

Conversation with
SAMUEL
LEUENBERGER, SALTS

I is for

Institute

What's in a name? This is the question underlying our investigation into ICA: how it came to be, what it means now, and how we might imagine it in the future.

In a field so often defined by precarity, this project is grounded in a spirit of collegiality, a looking outward that aims to facilitate self-reflection. As such, we have engaged colleagues primarily from small- and mid-scale contemporary arts organizations to discuss their institutional histories and how they understand the stakes of their work. The *I is for Institute* website acts as a repository for these ongoing conversations, as well as archival material relating to ICA's history. We thank our many colleagues for their generosity, enthusiasm, and frankness. Their thinking has in turn energized our own.

— Alex Klein,
Dorothy & Stephen R. Weber
(CHE'60) Curator, Institute
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Samuel Leuenberger is the Director and Curator at SALTS in Birsfelden, Switzerland.

With Alex Klein, Tausif Noor, and Laurel McLaughlin

ALEX KLEIN:

What is your position at SALTS, and can you tell us about the origin of the project?

SAMUEL LEUENBERGER:

I'm the founder and Director at SALTS. I'm one of two curators here. For the past five years, I've had a co-curator, Elise Lammer. This year we're celebrating the 10th anniversary of the space, which has undergone quite a few different formats. SALTS started as a private space, an art salon in a converted butcher shop that my grandparents and parents worked in over the years. It is an oversized space and it became quite clear early on that we had to do something here.

Having lived in Zürich, I realized when I moved back to Basel in 2007 that Basel has a very different cultural economy. There is a high density of museums—there are more than 40—and a pronounced absence of commercial galleries. Those predominately thrive in Zürich and Geneva, which are considered larger international business centers. Basel likes to claim that it's a very international city, being on the border of France and Germany and being a tri-state city. There is a gallery market in Basel, but it's subdued, especially in terms of international exchange. Perhaps it was the lack of commercial art galleries that helped start and continues to give room to a lot of project spaces. Basel has both very established museums and a strong, thriving project space culture, which doesn't exist in a lot of other cities. Zürich and Geneva are far too expensive to even rent a space, unless you do it out of your own flat.

AK:

Basel is less expensive?

SL:

Yes, it's a bit cheaper than Zürich and Geneva. Before SALTS, I worked for many years between the commercial and institutional worlds. I worked in auction houses and as a curatorial assistant at Kunsthalle Zürich. I realized that the people who are absorbed into these platforms are often similar—they're just fed different discourses depending on the business of the art world they're involved in. It was actually quite funny working in an auction house and having private collectors come in and being very hush-hush. When you go to the kunsthalle, those same people are patrons of that institution as philanthropists. It's funny, because everyone is trying to sell a particular mission statement, but there's so much crossover in all these different fields.

When I came to Basel, I was interested in creating a space that gets rid of all of these codes and rules. I wanted to show young, almost grassroots artists, who were just out of art school or early in their careers. I wanted to help them show their work in its beginning stages so to speak and not think about doing marketing and communication, or a press release, or educational programming. I wanted to just try to peel back all the layers of the onion and start with the center. It started off as a very idealist thing, as many of these projects do.

AK:

I'm curious to hear how it has evolved over time.

SL:

Here we are 10 years later, and with some distance, I can see that we're exactly where a lot of other spaces are now. We adhere to a lot of rules that a lot of young spaces adhere to. It's interesting to go down this road where, with every exhibition we did, we began to peel this onion. We built it up to the point of how I felt like it was what we needed and not just because it was supposed to have all of these layers.

AK:

Right.

SL:

It was really interesting to actually start from zero, to see what it means to create an exhibition and start a dialogue outside of any sort of pressure from sponsors, donors, the city, or having to worry about whether we were private or public. This was one of the reasons that SALTS began privately. At the beginning I ran it parallel to being an art advisor.

AK:

Ah, so you personally financed it?

SL:

Yes.

AK:

And you must own the building, right, because it's been in your family?

SL:

Yes, the building is family-owned.

