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Marc-Olivier Wahler
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LOS ANGELES — The Swiss-born and Paris-based curator **Marc-Olivier Wahler**, previously director of **Palais de Tokyo**, has been spending much of his time in Los Angeles these days. His latest exhibition “LOST (in LA)” opened at the **Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery** at Barnsdall Park on December 1 and, after a quick trip to Miami to host a yodeling contest for **Art Basel Miami Beach**, he has returned to L.A. to prepare for “From Triple X to Birdsong (In Search of the Schizophrenic Quotient),” a group show opening at **Kayne Griffin Corcoran** on January 12. The curator is also developing the L.A. chapter of his Parisian experimental art space Chalet Society. Wahler sat down with **ARTINFO**’s Yasmine Mohseni at the “LOST (in LA)” exhibition to discuss L.A., Paris and taco trucks.

Where are you staying in Los Angeles and where have you had your favorite meal?

Right now, we’re staying in Mount Washington. I’ve eaten a lot at a great little Thai place, but that’s because it’s near Barnsdall Park. I had the most amazing food at a taco truck in Pacific Palisades.

Tell me about “LOST (in LA)” and how you got involved.

It started as a conversation with Elisabeth Forney [Executive Director of France Los Angeles Exchange]. She wanted to organize an exhibition of French and Los Angeles artists. I came up with this idea of [an exhibition loosely inspired by the television series] “Lost.”

Do you typically curate theme show?

No, I never do theme shows. For me, they are boring because they explain what is at stake with the theme. A good exhibition is when you have the answer on the tip of your tongue. You know the answer is somewhere but you keep searching. If you have the answer then what’s the point?

Why “Lost”?

I came to L.A., we were searching for spaces and I was talking to French and LA artists about TV series. It’s obvious that “Twin Peaks” was *the* influential TV series of the ’90s, so we were talking about influential TV series today. A lot of artists talked about “Lost,” not as the most influential but [as a show that] both impressed and frustrated them. They were impressed by the multiple layers of time and space and how they were interlaced together, but at the same time they were saying, ‘If only we could find the formal link that unites it.’ The show is more about the missing link. It was assumed from the start that it’s impossible to find this missing link, but as with any show I’m doing, it’s always about the search for something.

Was all the contemporary work made especially for this exhibition?

Not all, there are some works which already existed, like the Michel Blazy [*Fontaine de Mousse (Foam Fountain)*, 2007], the small paintings by Philippe Mayaux [“Idoles and Paintings Series,” 2012] or the Alexandre Singh [*Assembly Instructions (The Pledge: Michel Gondry)*, 2012] from a series I started at Palais de Tokyo. Vincent Ganivet, Vincent Lamouroux, Nathan Hylden and Dewar & Gicquel [all created new work].

How did you select and lay out the work?

The way I organize a show is always dictated by the space, everything is organic. The space is kind of special here. It’s influenced, for the good and not so good, by Frank Lloyd Wright [whose Hollyhock House, 1921, is also in Barnsdall Park]. I see the space and I immediately see some works that should go in it. The challenge with the ceiling is that it has two different heights, so I imagined asking Vincent Lamouroux [*Milieu*, 2012] to create this kind of undulating ceiling that would bind the architecture and the works together. And then came this idea of the work by Vincent Ganivet [*Wheels, Los Angeles Issue*, 2012], two wheels that distribute the space. The Ganivet structure with these cinder blocks recalls the [Wright-influenced] architecture of the columns. But it’s not like I said, “Oh, I see the columns and I think about it in [Ganivet’s] work.” Everything happened a little bit by chance. It’s always difficult to write a curator’s statement or press release because I don’t know. I should be able to write it two weeks after the show opens because until the last minute, I still don’t know what it will be.

How did you select the L.A. artists?

I was thinking about all these great L.A. artists like Robert Gober and Charles Ray, but they were in Pacific Standard Time, and I wanted to show artists who were not: like Robert Watts [*New Light on West Africa*, 1976], Robert Overby [*Concrete Screen Doors (Plaster Cast)*, 1970-1971] or Robert Kinmont [*My Favorite Dirt Roads*, 1969/2008]. Jim Shaw [*Dream Object*, 2012 and *Dream Object*, 2004] and Marnie Weber [*Picnic Pig Scarecrow*, 2011] were happy to show these pieces because they haven't been shown in L.A. before. And Mike Kelley [*Bridge Visitor*, 2004], he's everywhere but it's an homage, that's why his piece is a little outside of the exhibition, like a prologue.

