from the heavy industrialized world, as if we had rediscovered a balance between mechanization and nature. The relationship with nature is a very important part of the message. If you do not see it in the biker then the Haus der Dinge again a polysemic object, will help you to realize it.

A third level is the treatment of apparently simple material: the wires look hand-bent, almost without tools; porcelain is unbaked, there is no attempt to hide the extensions of the wires, on the left and on the right of the figure, used to secure some stability for the piece. All this conveys a statement about where the real values are: Kamm had meticulously to look unmeticulous, to express his preference for genuine humanity and nature over design and industrial production. So the house is carefully "unheavy," free, unpredictable, but still filling our need for a more human habitat.

Henry Meyer is another case of visionary creativity, whose significance one would fail to grasp if looking only at appearance. Henry Meyer is a "pataphysicist," as such he goes faithfully along an alternative philosophical line, which seems a "non-sense line" or "paralogical" line. But he does it in a very methodical and, as required by the logic of this system, self-challenging way. He is deeply rooted in high culture, but remains at the same time an outsider. For example, in Cubistine chez elle (a reference to Sade) or in the Generals, there is a systematic application of cubist painting in three dimensions. But the derisive laughter, as well as the material used (paper maché and egg wrapping, instead of brass or marble) creates an attraction and a distance at the same time, a kind of parallel thinking. Le Fantôme de la Nicotine conveys similar feelings about a terrifying monster, even in a small dimension, but also appears as a scornful outburst about nothing. It is not without importance that the piece has a humble rationale which coexists with the representation: when the artist gave up smoking, he embedded some of his pipes in the paper maché, creating the monster around them. It is worth going around the little sculpture, to observe the meticulous and creative work on all sides. The egg, appearing like a flower, could be any fragile dropping by the monster, a reminder of the great dinosaurs, or a reminder of the egg cartons which are used to build the figure.

An interesting comparison can be made between these highly actualized productions and other of Meyer's works still in progress or which did not achieve the same level of parallel logic, complexity, and meticulous construction. Even if they might be very imaginative, they do not strike one the same way. It shows that a strong logic, meticulously applied, is necessary in order to convey nonsense and flamboyant surrealism.

Looking at Gérard Goy's pastels offers a quite different experience. Goy seems to be a perfect example of the tradition of meticulous workmanship. Indeed, the closer you look, the more it is true: layers and layers of discrete pastel are applied to the paper and fixed carefully before the next reworking of the art piece. But
even before that, light had been con-
trolled in his studio; a humble back-
ground had been chosen (maybe an
old washed-out tablecloth); carefully
selected little objects had been
placed with care, reflection, and ex-
perience on the table: an old, almost
moldy lemon perhaps, a very small
basket, a small white ceramic pot or
a black bottle. Some viewers might
see an excessively restrained cosmos,
ashrunk en approach to the world:
why not paint the beautiful land-
scape which surrounds Goy’s ap-
artment in Lausanne? Why not paint
the Alps which are so close? Why,
when Goy looks through his window
draws houses with snow on their
roofs, be so sparing of pastel, to
the point that these houses almost disa-
ppear into the paper?

Goy’s art is precisely this quest for
the essence of things and behind this
for the essence of presence. Goy
does not proceed by verbal philo-
sophical means; I even suspect that
does not trust verbal skills, at least
not his, to apprehend this question.
His quest is visual, humble and proud
at the same time.

As everyone knows, and quite of-
ten forgets, “things” are present to
us because they reflect light. Instinc-
tively, Gerd Goy dims the objects,
dims the light, dims the pastel, until
the pattern of presence, until the
pattern of essence comes out of the
quest. It is somehow the reverse of
exuberance, but it is as daring, as
creative, as any other more exuber-
ant-looking art work.

Goy, also a refined watercolorist,
indeed has painted the Lake Leman,
the largest lake in western Europe,
making beautiful watercolors at
dawn, not grandiloquent, but catch-
ing the intimate fragility and
unscratched beauty of the early
morning light on the water.

A similar perfection and delicate
approach can be seen in Gérard de
Palézieux’s watercolors, an art form
in which Palézieux, already an ex-
cellent oil painter, became a master,
after having been first in touch with
Goy. Even if his works are quite dif-
f erent, Palézieux is satisfying the
same way because of being light
without being flimsy, searching for
perfection without being mannered,
being traditional without being out-
paced. Some people might feel that
both Goy and Palézieux seem to
ignore their time, its struggles, its
atrocities, its calls for urgent action.
Wrong: being both humble and not
humble, they maintain standards in
perfection and beauty. This is an im-
portant statement.