AK:

That's great.

SL:

I got it at a very reasonable price. In the beginning, I thought, "If you don't get private funding, then no one can tell you what to do." Of course, I found out later that it's the opposite in Switzerland. If you don't apply for public funding, you're actually considered stupid, because there's so much public funding around that it doesn't make sense to not take advantage of it.

AK:

You're lucky.

SL:

The idea of independence was really important to me in the beginning; I started it with my own resources. From early on, we were always concentrating on the production of solo shows. We have mounted group shows, but it was always a conversation with an artist about where their boundaries were or where they felt like they hadn't gone in their practice but wanted to go. It doesn't matter if it's technical. We try to do what they want to do.

AK:

Backtracking for a second, you moved back to Basel in 2007. What brought you back?

SL:

Originally it was a private matter; my dad was in ill health. He had a heart attack in 2007, so I stopped my work at Kunsthalle Zürich quite abruptly. I just decided to go back and help him out. He's recovered and is fine now.

AK:

I'm glad to hear it. From the moment to had the initial idea to the time SALTS opened its doors, what was the process like? What was it like to take a butcher shop and turn it into an exhibition space? It must've been a process.

SL:

It was a butcher shop from the 1930s until 1995, and afterward it stood empty and was subleased for many years. In 2004, there was a big fire: someone was fixing a car, and basically the car started burning and the entire ground floor was destroyed. It was a blessing in disguise because the building was very old, built in the mid-1930s. If you've never seen the inside of a butcher shop, it's full of metal structures and water pipes, extra electricity, boiling rooms, heating rooms. It's almost impossible to get rid of all of that infrastructure.

AK:

Did you renovate it with the idea that it would become an exhibition space?

SL:

No, we basically just decided to take out all of the walls and leave it as a big open loft. It stood empty for a couple of years without anybody knowing what we should put in it. I never thought I would move back to Basel, but when I did, I wanted to live in this space because it's a cool space.

My former partner and I once hosted a degree show here in 2008 by an artist friend of ours from Zürich. She had fantastic new work, and as you know, artists and students all too often have to throw away their work because they have nowhere to exhibit or store it. We showed it for three months so it wouldn't get thrown away. It was this first gesture of safeguarding something, putting it up, and all of a sudden, we had people coming by and saying, "We have this work, can you come see it?" It took a little while to think that we could actually do this. So, it came out of this opportunity—having space, having friends who make good art, actually realizing that we live in a city that allows for showing that art, and then just doing it. In 2009, after our first

official opening as SALTS, we did a show with Tobias Spichtig, who we just invited back to do a show for our 10-year anniversary.

AK:

Full circle.

SL:

Yes, full circle. Celebrate the future by looking back.

AK:

What about the name, SALTS?

SL:

Well, it's very simple. SALTS comes from the initials of the three founding members. So, myself and Anna—Samuel and Anna Leuenberger—and Tobias, that first artist friend.

AK:

I originally thought, "Oh, it must have something to do with the butcher shop." That's so great.

SL:

SALTS started officially in 2011 as an organization with Tobias; for the first two years, my partner and I just ran SALTS as an artist salon. We basically lived in the whole space and artists came in and put things in the kitchen and so on.

AK:

So, you were living there?

SL:

Yes, and I am still living here.

AK:

Oh, I haven't had the opportunity to come see the space in person, so I didn't know.

SL:

The bedroom is the first room we held shows in—a little butcher room, and then we opened it up. Then, we opened up the larger space next door, which is about 100 square meters. Of course, when you open up a larger space, nobody wants to show in the smaller space.

AK:

And you have other exhibition spaces at SALTS as well?

SL:

We have a couple of garage boxes that we transformed into mini-white cubes and we have a large garden. Early on, we didn't always have two shows. We had a larger production inside. The open structure of the garage was used as a project space, where you could do things in-situ. But then we plastered it shut so we have two separate rooms that are very versatile. This spring, we built a third exhibition box in the courtyard, we have a summer cabana and an old water tank that we just gave to a young artist named Cassidy Toner, who is starting to curate shows there.

