

In the spring of 2016, Thomas Baldischwyler got a call from the office of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture. The caller underscored the need for absolute discretion until the winner of the Rome Prize would be officially announced. But Baldischwyler couldn't resist the temptation to post a coded statement on Facebook, and so he chose a line from Thomas Bernhard's "Extinction": "Standing at the open window, I said to myself, I'm here to stay, nothing will make me leave." Rome—the exile of Bernhard's protagonist Franz-Josef Murau was also the writer's own exile. And he wouldn't have traded it for any place in the world. Arriving in Rome in September 2017, Baldischwyler soon doubted that he would stay for long. His original project (the idea was to draw a connection between the story of how the Italian entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi went into politics in the early 1990s and two dystopian techno records that the Roman producers Leo Anibaldi and Lory D released in 1993, examining the economic foundations of creative practices in light of their substantive concerns and vice versa) collided with the unfolding sociocultural crisis in Italy. The country seemed utterly paralyzed before the upcoming elections. There was nothing people were less keen on than talking about their fairly recent past. One bright spot: the freelance curator Pier Paolo Pancotto was interested in Baldischwyler's record label Travel By Goods and invited him to perform a sort of avant-garde DJ set together with a couple of Italian artists at the Villa Medici. That was how he met the Rome-based artist Nicola Pecoraro, who had studied in London and now lives in Vienna. Pecoraro and Baldischwyler had launched their careers around the same time. For the exhibition, he explicitly asked him for a painted head from an artist's edition that the Swiss publisher Nieves had brought out in 2008 (not long after Apple introduced the iPhone). In Baldischwyler's eyes, Pecoraro was a phenomenon: defying the odds, he'd launched a series of attempts to bring international discourses to Rome. His journalism for the now defunct print magazine Nero, in particular, had for the most part been outstanding writing for a readership of one. No wonder, then, that whereas Bernhard had moved south in search of a happier life, Pecoraro felt drawn in the opposite direction. The conservative postwar Austria of the 1960s that Bernhard (like Ingeborg Bachmann) perceived as a dark prison looks like an ideal place to an Italian artist in 2018, despite the right-wing conservative government. "We have to leave," people kept telling Baldischwyler, from Venice to Palermo. In this sort of situation, it's interesting to see why someone is staying. Soon after an event at Villa Massimo, a gallery owner introduced him to Nico Vascellari. Like Pecoraro and Baldischwyler, Vascellari was born in the mid-1970s. Starting in 2008, he ran the club Codalunga in his hometown of Vittorio Veneto near Venice, organizing concerts, performances, and exhibitions by international artists. Remarkably, the venue, although located in the middle of nowhere, attracted idealists from all over Italy. It now exists only as a catalogue—Vascellari has joined his wife in Rome and mostly works as an eclectic visual artist and performer. When he and Baldischwyler were in closer contact, he was designing a collection for Fendi; had a major solo exhibition at the MAXXI, a museum in Rome, a show that presumably wouldn't have been possible without the fashion house's sponsorship; and joined the band Ninos du Brasil to perform for his friend Karl Lagerfeld at the party after a Chanel runway show at the fish auction hall in Hamburg. Museums in Italy used to be underfunded, but since the last election, the situation has only grown worse, and it makes sense that the fashion industry has emerged as the most promising source of funding support. Compared to other Italian industries, it still seems to be doing extraordinarily well. Italy accounts for 41 percent of the total production of fabrics and accessories in Europe; the country is the world's second-largest manufacturer, after China, with Italian companies, unlike their Far Eastern competitors, focusing on the luxury segment. In Germany, the arrangement might have earned Vascellari accusations of selling out, but not so in Italy. The work at Codalunga remains the central pillar of his moral credibility, and when he sells a T-shirt labeled "Dream / Merda," as he did late last year, that only seems to solidify his status. There's no work by Vascellari in the exhibition, only a photographic piece by Baldischwyler titled "Geisterbahn für Geldautomaten" ("Ghost Train for ATMs") that shows the Canadian industrial music project Prurient's performance during the opening party at the MAXXI in Rome. There's also no work by the Spanish artist Coco Capitán. Gucci is for her what Fendi is for Vascellari. She started early on to make photobooks with the creative director Alessandro Michele, draws text pictures (which Gucci printed on outerwear in the 17/18 collection; they were published as a photo spread that ran in the British magazine *Dust* and is on view here),