What was your curatorial process for “From Triple X to Birdsong (In Search of the Schizophrenic Quotient),” your upcoming show at Kayne Griffin Corcoran?

I was talking to Maggie [Kayne], we met in Basel this year, and I was showing her pieces I like by Francois Morellet and Ugo Rondinone. The show started with Morellet's Triple X piece then came Ugo Rondinone and Carol Bove. Then, I saw the space and I thought Oscar Tuazon should be in this place, Charlotte Posenenske should be there and we need the John McCracken mirror piece. Then I saw a place [in the gallery] that is perfect for one of the best and major pieces by Tatiana Trouvé, which has never been shown in Los Angeles, [*350 Points Towards Infinity*, 2009].

How has the L.A. art scene influenced you as a curator?

It's the dream here; all the best artists are here. Mike Kelley is the best reference, he did the best show I've ever seen as a curator: “The Uncanny” show. I was in Vienna for another project and stepped into the exhibition at the Mumok, and I stayed for I don't know how many hours. I left the show and thought, “Okay, he made the show I always wanted to do, I can quit and do something else.” I could never go as far as he went.

What about this show impacted you?

The freedom of putting things together from baseball vignettes and medical research tools to Christian art of the Middle Ages and minimalist art; it was so well done, everything made sense. It made me realize how talented he was in mixing the high and low — this is quite important, especially nowadays. Artists in L.A. are better at doing this than elsewhere. If you think about Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw and Marnie Weber, these artists take popular culture and mix it with minimal art, which you find elsewhere, but here it's embedded in the culture.

How have you found the artistic environment in Los Angeles versus Paris?

Things have changed for young artists in France over the past 6 or 7 years. The new generation of 25 to 35 year olds has different references, and they're totally international. Before, a French artist would go to a residency in New York only to come back stronger but always with the idea of having a career in France. I advise artists — and most of them already have this idea [before I suggest it] — that it's not always good for their first gallery to be French. It could be a German gallery or British or American to start with, because then they go to Berlin, London or New York. Here, a lot of young artists from New York are coming here because it's a better to work. I think the best thing for an artist is to make it in New York, have a gallery in [New York] and then come to Los Angeles to work, but always keeping the New York gallery to do the [market] work.

How have you found the private collections in L.A.?

The market puts pressure on what the collectors want but here there's more freedom. [But] I have to say that I've visited a lot of collections here and, of course, there are exceptions like Blake Byrne and some others, but I was surprised to see that most of the collectors [in Los Angeles] collect the same works.

When can we expect to see Chalet Society arrive in L.A.?

I feel like it's better for Piero Golia to talk about it. I created Chalet Society in Paris [in October 2012] and I'm going to do something else in Berlin and Beirut. I started a conversation with Piero about a Chalet Hollywood and he is very enthusiastic – I feel like it's now his project in a way.

Okay, fair enough. So, what is Chalet Society? And where does the name come from?

Where to begin... A chalet in Switzerland is something you own and lend to friends or, if you don't have one, you have friends who let you use theirs. It's community-based. I've been a director of institutions for around 20 years and, as a director, I always search for tools to help the artist. The artist works at a certain speed and with a certain freedom, [while] the institution has another speed — it's slower, there's always a gap in between. The bigger the institution, the wider the gap becomes. I was thinking about art centers, which have been around for over a century. In the beginning the identity of the art center was clear: doing a job the museum or a gallery couldn't, and founded by an artist. Nowadays, everyone is doing the job of the art center. So, I thought maybe I should create a structure that allows me to search for the identity or position of the art center today. We don't have an answer, we're always trying to find solutions; it's more like a lab where we're testing ideas. Everyone is volunteering their time, me included. I think the dynamism of a city relies on this structure.

To see images from "LOST (in LA)," click on the [slideshow](#).