The spaces themselves are small, but the nice thing is that when we invite artists, they can choose whether they want a more classic gallery or a box outside that they can transform and do something outdoors. The range that we can offer here is often very exciting for artists, because it's made for anybody, so to speak.

TAUSIF NOOR:

I'm sure that that kind of flexibility or modularity is appealing to artists. Do artists tend to do commissioned works? How are you working with them?

SL:

SALTS very quickly became a place where we commission productions for a new show, and often it's a work that's being presented for the first time. Since it's a loft space, the artist can stay here, and I have my own space and office here, so it can become a place where artists can live and hang out. For many years, we've been inviting guest spaces as a platform for partners and friends. We have guest curators, or a guest institution, or a gallery—we're not shy about having a commercial gallery here as well—in order to get a different spirit and exchange.

AK:

But you don't sell work out of the space, do you?

SL:

No, we never have.

AK:

So, when you commission work the artist can take it with them?

SL:

Yes, that's right.

AK:

I hadn't realized the domestic aspect of the project. It must be really nice if you have an artist coming to work at SALTS that they live adjacent to you. It must really change the curatorial dialogue.

SL:

The flexibility of the spaces is the biggest selling point, and we're expanding and reconstructing the space all the time. I know these days one tries to avoid using too much architecture and scenographic methods in your exhibition-making. It's almost considered an abuse of contemporary art at times. But at the time, we had a lot of fun with that. We have an amazing person who has been doing our construction since day one, and he's volunteered to work in our bar and do various construction changes for free. I always used to joke that it's better to have a good construction worker on your team than a good graphic designer. A lot of the young hip spaces, they have good graphic communication and then when you get there the space is kind of...meh.

AK:

It's totally true.

SL:

Of course, graphic design is necessary since we work so internationally and through digital channels. For the longest time we didn't have a good graphic or corporate design, but our guy can simply do anything, which gives us not just complete freedom but also a rare confidence to never have to say no to an idea.

AK:

Does he still work with you?

SL:

Yes, and he's slowed down a little bit. He used to be buried in work. We used to say to an artist, "You want to build a water tower, let's build a water tower." This of course opened up possibilities that even other spaces that could get good funding couldn't offer because it would cost a fortune. So, we were very blessed to have him on board early on.

AK:

Are you able to pay artists?

SL:

As in an artist fee?

AK:

Yes.

SL:

You know, it's a big topic of course. We only pay artists when they ask for a fee.

AK:

I see. But you cover the production costs and all of the other things?

SL:

Yes, we give generous production money. Some artists really use the budget, and some artists work digitally or in non-object-based practices and just really need a fee. Others walk away with a new set of sculptures or works. I think every artist should get a fee, but the reality is that when it comes to making a show, often my focus and the focus of my artist friends is to put the money into the production. So, I'm always a little bit conflicted. But I'm also conflicted because myself and my co-curator, Elise Lammer, after all these years, we're still not paying ourselves.

AK:

That was my next question—if you actually get paid?

SL:

We don't, no.

AK:

So, you have to survive on your freelance work? And I'm assuming your rent is free?

SL:

It's very cheap. My colleague and I get paid through our external projects. It's not a justification, but perhaps explains that particular issue.

AK:

Yes, we understand.

TN:

Is SALTS just a two-person operation, or are there other staff members?

SL:

We're a little bit larger. We have three regular technicians who have been working with us from the beginning. For a couple of years, we've hired an external person who helps with fundraising, which is becoming increasingly important because there are so many funding channels that to properly feed. We have a board—we're an association and we have a couple people who are helping us in the background.

AK:

Is the board a financial board or are an advisory board? How do they function for you?

SL:

They're an advisory board.

TN:

You mentioned streams of funding, and that you get government funding. Is it city funding?

SL:

Funding-wise, we're around 75% funded from third-party funding including private foundations and government money.

AK:

Are there grant applications that you have to apply for?