and now has solo shows in major Chinese museums. As Baldischwyler sees it, these examples illustrate that the notion of the “local artist” has taken on a new meaning. A corporate culture is developing that exists like a world unto itself, a program for a minority audience unconnected to the general discourse. The corporation (and, primarily for its reach, the corporate Instagram account) is its venue, and identifying a cultural canon is becoming more and more difficult. Capitán, in fact, isn’t even sure that she would call herself an artist. She just makes stuff and then lets others figure out the right terms to describe it. Similarly, the Chinese artist Wong Ping, who has just opened his first major institutional solo show at Kunsthalle Basel, responded to every question the journalist Kolja Reichert asked him by saying that he had no plan at all, not for his work and not for his life. He had not the faintest clue what the art world was about, he added; he didn’t get its rules and fabricated assertions. At one point, MTV had contacted him out of the blue to commission one of his video clips, then Prada had done the same thing, and then the Guggenheim Museum in New York, which he’d never heard of, so his first thought had been: funny name. One person who had never heard of the Villa Massimo was Wolfgang Voigt. Voigt has been active as a musician and visual artist since the 1980s. Without a degree in either field, he became a techno star in the 1990s and is now friends with Albert Oehlen and an entrepreneur (the Kompakt label and distributor in Cologne) who tours the institutions and festivals with his ambient project GAS. In Rome, Baldischwyler was allowed to invite a series of guest speakers, and he didn’t have to think twice about putting Voigt on the list, whose life story and business model are without equal. Voigt was a little puzzled at first but then agreed. A fortunate coincidence made it possible to invite him together with Hans-Jürgen Hafner, a currently unaffiliated curator who had been director of the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf for what felt like forever. Baldischwyler prepared various performative interludes for their conversation at Villa Massimo, and the show at Conradi includes a six-minute clip in which Voigt talks about the years between 1998 and 2008. In 2008, the Red Bull Music Academy invited Voigt to Barcelona for an interview. Mense Reents, a Hamburg-based musician who had been a member of Ego Express and other formations and now plays with the Goldenen Zitronen, found a recording of the interview on YouTube. For a new piece produced by his band Die Vögel (with Jakobus Siebels), Reents used the audio from the documentary footage. An early version of the track included much more of the conversation; in the end, all that was left is the sentence “So where is the emotional side in this kind of music?”. At one point in the interview, Voigt mentions that there are tracks in electronic music without a kick or bass drum, saying that such a track is one in 10,000. That gave Die Vögel the title for their piece; an exclusive preview of the video, by Timo Schierhorn, can be seen in the exhibition. Baldischwyler recognized a fortuitous linkage in the appropriation. In 2018, he was invited to a Red Bull Talk at Schwarzes Café, a space designed by Heimo Zobernig at the Luma Foundation’s Westbau in Zurich. The event was produced by the Swiss print magazine zweikommasieben and held in cooperation with the Red Bull Festival. Dietrich Mateschitz, the managing director and co-owner of Red Bull GmbH, the Austrian manufacturer of the drink, had recently made headlines with xenophobic remarks, attracting the attention of journalists, who then uncovered how much money the company patriarch was funneling into promoting reactionary ideologies. Baldischwyler’s Swiss partners had brought the awkward situation to his attention before the event. He tried to discuss the pros and cons of accepting the invitation with his friends in the orbit of Hamburg’s Golden Pudel Club, where, the previous fall, a controversy had erupted because many of the British DJs who had regular gigs there suddenly came out in favor of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement, whereas the Pudel Club has a strict policy against anti-Semitism. Baldischwyler’s friends were evenly split between encouraging and warning him. In the end, he decided to participate in the event in Zurich and try to speak about the absurd economic premises of art-marking in late capitalism. A collage combining the English introduction by a member of zweikommasieben’s editorial team with a documentary photograph by Lendita Kashtanjeva is on view in the gallery. In his talk, Baldischwyler also discussed a work of public art he’d realized in 2016: from January 2017 until the spring of 2018, an oversized copy of the front page of the May 14, 1976, issue of the tabloid BILD graced the façade of a building on Hamburg’s Schulterblatt. As clouds of tear gas filled the street during the protests against the policies of the G20 states in the summer of 2017, the huge poster was a reminder of a major printers’ strike more than four decades earlier, in 1976, and of how BILD and other outlets owned by Axel Springer had sought to discredit protest in general. The exhibition includes sections of the piece—the original work covered more than 100 square meters—on stretcher frames.