Raymond L’Épée belongs to an
similar trend. Like Goy or Palézieux,
he first looks prominent because of
the quality of his technique, the
precision of his skills, the demanding
requirements of his idea about paint-
ing, rather than by an exuberant
imagination. Again, this first impres-
sion may be deceiving, although the
characteristics we just mentioned are
in fact present and effective in his
work. Present, but not applied just
in order to offer us a nice image
of reality. In L’Épée’s work there is
an intense process of selection and
suppression and reinforcement, sup-
ported by a technique of “flat”
layers. One of the best examples of
interaction between technique and
meaning is the painting depicting a
baroque staircase under high-noon
light. Italy can be picturesque and
has been reported as such by many
excellent painters, particularly of the
nineteenth century. In many of
L’Épée’s large paintings, “flat” layers
of painting seem to rub out details or
accidental picturesqueness, some-
how how overexposure in photo-
graphy: irregularities blend into pure
surfaces whose task is to send bold
vibrations of air and light toward us,
a superior layer of existence. It
could be the light of a hot midday
sun, like in A Mid; it could be the coolness
of shadow under a Mediterranean
door, like in Rideau de Perles.

Most of the time, L’Épée’s colors
are delicate and blend into one an-
other. When bright, usually in the
foreground, they speak loudly about
themselves and the object they
depict (usually a flower), but even
more, by contrast, about the delicate
and precious atmosphere of the
background seen through a window
or behind a railing.

“Most of the time,” I wrote, be-
cause L’Épée is not bound by tricks,
but an artist in the quest of essence
and beauty. His signature, fading
into the canvas to the point of al-
most vanishing—something to hunt
for—is that of a discrete and confi-
dent artist, conscious of his qualities
but knowing where the essence is.

With Armand Oswald, who
shows a remarkable balance be-
 tween unpretentiousness and con-
sciousness of her talents, we are
back to a more obvious presence of
both the meticulous and the explo-
sive creativity. In this exhibition
both the big drawings and the relatively
small etchings have a systematic,
almost compulsively controlled accu-
mulation of nonrepresentational little
“marks,” (countless strokes of lead,
and of eraser in the big drawings)
from which a powerful meaning
emerges.

Oswald, more than some other
artists, requires the participation of
the viewer: from the multitude of
lead strokes, meaningless per se,
when a certain density has been
reached (it is hard to say when), then
a face, a body, an attitude, finally the
depiction of the human condition
will emerge with the complicity of
the viewer. For the viewers, there is
an extraordinary moving and satis-
fying feeling of accomplishment
when the meaning of the piece emerges
from the separate meaningless
strokes. A kind of gratitude then
binds us to the artist who has been
able to engineer this trip through
perception and take us with her. In
the etchings Au delà des Masques,
there is a similar experience of en-
joyment: we start from the perception
of meaningless aquatic irregular
grays, then we vacillate for a second
between the discovery of undefined
landscapes and the recognition of
faces; then we reach the idea of “be-
yond the masks.” This artistic motion
(and source of emotion) leaves with
us the pleasure of discovery and the
enriching ability to perceive eternal
landscapes on faces (and perhaps
fragile faces in landscapes).

Some other drawings, done in
the same technique as Transit, ex-
 plore even further the limits of rec-
ognition and ambiguity; they too
offer the rewarding privilege of
the human brain being able to achieve
perception out of many insignificant
“marks.”