SL:

Yes, and they're yearly. There are very few people that get money for a long period of time for smaller spaces like ours. For example, every three years the Nestlé Foundation of the Arts chooses 10 spaces to support. They give you a fixed amount for three years, but that's it, and you can never re-apply. But at least for three years, you know you have a certain amount of money.

AK:

Right.

SL:

Public and local funding ranges. There is the Swiss lottery fund, and the Swiss Arts Council, Pro Helvetia, which has been a big supporter since the beginning, and of course the canton itself, where we're based. Then, you have a whole range of private foundations that support us. So, it's between all these different sources.

AK:

That's a lot to be running after all of the time. Do you have a consistent operating budget?

SL:

Our operating budget is somewhere between \$150,000 and \$180,000 USD.

AK:

How many shows do you do a year?

SL:

We do between six and eight shows a year.

AK:

Oh, wow that's a lot.

SL:

For two or three years, we did 12 shows per year, but we reduced it to six or seven this year. For two or three years, we did 12 shows a year. We had five exhibition slots a year and we did three shows each time, and I still wonder at

times, why we were running such a mad program.

AK:

That's always the question!
You're not the only one to think
like that.

SL:

For a year and a half, we've really slowed down. Instead of having five opening times, we now have openings in spring, summer, and fall.

AK:

How far out do you plan? How far
out do you start a conversation
with an artist?

SL:

Not very far out. If we're asking someone a year ahead, that's a long time;
usually it's six months, and even shorter when we have a gap in the calendar.

AK:

But it gives you a lot of flexibility,
which is not what institutions
usually have.

SL:

For us, it's more the opposite problem. For certain funding bodies, you have to
submit a year and half before. We often find ourselves in a squeeze in the final
report, justifying things since our program will have changed so drastically
between submission and final result.

AK:

Do you apply for a project and
not necessarily for your general
operating expenses?

SL:

No, it's different. Sometimes it's for a yearly program, which is a problem if the
grant application is a year and half before. It's so unpredictable.

AK:

I totally understand; sometimes
the grant doesn't match up with

the institution or the project. We also have that problem.

LAUREL MCLAUGHLIN:

You had mentioned earlier that you do partnerships—are those partnerships part of the overall exhibition cycle? I know you have a relationship with Basement Roma and some other arts organizations internationally. How do those partnerships work, and how do they function within your funding?

SL:

It's different because it changes; sometimes you're not allowed to use certain funding anymore. You have to be careful. In April, we're hosting a biennale that takes place in Basel, and we cannot ask our usual funding bodies for support because the biennale organizers have already asked all the same organizations. So, we're hosting it, but we have to take it out of a different fund, or we would be crossing over into their funding. In regard to other partners, we started with a small group of partners like Basement Roma and then David Dale Gallery and Kunsthalle Lissabon, who run studio and exhibition programs similar to ours. We make a proper exchange, but then there are institutions that are near us and I appreciate, like the CRAC Alsace. It is just 35 minutes from us and it's actually a much bigger institution, but still, considering it's so close, it's less known than Basel. There are these institutions that are close by and that we can support. Sometimes it's a one-way invitation and not always an exchange, but we can give our platform for to a wide range of independent and institutionally linked curators.

LM:

That's great.

TN:

You started your project with younger artists and artists who were still early on in their careers. In some of the group shows, you've had artists like Louise Lawler. What are your criteria in selecting artists?

SL:

It's always the most interesting question and I always ask this to people as well. I haven't yet found someone who can give me a systematic answer.

TN:

Maybe it's not systematic?

SL:

I think, from today's perspective, SALTS is in a strong niche where artists exhibit before they get to a large institution like a kunsthalle. I think we're a smaller, leaner institutional version of a kunsthalle in terms of what you can do to present yourself as an artist. We often present the first solo show in Switzerland for an artist, or we show artists who have shown for several years but they're having a breakthrough moment. It's often right before their careers explode. This is the moment when we can actually show these artists because it might be too late later.