The printers' strike, which heralded the end of the period of "concerted action," or coordination between state, employers, and unions in West Germany, also figures in Baldischwyler's personal history: his father, Hans-Jürgen Oebbeke, was a typesetter by training who, when the early stages of digitization made his trade redundant—the ultimate cause of the 1976 strike—enrolled to study photography at Fachhochschule Bielefeld, then already a school of some renown. His first work, in 1975, was a series of pictures taken at his old workplace. One of them is on view in the exhibition not far from the poster sections. The sense of uncertainty and dissonance due to the economic situation had been the central issue in Baldischwyler's conversation with Alberto Guerrini at the techno club Ex Dogana in Rome, where Guerrini had a regular gig. Baldischwyler had long been a fan of Guerrini's blog "Gabber Eleganza," the fruit of his extensive research on the youth movement Gabber, which was born in Rotterdam in the early 1990s and spread around the world, spawning numerous sub-genres. Shortly before his departure from Rome, Baldischwyler received an email from Guerrini, who had noticed that Baldischwyler had filmed a reportage on the band Ilsa Gold in May 2011 and so presumably had contact information for the Austrian artist Peter Votava. Votava had recorded with the Antwerp-based transgender activist Liza'n'Eliaz in the 1990s. Guerrini wanted to write about Liza'n'Eliaz, who had died in 2011. Coincidentally, two friends of Baldischwyler's, Florian Meyer and Lotte Effinger (members of the Sexes artists' group), were preparing a work about Liza'n'Eliaz in Brussels. An exhibit related to the piece is included in the show. In 1968, the writers Peter Chotjewitz, Hubert Fichte, and Ernst Jünger were guests at Villa Massimo at the same time. Chotjewitz, better known as Andreas Baader's lawyer and best friend, tried to instigate political discussions but, according to Fichte's recollections, mostly turned out to be an annoying and conceited petit bourgeois. Fichte severely chafed under the structures of life at the villa and, after doing a photography piece on the Spanish Steps with Leonore Mau, soon took off for Morocco. Jünger was editing his book on intoxication and spent most of his time apathetically wandering the ruins. If this cultural-ideological confusion feels both near and very distant now, it is with a similar sense that one considers the platonic relationship between the Austrian lyric poet Ingeborg Bachmann and the future U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. More on this in the attached letter from Baldischwyler to the collector Giuseppe Garrera on his idea for an installation at the "Vetrina"—a glass display case at the end of Via Giulia, Rome, where Garrera and his brother feature visual art. He'd been introduced to Garrera by Max Renkel, with whom he'd struck up an acquaintance in a shop selling fine-art photography catalogues in Rome's centro storico. Renkel, a native of Munich, had studied at Hamburg's University of Fine Arts (HfbK) quite a while ago and decided early on to move to Italy, where he settled down in Rome. He has a vast collection of artists' publications, works on his painting, and builds objects such as the iPhone and iPad replicas on display. In Rome, Baldischwyler read the transcripts of the radio reports that Bachmann had written for the Austrian public broadcaster at irregular intervals. A friend recommended Bachmann's story "Undine Goes," where the writer uses "Hans" as a name for all men. Her riposte in an interview that she, too, was Hans reminded him of Hubert Fichte's skipping back and forth between the personae of Jäcki and Detlev. When Baldischwyler got his hands on Johanna Maxl's book "Unser großes Album elektrischer Tage," he recognized a contemporary extension of the same method. In the past, Maxl had presented much of her literary writing in inter-media settings, in performances or art installations. She and the visual artist Jakub Šimčik direct the interdisciplinary platform Initiative Wort & Bild. A graduate of the Deutsches Literaturinstitut, she's now a master's student in the inter-media class at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig. In the book, Maxl's protagonists are looking for a Johanna. It remains unclear: is it the author herself that her characters are desperately searching for, or are they actually trying to find themselves? As Baldischwyler sees it, the text ideally complements the exhibits