On the four huge walls of a
museum gallery, Oswald recently
played in a very different way with
ideas of emergence and decline. She
painted around the four walls the
emergence of life on earth and its
disappearance, starting from a large
uniformly painted red wall, until the
idea comes full circle.
André Tommasini’s aspiration
and work are totally different. Maybe
due to his first training (an early
apprenticeship in marble tomb-
stones, before attending the school
of art), and to his character (worrying
and demanding), added to his sensu-
ality, Tommasini has developed
a strong need for perfection in shapes,
finishing of the surfaces, smooth pas-
sage from one volume, one form to
the other. It could be seen as classi-
cal, and because of the meticulous
craftsmanship, very Swiss. It would
be a shame to end with the ap-
proach here.
The series which reveals most
explicitly another dimension in
Tommasini’s work is Etage (Bench-
vise). Using two different kinds of
marble, or even stainless steel,
Tommasini grips with a clearly rep-
resented vise the rounded shapes
coming out (or trying to come out) of
the marble: “I like the rounded
shapes because they express the
internal force, a rising of sap.” Part
of the struggle of the sculptor is to
fight for the emergence of these
forms from the stone, or beauty
from the world.
When the world was shaken by
the reappearance of hostage-taking,
Tommasini was already involved in
the idea of constraints preventing
forms from blossoming from the
stone: “I like fulfillment when
thwarted . . . Shapes which crash
together go beyond themselves.”
Using steel cables, he produced a
series he named Otago, which is
a sculptural response to his time, but
also the expression of a less time-
bound reality, a more permanent
-task: “go beyond themselves.”
These oppositions or duality have
also been expressed by mixing mar-
bles (light and dark, for example).
Particularly attractive is the series
called Expansion, in which rounded
shapes expand from cubes and angu-
lar forms, or vice versa. Less obvious
than some series, Expansion conveys
very well the idea of constraints and
contradictions, the pleasure of a ca-
ress, the opposite with the sharp
edge. By careful finishing and elimi-
nating the incidental in the raw ma-
terial, Tommasini reaches what he
calls the “tension of forms” and
expands to the “beyond.”
It is difficult to say what kind of
artist Henry Roulet is. It is a lot
easier to say what he is not: not a
“naive,” or a “primitive.” Even if his
work might suggest artists like
Auberjonois or Giotto, he is not their
follower. Even if he is obviously at-
tracted by Tuscany and Venice, he is
not an “Italianist.” Even if all of his
paintings have scenery and show
figures, he is not just telling stories.
Even if he uses color as the most im-
portant component of his painting,
he is not a “colorist.” Not this, not
that: something basic in Roulet’s art
makes it approached better by sub-
traction than by addition, by asceti-
cism than by accumulation.
What happens to the colors on his
canvas or to the drawing and anato-
ymy of the people? The same thing
happens to both of them: For ex-
ample in The Train for Napoli, Le Bar,
or L’arrivée du Cirque in which one
expects abundant motion and anima-
tion, Roulet cuts out the movements
of the arms or knees toward the left
or right side of the painting. He
keeps only the central part of the
people depicted, as in a photograph
of a person in motion, when shot at
very low speed: on the film the den-
sity is strong enough only in the cen-
tral part of the body to produce an
image on the sensitized paper, and
the rest fades. By trimming the sides
of his figures, Roulet elongates them
to stable verticals; through this re-
duction he reaches their internal per-
manence, often increased by the
contemplative look on their face.
By subtracting the realism of motion
and stiffening of the body, Roulet
offers the image of peaceful souls in
which sadness is never despair, joy
never excitement, humor never acid,
and satire is tender. The colors also
exhibit the same spirit; they are
strong, but deprived of their loud-
ness. Quite often Roulet paints red
on a red background (Le Bar), green
on green (Course d’escargots), with
equal density given to air or water as
to solid things, walls, or people. By
increasing the general density, Roulet
excludes the possibility of the indi-
vidual and the momentous over-
whelming the permanent.
This process is almost the opposite
of naive or folk painting, which is in-
teresting to the viewer because of its
accounting for the moment and the
particular.
Who could be more different than
Peter Fürst, the celebrator of en-
ergy, the passionate musician, the
deeply involved contributor to carni-
val masks and costumes, the cook
and the distiller of refined and pow-
erful plum liqueur?
Fürst’s life embodies Swiss contra-
dictions: in the middle of a successful
career in Basel in advertising and
decoration, Fürst turned his back on
a certain kind of sophisticated life in
favor of giving free rein to his imagi-
nation and need for expression.
First he worked on iron, hammer-
ing and welding, creating loud and
meaningful structures; loud in many
ways: during openings or special mu-
cic sessions, he would climb into his
sculptures and bing and bang on
them, or play his jazz flute with his
group, one of them taking over the
percussion.
In a later stage, he was attracted
to watercolor, which he learned to
master with Kirova. Drawing and
painting back stage during jazz ses-
sions and concerts, sometimes he
would expand with the music to its
climax (Plein Tube). Sometimes he
would meticulously respond to deli-
crate rhythms and watercolorlike
moods (Gismondi). Whatever Fürst
paints, rhythm and music are impor-
tant elements. Whatever music he
plays, his musical space is organized
in structured sequences. It is a beau-
tiful experience to watch his art work
while listening to his music, or to the
music he is responding to in painting.
Even though it is not a Swiss in-
vention, mezzotint is very appro-
priate to Swiss traditional mentality: it is
a time-consuming, meticulous job,
even before any image begins to ap-
pear on the plate. First the artist has
to move a rocking tool, the rocker,
across the plate as long as necessary,
soring the metal and giving it a vel-
vet appearance. Only then can she
or he start to have some image ap-
ppear by pressing on this textured sur-
face with the burnisher or other tools
to create a shadow image. Inks are applied very carefully and get caught in the "velvety" finish which is still left on the plate. The ink is then wiped away from the more or less glossy surfaces with a cloth, often at the end with the palm of the hand. This procedure gives the prints the fleshlike grain and mixture of softness and depth one can admire in Izabel’s works. Many of her prints put together various objects or elements which share a kind of softness and flexibility and suggest a caressing in one way or another: feathers, rich textiles, parts of the human body. By keeping enough ambiguity and balancing quite skillfully representation and fantasy, Izabel reaches a high degree of sensuality, without falling into monosemic voyeurism. In her more recent works, (she had been working in mezzotint for many years), collages and mini-installations, she goes further in exploring the juxtaposition of different materials and symbols, pursuing a discrete and tasteful interaction.