AK:

Right, before the funding gets too difficult. I'm curious how SALTS fits into the local ecology of Basel and to hear a little more about what hole it fills, knowing that there's the Kunsthalle Basel and Art Basel and a lot of other things going on in the city.

SL:

I feel like we belong to Basel's cultural landscape, even though technically we're not in Basel.

AK:

You're not that far though, right?

SL:

We're a stone's throw away. We're 50 yards from the border of Basel-Stadt, our neighboring canton, which means that we're not eligible for certain funding from the large city

AK:

Really?

SL:

There are some very large patrons of the arts in Basel. The biggest one is the Christoph Merian Stiftung, and they have in their statutes very clearly that they only support organizations in Basel and artists that are linked to the city.

AK:

So, being over the bridge disqualifies you for that?

SL:

Seriously. Every state, or canton, in Switzerland has different jurisdictions. There are national laws, but then cantons have their own laws. It's an intricate negotiation. Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft are two of the cantons that have worked very closely together with partnerships. You have to prove that you've gotten local support in your area before you ask the neighboring canton. For example, if I ask for funds from the Basel-Stadt Lottery Fund, I need to prove that I also got some money from the Swiss Lottery Fund in my own canton, or else they won't chip in.

AK:

It must have been a big learning curve when you began embarking on this.

SL:

It really was, and still is to this day. You're learning all the time. At this point, we can supply an exhibition production budget as large as a big kunsthalle, but of course our overhead costs are much lower. This is a really great way for artists to officially play outside of the limelight, so to speak. You have time to experiment. If you show at the Kunsthalle Basel for instance, there's enormous pressure to show in their historic location and to perform well. You have seven rooms and a lot of square meterage that you have to fill with a fairly small budget, considering the size, whereas here it's the opposite. It's a different ball game, with a different speed.

AK:

Because it is a different ball game, and a different environment, do you think there's a different audience that goes to your space versus the Kunsthalle Basel? Who would you say is your audience?

SL:

In a smaller art scene, there's of course a big crossover. Our space is still probably visited more by artists and curators. There's fewer collectors with heavy pockets coming to our space because they usually go to the big museums. Even though there are about 30 project spaces in Basel, we participate in dialogues together and we have projects together every year. In general, there are not many curator-run spaces in Switzerland outside of Basel.

AK:

Are there many artist-run spaces?

SL:

Yes, which makes sense, you know? Of course, the duration of these spaces is often very limited till one guy get too busy or one gets famous. The most famous artist/curator run space in recent years was certainly New Jersey, which was a huge, huge thing for Basel. It wasn't just an artist collective; it was guided by Daniel Baumann, who is now the director at Kunsthalle Zürich and four really great artists who invited young artists from New York and all over.

AK:

It was very hip.

SL:

That program was kind of staggering. I think the media realized what was happening in front of them. They completely redefined what it means to run an artist-run-space on such a high level. Then a few years ago, Nikola Dietrich, when she was the curator of the Contemporary Art Museum, along with a group of artist and curator friends started a project space adjacent to the museum called Helene, which was actually a very interesting concept. They got a lot of young people to come to their openings who could also redefine the museum itself.

AK:

Who do you think of as your peers? This can be within Switzerland and internationally and also conceptually. I'm also just thinking that Basel isn't that far from Zürich; the distance is less than where we are in

Philadelphia to New York. You can be on a train back and forth between the two cities fairly quickly.

SL:

For sure, but in Switzerland people are not used to traveling in the same way as people in the U.S. It's only now changing. If you were to tell your parents that you're having dinner in Zürich during a weekday, they would think you're crazy.

AK:

Really? I've totally done something like that before.

SL:

For two or three years when we first started the space here in Basel, we only had our Zürich crowd coming, because that was our network. It took us two and a half years to get the Basel crowd across the bridge because we weren't in Basel Stadt, you know? At first, it was a mental jump to have them realize, "Oh my gosh, this is only five minutes by bike." And now, a lot of the art schools have helped to break down the walls between these cities because artists are visiting each other from Basel to Bern to Lausanne to Zürich. Now if you have a show, there are artists coming from different cities in Switzerland. In regard to other spaces, I think funnily enough, I have colleagues that run very similar programs—like the Kunsthalle Lissabon, like the Basement Roma guys, or like the David Dale Gallery. They're spaces that really operate outside of the normal institutional setting. We all do these productions with young artists. There are a few spaces that we look at and have to laugh a bit since we've shown a lot of the same artists.

