

My Art Guides

Interviews

The new Basel H. Geiger Cultural Foundation: an interview with Director Raphael Suter

by Mara Sartore

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The Basel H. Geiger Cultural Foundation was founded in 2019 by artist and philanthropist Sibylle Piermattei-Geiger (1930–2020) and her husband Rocco Piermattei-Geiger. Sibylle Piermattei-Geiger passed away in July leaving an important legacy behind her. Could you tell us more about this and Sibylle Piermattei-Geiger, why she and her husband were so driven to create the Foundation and about her vision?

It was of course a great pity and a shock when she left us on July 15, 2020. Over the last few years we had many discussions about her idea for this foundation and of showing exhibitions in Basel. I think I understood her intentions quite well, as she did something similar in Italy, in Cecina. She wanted to open exhibitions to large groups of interested people, families, art lovers, not only to a cultural elite. She also wanted to offer free catalogues to visitors, her idea was that exhibitions should be impressive and then visitors should be able to bring the exhibition home with them, to have the possibility to reflect on what they've seen.

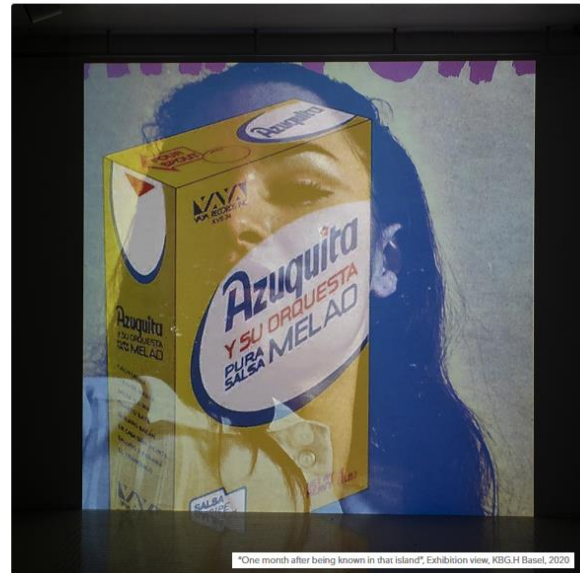
KBH.G is opening in Basel in a challenging year for the art world and cultural events in general, with a very ambitious exhibition focusing on Caribbean artists, who until now have been left out of the art scene limelight, could you tell us how this project came about and what were the most challenging aspects of the show?

My Art Guides

I worked as a cultural journalist for Basler Zeitung, there I had the opportunity to visit the Dominican Republic for the opening of the Atelier House, which was built and founded by Davidoff, who at the time was one of the main sponsors of Art Basel. I was left very impressed by the Caribbean art and its artists, of which I had no prior knowledge. After that, Davidoff changed its strategy and gave the Atelier to the Dominican Republic to create a school. Later on I met Albertine Kopp (formerly director of Davidoff Art Initiative) and she was struggling with finding sponsorship to keep supporting Dominican artists and she did not want to disappoint them. I was very impressed by her drive, I had the opportunity with a foundation in Basel to finance the exhibition and also the catalogue here in Basel, it was a great chance to give continuity to the initiative, under a new name: the Caribbean art initiative.



Curators Yina Jiménez Sutil and Pablo Guardiola, Albertine Kopp and Raphael Suter



*One month after being known in that island". Exhibition view, KBG.H Basel, 2020

Basel is a small but active city, you have been a key figure in the city for a long time, first editor in chief then director of the Cultural Editorial Office at Basler Zeitung. In your opinion how do the city's institutions interact and what role will the new KBH.G play here? Have you initiated a dialogue with the cultural community?

I think it's possible to create a dialogue for our foundation because we are independent. For me it is very important to create and initiate conversations and collaborations here in Basel, I have met a lot of people from the cultural community here. There are big institutions like the Foundation Beyeler, the Kunstmuseum, commercial galleries here in town but we have no intentions to compete with them, we just want to show art at a different level, with our own identity. Of course, I would love to collaborate with the Basel institutions, including cinemas, music festivals, events – to engage in transversal collaborations to broaden our horizons on the cultural scene.

My Art Guides

Sibylle and Rocco spent quite a large part of their lives in Tuscany where they founded the Fondazione Culturale Hermann Geiger in Cecina in 2009. How do the two foundations relate and differ? Are there any plans to collaborate in the future?

The Cecina foundation is now closed and we are not going to reopen it. We are taking over the building, as Sybille left not only all the money she had but also all her real estate to the foundation, we would like to organise an exhibition in memory of Sybille next Spring in Cecina.



After one month being known in that island" just opened yesterday, 27th of August 2020 this will remain an important date in the history for the Foundations, what are your plans for the future and how do you foresee the development of this new art institution?

The next upcoming exhibition will feature one of Basel's important private collection including works by Picasso, my idea is that we exhibit every year or every second year a private collection, as there are some incredible private collections here in Basel which have never been shown to the public. Collectors are keen to show their collections within an independent institution such as ours, as we have no commercial purpose; they also seem happy to produce a catalogue which is good for their collection.

In Spring we will have an exhibition by Klaus Littmann (For Forest) who is bringing a temporary installation dealing with nature. In Summer we are showing another show by Basel based artists Admir Jahic and Comenius Roethlisberger, who created "ARTISTS' RECIPES", the artists' cookbook with recipes and illustrations by international artists. They now have a similar project with 100 or so artists all over the world, focusing on music and memories - they give a music title to each artist and the artist produces their response. This kind of global artistic exchange is very important and interesting especially during the era we are living in, the show will be accompanied by an extensive music programme with DJs and live music.

My Art Guides

Will the collaboration with Caribbean art initiative continue after this exhibition?

No, we would like to support the initiative to show the show, or parts of it in the Caribbean as it is a pity that many people couldn't come. To me it's important that people understand that the KBGH institution is not a space dedicated to Caribbean art only, I think that happened in Miami last December when we started to communicate this project, many people got the wrong message and thought this was the first space in Europe dedicated to Caribbean art and that's not true!

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Raphael Suter
Director