in the show—all of which attest to the baffling and impenetrable nature of today's economies. In October, Baldischwyler was invited to give a lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. He chose to open with the book "Ich schreibe mein Herz in den Staub der Straße" by George Forestier. According to his official biography, Forestier was born in Rouffach, Alsace. He volunteered for the Waffen-SS in 1941 and fought in the battles of Vyazma, Voronezh, and Oryol during the German war against the Soviet Union. After a brief stint in American war imprisonment in 1945, he was released to France, where he was sentenced for collaboration and lived in Marseille under an assumed identity. Tracked down by the police in 1948, he chose to join the Foreign Legion rather than serve his sentence and was shipped off to French Indochina, where he was detailed to a

forward post and considered missed in action after the battles over the Song-Woi in November 1951. In reality, Forestier was Karl Emerich Krämer, the editor at a small publishing house in Düsseldorf. When the hoax was exposed, it was a huge literary scandal that rocked postwar Germany. In his talk, Baldischwyler started from the premise that everything is constructed nowadays, that any life story is a cut-and-paste job – though he didn't necessarily see anything wrong with that. Later, he found out that he'd been asked to speak as a replacement for the Austrian painter Elke Krystufek. He'd known about Krystufek's work since the mid-1990s. In 1994, she'd been invited to participate in a group exhibition at Wiener Kunsthalle, Vienna, with an international partner of her choice. She chose the music producer Kim Fowley, whom Baldischwyler also admired very much at the time. Fowley was tied up with other business, so she just shot a video of him in New York; her other contribution to the exhibition was a solo performance during the show's opening in which she appeared in a bathroom installation and masturbated in front of the audience. For the exhibition at Galerie Conradi, Baldischwyler asked her for a 1995 work that combines a portrait of Edie Sedgwick of short-lived Warhol-muse fame with a very personal text by Krystufek. Both Wolfgang Voigt, in his talk, and Coco Capitán, in an interview, mentioned Warhol's factory as an important reference. What may have looked like a libertarian community founded on the spirit of mutual support was actually a radically market-oriented production facility, a machine that served Warhol's purposes, and in a certain sense, Edie, who was addicted to heroin and died in 1971, was one of its victims. As it happened, an old regular from the bar where Baldischwyler had worked for most of the 2000s was on his way to a rehab center when he called in December. Heiko Dupke is a jack of all trades who got tripped up by prescription medication. He contacted Baldischwyler because he'd bought a supply of canvases, planning to paint while in therapy, and couldn't think of any suitable titles. The first phrase that came to Baldischwyler's mind was "Ghost Train for ATMs." He asked Dupke to paint the picture as a matching piece to accompany the documentary photograph from Prurient's performance at MAXXI in Rome. And now both appear side by side. The Hamburg-based artists' group Supinice (Valerie von Könemann & Jil Lahr) only just completed their studies. If they were older, they would surely have been regulars as well at that bar where Baldischwyler worked before he made being an artist his main profession. Lahr now sometimes helps out at the Golden Pudel Club, and it was there that, shortly after his return from Vienna, she showed him pictures on her iPhone of an exhibition and performance at Künstlerhaus Wendenstraße. Baldischwyler very much regretted that he'd missed the great installation. It consisted in part of elaborately batik-dyed and silkscreen-printed T-shirts in modified pizza cartons. He asked Lahr to come to the event where he would receive the Edwin Scharff Prize. Unfortunately, she didn't have the time to interrupt Senator of Culture Brosda's welcome address by presenting him with the T-shirt in a pizza carton. That's how Baldischwyler didn't get the last work for his final presentation in hand until after New Year's Eve. Lahr asked him for a photograph, and so, in the first week of January, he drove to Versailles, where he took his own picture in the Hall of Mirrors at night, with his friend Thomas Jeppe, who lives in Paris, holding the flashlight. Anything less just wouldn't have done.