AK:

Right. You have a similar sensibility.

SL:

Yes, and I guess they're all smaller in scope with regard to what they offer. All these spaces that operate in big cities and have a very important voice in those cities because the next step up is already a bigger institution. It's especially daunting here in Basel with all of the cultural saturation. It takes quite a bit of courage to be doing what we're doing, because we're not really doing it for all of the potential audiences here.

AK:

I'm assuming there's a huge number of international tourists coming through the large museums. Do you get a lot of that spillover?

SL:

Yes, absolutely. We get good visitor numbers and we have entire school classes coming here. Of course, during Art Basel, we get major, major visitor numbers. But funnily enough, when city previews are listed by the likes of Frieze, we often get listed together with other strong institutions. It's quite funny to be in Top 10 lists together with the Kunstmuseum Basel, Fondation Beyeler, and then SALTS as the only project space

AK:

Since you brought up Art Basel, we were interested to hear about your work as the director of Parcours, and to think about that as another curatorial platform that might inform the work that you do at SALTS.

SL:

Parcours has been such an amazing platform for me because I can work in a small institutional platform in a courtyard, and then go to a major public park in the largest international platform there is in Switzerland.

AK:

Right, and you've been doing it for how long?

SL:

This is my fourth year.

AK:

And this is recurring?

SL:

Yes, it was limited to three years, but Art Basel just prolonged the contract, so they're happy with what I'm doing, and they'd like me to continue. This of course has really gotten much more attention for SALTS of course, and vice

versa. I was hired to do ParcourS because they liked what I did with artists on an individual level there. It has happened now a few times that someone I've shown at SALTS is showing at ParcourS two years afterwards, and it's obviously because of the relationship that we had.

Today, an exhibition career can be de-hierarchized. You used to have to take these slow steps to develop your career from working in a gallery to an institution to a museum. Now, I sometimes ask an artist to show at SALTS and they've already been asked to show at a kunsthalle at the same time. There's a 50/50 chance if they weren't asked by Kunsthalle Basel that they're asked to do a show here at SALTS. One year, they're doing a show here and the next year or two years later they have a gallery that wants to represent them, or their gallery wants to show them at ParcourS. It's kind of strange. On the one hand you have to be careful of the signals that it sends out, because you can also go too fast. The visibility in ParcourS is much, much larger on every level.

AK:

And the budget must be pretty good as well? How is ParcourS funded?

SL:

ParcourS is financed by the galleries.

AK:

Does it allow you to work with artists that you wouldn't normally work with at SALTS?

SL:

Yes, of course. That's my favorite part of it. I have a long list of artists I have long admired. Every year, I pull out my book and I'm like, "Oh we should do something with Jessica Stockholder, this is great." Or someone like Mark Manders, who I've been a fan of for 20 years. I really treat ParcourS as an event, an exhibition platform, for all generations of artists. It's meant to be for all artists and all audiences. For me, it's important that there are emerging artists and a couple stars in there. There has to be a whole range for it to work as a city experience. It's really happening outside the fair in the city and people stroll around in a different context and they get to know the city. Maybe for us they're older, established artists, but for a general audience, they might not be known.

AK:

It's interesting though that you're dividing your curatorial work between SALTS and the artists that you would love to work with who are appropriate for that context, but then you get to flex different muscles with Parcours. It's lovely that you have multiple platforms.