When applied to trivial circumstances, compulsiveness might be considered a defect in average people. However, when it goes far enough, it can reach art and ethereal dimensions. This is what one is tempted to think about Olivier Charles.

Very different from the other "perfectionists" we have already encountered in this exhibit, but also producing works which carry us away, Charles seems to start within himself and accumulates on the canvas small signs from his memory, borrowed from a rich internal alphabet: letters, dots, spots. With them, he creates a daybreak or twilight universe which expands so far that one can become totally enraptured, the same way we might lose our earthly ties while gazing at the innumerable dots of stars on a clear winter night, entering an interstellar space. Charles’s canvas, filled and framed like the well-ordered mind of a Swiss man, explodes and frees itself in an intense, breathtaking image.

Liuba Kirova has lived and been active in Switzerland for many years and received Swiss citizenship in the late seventies. As many people did when moving to the U.S., she brought an interesting contribution to her new country from her native Bulgaria, where she received most of her training in art. She also lived in Italy and France.

An expert in watercolor, she is a colorist and “motionist.” By saying “motionist,” we try to characterize her specific way, through the distortion of ordinary perception and traditional perspective, to express the motions she sees in structures, surfaces, shapes, which surround the figures she places in most of her paintings. Because paintings are not movies, the painter cannot have her figures move on the canvas; but she can express their liveliness, as well as her own, by having everything move around them: walls or buildings running to their vanishing point, steeples swinging in the sky, unidentified objects flying through the canvas. In addition, she introduces symbols of movement and drops them in the animated space: windmills, horses, carousels, kites (or maybe just swirling colors).

Kirova is more than lively; she is gifted with an exceptional ease in painting. She is almost never at rest. The amazing discovery she made is that the works providing the viewer with the greatest feeling of life, lightness, and freedom of motion are often those which required the most care and structure.

Italo Valenti is the most internationally famous of the artists we show. He has been exhibiting with Julius Bissier, Jean Art, Ben Nicholson, Mark Tobey. But more striking than his fame is the beauty of his work, whatever medium he chooses. In the case of Italo Valenti we are not going to approach the subject of meticulous and fanciful, even if

Valenti is both. Each painting or collage is striking as a whole, as a perfectly balanced piece. It calls for an immediate and deep relationship in which first the pleasure of the senses overcomes understanding and thinking. Later the artwork might return to one’s mind as conveying thoughts about happiness and seriousness, about the richness and the complexity of the world around us. But first his art addresses the viewer as visual and sensual. Being restrained in the use of words is a way to pay a tribute to its beauty.

Valenti was part of an exhibition organized by Bernard Blatter under the title of Painters of Silence. Indeed Valenti makes it eloquent.

Conclusion
There have been and still are many dimensions and trends in Swiss art, including, more recently, minimalism, new geos, etc. As the recent important art fair catalogues show, some famous Swiss names and successful artists are on the international market.

The present exhibition presents Swiss artists who all have qualities which last beyond trends and time. They are successful in their country, but they deserve a wider public. We are very pleased that they are offered an opportunity to be seen and appreciated in the United States.

March 1991

Janice and Jean-Pierre Golay

NOTES
2. Idem.
5. Idem.