SL:

Totally. Even when I curate outside of SALTS I usually curate with very young artists. It's just what I do. Parcours is a wonderful exception for me because it's a constellation of the gallery and the city hosting the project, and it's the combination of energies. That's very special. The past few years I've tried to get as many artists as possible to do site visits ahead of time, so the project also changes. Normally, it's up to me as a curator to suggest a location, and then the artist comes over and we make the final decision together. It's made Parcours deeper in many ways, especially in choosing the location together so that the work doesn't just become décor. That's the biggest thing that some artists and gallerists don't understand. They think "Oh, it's sculpture, it will look great." But it can be so much more. So, every year I try to change the angle. For people who don't know it, they think of it as an outdoor sculpture project and they'll tell me things like, "Well, we don't really show outdoor sculpture." But last year we had 19 indoor projects and only three sculptures outdoors, and we almost did the entire Parcours indoors in private houses, in city buildings, in public, civic places.

AK:

Great.

SL:

I try to play with the platform that I'm given. It's much more than public space. Basically, all of these spaces are semi-private to private and public. There is a thin political line between them all.

AK:

Many of the institutions we've spoken to are celebrating or will soon be celebrating their 10-year anniversaries, and it's interesting to look back on the

2008 financial crisis and how it mobilized many of these spaces. Here you are 10 years later and I'm curious, where do you want to go as an institution? Do you want to grow, or do you have a good sense of what the rhythm is? Do you anticipate change?

SL:

I anticipate change, yes. I think we're too small and too young to just keep doing what we're doing, because you develop a formula and things fall into place and it's easy to get comfortable. It's easy to stop surprising your audience and people get used to the fact that you're doing 10 shows a year. For me, that urge is subsiding.

AK:

You're not the new kid on the block anymore. But there's also questions of exhaustion to consider.

SL:

Exactly. I think museums and other institutions are completely different in terms of their mission statements. The idea of an institution with a reoccurring set of qualities that repeats itself has to allow for change. With some places like the kunsthallen, there's this wish to go rural, and even though we're technically in the countryside here, there's a wish to expand SALTS into long-term residencies and develop projects with more time and more seclusion. These days, as you know, every artist is in such a rush. They're at your place and suddenly they can hardly focus on your show until they've catered to the next two they are already organizing.

The high-speed at which everyone is working is something that needs to be adjusted. This is why so many residencies these days have artists sign and confirm that they'll be at the residency for at least 70% of the time, because so many people agree to participate to residencies and then they're never actually there! It happens in the States, in Europe. We have these wonderful residencies with crazy application processes, you finally get in, everyone is jealous, and then a few years later, you hear the artists complaining that they were hardly there because they had other commitments. On the other hand, what can you do? You don't want to stop anyone from pursuing their career. How can you set up a program where people can and want to stay longer?

AK:

It's interesting because we've had a lot of conversations with people about growth and scale. What does it mean to grow as an institution? Does it mean growing your footprint and doing more, or does it mean this kind of reconfiguration that you're talking about? It's really interesting to hear that you dream about relocating to the countryside and slowing down. Is that a shift that you're anticipating in the near future?

SL:

I think so, yes. It all depends. At the end of the day, you have to be honest with how much a project costs you personally—both energy-wise and financially. We choose to run this place very uncanonically and that's the nice thing about it. But if I were to live somewhere else without subsidized rent, and if I didn't have a guy who helps with construction—if all of these things were to go away, it could all just fall apart. I would have to reduce every show from about 15,000 Swiss Francs to 5,000 Swiss Francs because otherwise, we couldn't cover the rest. And then where do you end up?

With these self-initiatives, there's always one point where you either have to step up and get really institutionalized, which we could do—I'm speaking with the state and I'm speaking with the city. If the exercise was continued without me, what would that mean? It would mean that all employees have to be paid, rent has to be paid, and then all of a sudden, you're stepping from a 250,000 Swiss Francs per year expense sheet to a 500,000 or 600,000 Swiss Francs per year, if you really want to do it. Then you have to submit yourself to another level of due diligence checks, by your donors and funding bodies.

TN:

And then, at what point does it stop being SALTS and it becomes something different?

SL:

Exactly, it becomes something different. People can start new projects thinking, “This was a good 10-year run, let’s start something new.” But at the same time, you’ve put in a lot of blood and sweat to build a brand, so to speak.

AK:

Sure.

SL:

Why not adapt to new models instead of just completely restarting everything?

AK:

Right, because who’s to say that institutions can’t evolve and grow and change over time into other kinds of new structures? Or grow with you?

SL:

Yes, I mean it’s an exciting moment because I think a lot of colleagues are turning 10 and it’s funny, depending who you speak to, we think “Jesus, we’re getting old.” We used to call our space a place for young emerging artists and we considered ourselves young, but 10 years later we’re not that young anymore. Of course, when you speak to museum people and colleagues in the city they laugh at you and say, “Oh, 10 years! We’re celebrating our 100th or 120th anniversary! What’s your vision for the next 20 years?” The perspective on time is totally different depending where you work.

AK:

Museums are also shaped by the individuals that work in them, but not in the way that SALTS is tied to you for instance. So, your 10 years with SALTS is in relation to your own lifespan and personal life. That’s one of the questions that we’re really interested in with smaller spaces that have a foundational vision—how much is SALTS dependent on you as an individual and would you ever want SALTS to be extracted from

that? Could SALTS ever exist independently of you?

SL:

Yes and no. If all the players that would have to be able to play along, play along, it could become its own thing.

AK:

Would you want that?

SL:

Yes, that's the question.

AK:

Does it need to have this symbiotic relationship with your own curatorial desires?

SL:

It would of course be a totally different space.

AK:

Totally.

SL:

On the one hand, it's very tempting to think what would happen if we became something else. Now, again, to look at our colleagues at the Kunsthalle Lissabon, they decided to pull back and think for a year and invite friends to take over their program and see what happens. It would be interesting to make an open call for a space and to see who would actually apply. It would be very interesting to see what would actually come in.

AK:

Yes, and along those lines, RAW Material Company reconfigured from an exhibition platform to an Académie format. They've also had a kind of similar shift in the way that they've grown as an institution.

SL:

I think it's interesting not to kill things too quickly. There was a time when I always said no to external exhibitions requests for SALTS. There was this moment when a lot of art fairs invited us to exhibit somewhere in the gallery sector. And I made a point of saying no because every project far away is energy missing back home. I think there's a big difference between artist-run and curator-run spaces. For a lot of colleagues who ran spaces as artists, when they say yes to an external event, it is an extra networking platform for them personally as artists as well. It's a different motivation to do this. I always thought it was important, the non-nomadic aspect of a space and sticking with the site, actually really playing that card out as long as you can and seeing what happens. The trend has been for many years: "Oh, I'm going to open a space and run it for three years." And I thought, "Why did you already decide that you're going to run it only for three years?" That's very common, to limit yourself just in case something doesn't work out as planned. It's a bizarre phenomenon.

AK:

I love that you're originally from Basel and you can interact with it in a very different way through the work that you do at Art Basel and at SALTS. It must create a different relationship to the space.

TN:

Do you personally feel like you're fully institutionalized as SALTS?
Do you think of yourselves as an institution, or a project space?

SL:

I do think of SALTS as a mini-institution, yes. In a modest way I say mini-institution, but we have been institutionalized to a certain degree. At first, we were a salon, then the fad was to call everything non-commercial an "off-space"—which to me is a non-word, because it means nothing really. Then, everybody started calling themselves a "non-for-profit space," until they got criticized for calling themselves that because even kunsthallen and other spaces facilitate sales if someone walks in and wants to buy something. It's interesting to see these terminologies floating around. But if I really look up the word "institution" and the idea of consistently providing a certain quality, in that context I consider us an institution. And it feels good that people want

to show here, and that people want to invest their time here.

The last thing I wanted to add is an interesting detail. First and foremost, I run SALTS for the artists, in the sense that my biggest concern is that they walk away with a project that helps them grow. I'm less concerned about the press we get and the visitor numbers—and this is a great liberation because so many institutions need to get those two things in order to keep their funding coming in and all that stuff. And I think when we do a show with certain artists and see where they go afterwards, this is the best feeling.
